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Ethnography Of One Family On A 1939 Blackfeet Indian Reservation Farm Project In Montana

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The General Allotment Act of 1887, or the Dawes Act as it came to be known, authorized the president of the United States to divide American Indian lands into private sections to be allotted to individual members of the tribes. The act was designed to move Indians from tribal ways into "mainstream" U.S. American life. According to Scherer,

the Dawes Act became one of the most far-reaching and, for Native Americans, disastrous pieces of Indian legislation ever passed by Congress. By the time the allotment process was stopped in 1934, the amount of Indian-held land in the United States had dropped from 138 million acres to 48 million acres, and, of the remaining Indian-owned land, almost half was arid or semiarid desert.¹

The Dawes Act was not the only attempt by the U.S. government to change the way American Indians used their land. In this study I investigate water resource and land use development as well as one family’s participation in a tribal-federal government-sponsored 1939 farm project on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana. The project was developed to ensure the Indians’ utilization of water rights associated with the irrigation projects constructed on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in the early twentieth century. It was also a socioeconomic development effort to ameliorate the desperate living conditions the Blackfeet had suffered with the loss of their traditional buffalo economy. The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act provided start-up capital for tribal government development efforts as well as the opportunity for tribal members to become independent farmers. In this case, the Indian farmer could also provide feed for the emerging individual Indian livestock industry on the reservation.

I begin by addressing the development of irrigation on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and...
the ensuing tribal-federal farm projects. What then follows is an ethnography of one family’s participation in the Badger-Fisher Farm Project. For background research, I utilized archival records of the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) located in the Denver Federal Records Center to determine how one of the Blackfeet farm projects in the Badger Fisher irrigation area originated. The BIA records include much material related to the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (governing body of the Blackfeet Reservation) such as minutes of council meetings and related correspondence.

To conduct this research, I used qualitative ethnographic participant observation methodology in recording field notes in discussions with one family about the Badger Fisher Farm Project. The research came about because of my interest in learning how the project came into existence in addition to how one family persevered over twelve other initial family participants. The interviewees also shared handwritten notes of their experience and knowledge about the Badger Fisher Farm Project. The field notes were sorted into a descriptive narrative related to the research question of how the Badger Fisher Farm Project originated. Over several years, I usually prompted discussion about this project by initiating conversation with a request such as “Tell me more about how the Badger Fisher farm came about.” I also used the naturalist inquiry procedure in obtaining information as it came up during family conversations. The descriptive narrative provides some insight into this family’s life experience in its involvement in a government-sponsored socio-economic development endeavor.

PLAINS INDIANS AS FARMERS

Irrigation project development in the West was initiated by the Reclamation Act of June 17, 1902, in order to improve and “reclaim” land use for setters and others. The U.S. government has a long, complex history of damming waterways and initiating reclamation projects around the turn of the century. Many Indian reservations were included in this development process.

On the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, irrigation projects were developed in areas commonly called Seville and Badger Fisher. These irrigation projects were presumably part of the U.S. government’s efforts to assimilate the Indians. However, mostly white people were farming the Indian lands within the irrigation projects on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The irrigation projects were checkerboarded with non-Indian fee land (land under the jurisdiction of the State of Montana). Through a complex governmental process, non-Indians were able to acquire land parcels on Indian reservations after the 1887 Allotment (or Dawes) Act, which severed the Indian communal lands into individual plots of 160 acres (more or less depending on the particular reservation).

The concept of turning the Plains Indians west of the Mississippi River into agriculturalists had been formulating since President Jefferson had the idea of commercializing the Louisiana Purchase. Western Indians as farmers became a more acute design during the initiation of the reservation period after the Civil War. Although the western treaties, beginning with the 1851 Fort Laramie pact, contained promises ensuring the future welfare of the Indians in return for massive parcels of land, politicians and special-interest groups believed the demise of the Indians was inevitable. However, most of the treaties, including that with the Blackfeet Indians, extracted promises from the Indians to become civilized and Christianized, and one of the major markers of civilization by the non-Indian has been a sedentary lifestyle of agricultural pursuits.

BLACKFEET INDIAN RESERVATION

The Blackfeet Indian Nation currently has a population of over 15,000 members and is located on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in north-central Montana. The 1.5-million-acre reservation borders the Rocky Mountains to the west and Canada to the north (Blackfeet Indian Nation) (Fig. 1).

The Blackfeet are a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which includes the Siksika, Blood, and Pikuni tribes presently located on separate reserves in Southern Alberta, Canada. These tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy all speak the same language, which linguists have grouped with the
in the historic period included an area east of the Rocky Mountains between the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta and the Yellowstone River in Montana. The eastern boundary lay the western part of what is now the province of Saskatchewan and the western portion of North Dakota. According to Barney Reeves, an archeologist formerly with the University of Calgary, the size of the traditional Blackfoot territory is comparable to the country of France.¹⁰
The Blackfeet call themselves “Pikuni,” which was termed Piegan by early ethnologists. The Blackfoot Confederacy has been traditionally thought of as three tribal groups that included the Pikuni (Blackfeet), Siksika (Blackfoot), and Kainai (Blood). The Pikuni became separated by the U.S.-Canadian boundary, and they are now known as the Apatosi Pikuni (North Peigan) and Ampskapi Pikuni (South Piegan) (Fig. 2). (Note: “Piegan” is the spelling used in the United States, while “Peigan” is used in Canada.)

The individual family farms in the Badger Fisher Farm Project were located anywhere from one to five miles from each other within a total area of about two square miles. All the farms lay in an area wherein almost every forty-acre parcel was served by irrigation ditches. Because of the cold climate of northern Montana, most of the cultivation was wheat, barley, or alfalfa.
The Badger Fisher irrigation project was developed on a rolling flatland plateau area between Birchcreek and Two Medicine River. Birchcreek is the southern boundary of the reservation, while Two Medicine runs approximately through the middle of the reservation. The sources of the creeks are both located in the Rocky Mountains about twenty to thirty miles west of Badger Fisher. The Rocky Mountains form the western boundary of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Both of these creeks, along with Cut Bank Creek, flow together northeast of Badger Fisher to form the Marias River, which flows east about fifty miles to the Missouri River. The forks formulating the Marias River represent the eastern boundary of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The northern border of the reservation is the U.S.-Canadian international boundary. Birchcreek marks the southern boundary of the reservation. Birchcreek is the third waterway that flows east to the three forks forming the Marias River.

**BLACKFEET INDIAN IRRIGATION**

On July 25, 1939, the assistant secretary of the Office of Indian Affairs under the Department of Interior submitted a completed comprehensive study of the history and irrigation data on Indian reservations and sent it to all the reservation superintendents. These early efforts of irrigation on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation were noted:

In 1886, some ranchers along Birchcreek were irrigating about a thousand acres of land after constructing a “small ditch 3 or 4 miles in length.”

Other early irrigation included: (1) a two-mile ditch on the north side of Two Medicine River to irrigate about 250 acres in 1892 by the Holy Family Mission, and (2) a six-mile canal that was never utilized to divert water from the North Fork of Cut Bank Creek in 1903 for “lands between Cut Bank and Greasewood Creek.”

By means of federal legislation, the Blackfeet Irrigation Project was authorized on March 1, 1907 (34 Stat. 1035). An agreement between the Secretary of the Interior and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation initiated the planning, development, and operation of an irrigation system on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Although funding was appropriated through the Office of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was in direct charge of the project. Later, in 1924, the project was turned over to the newly created Indian Irrigation Service under the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs. It is interesting to note that this act also included, as stated in a report published July 25, 1939, “allotments of land aggregating 400 acres each, usually 360 acres grazing and 40 acres irrigable land, were made, under the Act of Mar. 1, 1907 (34 Stat. 1035).” Thus, it appears that this legislative action instituted terms and conditions relevant to the former Indian Allotment Act, or Dawes Act, of 1887.

On June 11, 1911, construction work was begun on the Badger Fisher Unit that would divert water from the south bank of Badger Creek by way of a canal to create a reservoir called Four Horns at the former Owl Child Lake. The Four Horns Reservoir was completed with timber construction in 1915 and revamped with concrete in 1930–31. The Badger Fisher Unit supplied water through “Blacktail Creek, and the Fisher Canal, to 30,000 acres of land in the southeastern part of the reservation between Two Medicine River and Birch Creek.”

Irrigation at the Badger Fisher Unit became operational in 1916. Later, in 1933, the government turned the management over to the water users. In 1939 the federal government resumed operation of the irrigation. According the 1939 report, the Badger Fisher Unit water appropriations included:

- Four Horns Reservoir = 60,000 acre feet
- Badger Creek Canyon Reservoir = 100,000 acre feet

The report provides a good description of the diversion structures, canals, flumes, and water storage areas. Included in the report are government buildings located in Badger Fisher (Fig. 3).
The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), or Wheeler-Howard Act, was enacted by Congress in 1934. The IRA legislation (1) created a constitutional form of government for Indian tribes, (2) cancelled the 1887 Allotment Act or Dawes Act, which caused the loss of tribal lands, (3) provided for the restoration and acquisition of public and federal lands, and (4) provided corporate charters for the councils to conduct business (25 USC parts 461–97). Appropriations for IRA included funds for land purchase and a revolving loan fund for tribal government and individual Indians to finance economic development and individual businesses. With this funding and additional support through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council was able to finance one of their first endeavors in economic development.
• Use of the IRA Land Acquisition Program for the purchase of reservation non-Indian lands for re-assignment to Indians for agricultural purposes.
• Use of irrigated farmlands for the purpose of raising alfalfa and crops for livestock. Graves states, “The Blackfeet people, as a whole, are fair stockmen and in order to insure winter feed must raise hay for their cattle and sheep.”
• The need for $48,000 to remodel and upgrade the deteriorating irrigation systems as well as adding additional irrigable acreage. He states, “Unless an immediate expenditure is made for construction and maintenance with proper supervision, the whole irrigation project will be lost and it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to be put back into operation.”

In a letter dated October 26, 1936, to W. S. Hanna, supervising engineer of the Office of Indian Affairs in Billings, Montana, Blackfeet agency superintendent Graves outlined the Indian and white users of the Blackfeet irrigation systems. The letter indicates that only one Indian, Frank Kuka, was irrigating on the Badger Fisher Unit (ten acres). The remaining twenty-one users were non-Indians. However, the Two Medicine Unit included seven Indians and twenty-four non-Indians. Presumably, this evidence was used to support the complaint of loss of water rights stated by Blackfeet superintendent Graves in his letter of October 5 to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (Fig. 4).

BLACKFEET FAMILY FARM PROJECTS

Paul C. Rosier, in his book *Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation, 1912 to 1954*, identified much of the internal and external dissension and growth that occurred around the development and impact of the 1934 IRA. In a letter dated October 5, 1936, the Blackfeet Reservation superintendent C. L. Graves wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs outlining several issues related to the development of the Badger Fisher and Two Medicine Irrigation Units. Funds were requested for upgrading the irrigation units. However, he further proposed a $100,000 loan under the auspices of the 1934 IRA charter for “resettlement of some 40 to 50 Indian families on the Two Medicine and Badger Fisher Irrigation Projects.” As indicated in the letter, the plan was based on a tribal council proposal. Early in the letter, Graves justifies the need for development of Blackfeet water resources: “If these water resources are not taken advantage of by the Indians of the reservation, others on the outside and to the east of the reservation will utilize this water and eventually the water rights of the Blackfeet will be lost.” The letter iterates the following development proposal:

JOHN COLLIER AND GREAT PLAINS DEVELOPMENT

Water and agricultural development on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation almost simultaneously fit in with Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier’s long-term plan for development activities with the Indians of the Great Plains. On November 9, 1936, he sent a memo to all Indian Affairs “Superintendents and other Field Officials” and attached a copy of a letter to Hon. Morris L. Cooke, chairman of the Great Plains Com-
lier’s intimate knowledge of Plains Indian tribes. “For the whole tradition and social ideal of the Sioux [and most other Plains Indian tribes] is not to hoard; not to possess except to give away; not to accumulate capital goods; but to be preoccupied only (in the material sphere) with group advantages.” He discussed the failure of the government to force the “scheme” of “individual commercial farming” and individual “go-getting” with Indians.38 Native American scholars such as Archambault have identified value conflicts such as Indians’ traditional orientation toward taking care of the cultural group as opposed to non-Indian society’s focus on the individual.39 Archambault also identifies prevailing society’s value of material and wealth acquisition contrasted with Native Americans value of altruism and sharing. Carroll van West states, “Their [Native Americans’] values remained defined by traditional Indian values and not by the assumptions and beliefs of the average middle class white American or even those by those of the average working class.”40

Collier is blunt about the effects of federal Indian policy regarding Indian lands. His thorough knowledge of the status of Indian resources is reflected in his statement that “some of the best lands having control of the water supplies are in white ownership so that use of the land in harmony with Indian need or with conservation principles is difficult indeed.”41

Collier not only poignantly points out problems but also lists solutions. His “Proposed Program for Indians” includes “the relocation of a certain number of white families, and that this relocation will involve the purchase of their land.”42 His “tentative program” for the reservations includes the following elements, among others:

- Consolidation of Indian land holdings into economic units.
- Acquisition of additional lands to provide sufficient pasture areas.
- Development of water supplies for domestic and stock use.
- Conservation of vegetative cover to ameliorate overgrazing.
- The “revegetation of denuded areas” as well as “development of all feasible irrigation” including “small irrigated substance garden tracts.”43

In the letter, Collier is obviously critical of the 1887 Indian Allotment Act. His statements relate a “false theory” that 80 to 160 acres could support a family through farming operations and “the further false theory that Plains Indians could be turned into individualistic commercial farmers.”37

The report criticized the government’s disregard of tribal culture, further demonstrating Col-
The plan also includes provisions for decent housing, essential farm and auxiliary buildings, adequate foundation herds, farm and household equipment, and “the provision of capital for co-operative industrial and consumers’ enterprises.”

Collier summarized his plan for the Indians’ social and economic improvement: “This program is based upon providing the Indians of the area with sufficient land, stock, and equipment to enable them to become economically independent with a reasonable amount of effort.”

He goes on to relate how the amount of acreage provided to each family for agricultural purposes needs to reflect not only the necessary equipment but also the average rainfall:

- 2,000 acres for 13 to 15 inches average rainfall
- 320 acres for 15 to 20 inches average rainfall
- 160 acres for 20 to 25 inches average rainfall
- 80 acres for 25 to 30 inches average rainfall

BLACKFEET TRIBAL BUSINESS COUNCIL AND FEDERAL OFFICIALS’ INDIAN FARM PLAN

In an interesting side note, another government official denies Indian development efforts to utilize tribal water rights. Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Zimmerman, in a letter to Joseph W. Brown, “President, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council,” dated November 30, 1936, refuses government funding for “further development of irrigation.” Apparently, Brown, then the head of the tribal council, had written a letter to the president of the United States requesting development funding for the Blackfeet. (I have not yet been able to locate this letter.) Zimmerman, in his letter to Brown, states, “Further expenditure of Government funds was not justified” due to “Indians not making use of the facilities afforded,” basing his decision on the fact that more whites are using the farmland than are Indians. Thus, in a ludicrous irony, the same figures used to justify a need to promote Indian farmers in agriculture are also being used as a reason for not supporting them in agricultural development. In fairness, it should be noted that the letter also states, “Completion will be deferred until a plan is developed for its operation that will insure the full utilization of the facilities [irrigation systems].”

On November 5, 1937, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council met with several federal officials to discuss the use and protection of Indian water rights and related developmental efforts through a farm project that would expand existing irrigation systems. This meeting was a result of correspondence and discussions of tribal and federal officials regarding the development of the farm projects to initiate use of tribal water rights. The exchange involved various costs and leveraging funds from the Indian Bureau, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and tribal funds. The need for a definitive plan relative to the availability of funds and the feasibility of the numbers of families that could participate in the project was discussed. All had agreed that an underlying need had to do with the poverty, slum-like conditions, dependency, and the future socioeconomic development of the Blackfeet Indian nation. The federal government officials wanted to narrow the farm project down to just the Two Medicine Unit (irrigated farmlands on what is now commonly called the Seville area). In the minds of the government officials, the Two Medicine Unit was more feasible due to the proximity of transportation routes (mainly the railroad). In addition, they thought one unit was more economically feasible due to the proximity of resources available and manageability of the project for the government and the tribe. Tribal officials pointed out the high interest in the project, as evidenced by over 125 families requesting applications and expressing intention. Council chairman Joseph W. Brown called for a vote of the tribal council, and the following were enacted:

- A motion to “start on the Two Medicine Unit first” made by William J. Spanish, seconded by James Choate and passed unanimously.
- A motion to include trust land allottees as well as those who would occupy land purchased by the Tribe was made by William J. Spanish and seconded by William Fitzpatrick and carried unanimously.
• After urging by Superintendent Graves to claim 284,300 acre feet of water replacing the previous officially stated amount of 119,000 acre feet, the Council unanimously passed the action. Wright Hagerty made the motion, and the second was provided by James Choate.
• The final council action involved appointing William J. Spanish, Richard Grant, and Medore LaBreche as a committee to develop a resolution relative to the expanded water right claim in the amount of 284,300 acre feet. The motion was made by William J. Spanish and seconded by Peter Vielle. The motion was carried unanimously.50

In a letter dated December 3, 1937, to U.S. Senator Burton K. Wheeler, Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Zimmerman Jr. responded to a citizen concerned about using federal funds for “the rehabilitation of the Blackfeet Irrigation Project” instead of “relief for destitute Indians.”51 Zimmerman explains that the funding “will work a greater good to the whole tribe through its use in rehabilitating the irrigation project and in taking families from the ‘shack-town’ on the outskirts of Browning and settling them on land where they will have an opportunity to become self-supporting.” The letter further clarifies the funding plan as established in the November 5 meeting of federal officials with the tribal council: “Approximately $112,500 of Federal funds, $27,000 tribal funds, and $30,000 of an allocation of revolving credit funds.” Zimmerman notes that the funds will be used to settle “twenty to thirty Indian families on irrigated farms” by rehabilitation of the irrigation system, “provide dwellings and other improvements,” and “block out lands through land purchases.”

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BLACKFEET FARM PROJECTS

On April 7, 1938, the tribal council passed a resolution to “engage in a corporate building enterprise,” stating that the “management and direction of the enterprise be delegated to the Credit Committee.”52 A “whereas” in the resolution clarifies that “$10,000 of Rehabilitation Grant funds and $25,000 of Tribal moneys are available to finance or to aid in financing the rural rehabilitation of needy Indians by construction and repairing houses, barns, outbuildings, and root cellars; by developing wells and a spring for domestic water; and for clearing and improving lands and gardens on small farms.” By this time, a new tribal council had been elected, and Stuart Hazlett was now the chairman signing the resolution along with Mae A. Cobrin as the secretary.

In a meeting on March 3, 1939, the council had obviously expanded the farm project, as evidenced by the minutes: “The importance of selecting desirable clients for the Seville and Badger Fisher Irrigation Projects was stressed by members of the Tribal Council.” The council gave the Credit Committee “full authority on the selection of clients for the two projects and their selection to be final.” The motion was made by Sam Bird and seconded by Wright Hagerty and carried unanimously. An additional action was taken to appoint Frank Pepion to the Credit Committee to replace A. E. Armstrong, who had been elected as sheriff of Glacier County.53

The minutes of the Tribal Council on January 5, 1939, provide an example of how the land acquisition program worked. The following action regarding some Badger Fisher land was taken:

The purchase of the Goff land holdings through the Land Acquisition Program has been completed, thus reverting to tribal ownership approximately 1,300 acres of alienated land. The superintendent of the Agency was authorized to separate this acreage into eighty-acre units for rehabilitation purposes to be assigned to individual Blackfeet Indians.”54

ONE FARM FAMILY AT BADGER FISHER

What was the experience like for Blackfeet families? What follows is an account of the lived experience of the only farm family out of the twelve initially selected family participants in the Badger Fisher Farm Project that successfully persevered in the endeavor of becoming Indian farmers. It provides a glimpse at how one family endured the hardships and challenges by maximizing the use
of their resources and by adapting to the changes introduced by the Industrial Age (Fig. 5).

LeRoy and Eileen Pepion, a newly married, young Blackfeet Indian couple, had been selected as one of the original family recipients of the Blackfeet “farm project” in 1938. As we have seen, the project was developed to ensure the utilization of water rights associated with the irrigation projects constructed on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation at the turn of the century, and it was also intended to ameliorate the desperate living conditions the Blackfeet had suffered with the loss of their traditional buffalo economy.

In a series of interviews from February 19, 1997, through July 2008, LeRoy and Eileen Pepion talked about moving to the Badger Fisher project lands in 1939, with their children, LeRoy Jr. and Howard. To be able to move into one of the project houses, the Pepions had to complete an application and be selected by the tribal council to participate. According to LeRoy Pepion, “The Indian Superintendent and his staff from
the area office in Billings were the starters and negotiators, along with the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, in starting a farm project, known as the Badger Fisher livestock project.” LeRoy noted that they were nearly bypassed in the initial selection process because tribal officials thought the applicant was Roy Pepion, who was a cousin.

THE TWELVE FAMILY FARM PROJECTS ON BADGER FISHER

In 1938 twelve houses were built in the area of the Badger Fisher irrigation project. Apparently, some construction was still going on when the Pepions moved into their home, as outbuildings such as barns and sheds were still under construction. “Twelve homes were constructed by Indian laborers; barns, corrals and sheds, and a chicken house. The original intent of the project was to have livestock, so each home were to do their own farming, haying, etc.” (Fig. 6).

Eileen Pepion pointed out that in addition to the house, barn, chicken house, and outhouse, they bought material for a livestock shed. She revealed that any additions to the land, such as fences, were at the cost of the participant. The family obtained water by way of a hand pump and windmill from a deep well.

According to the Pepions, the housing projects were assigned through a drawing method, and individual families received whichever farm was randomly selected for them. Eileen noted that some of the families did trade others for locations more suitable to their desires. LeRoy told about how some individuals wanted to be close to land allotments assigned to their relatives. Their place was desired by the Vielle family, but he and Eileen had previously decided to settle on whichever unit they had drawn in the selection process.

LeRoy explains the status of land acquisition:

At the onset of the Indian farms, the land where the homes were built was tribal land. Some of the land was originally allotted to
This sheep business lasted a few years but it ran into a lot of difficulties, keeping each farmer’s sheep separate from the rest, so eventually this project came to an end in about 4 years.61

He writes that “all the sheep were gone” by about 1945. Eileen faults poor planning, as the project participants all had sheep, but with an initial forty acres of farmland, they had no grazing land. LeRoy’s written account confirms that the project participants had to jointly lease grazing land and hire a shepherder. They leased grazing land on Two Medicine River and drove the sheep to Seville when a contract for wool and lambs could be consummated. BIA representatives would count the sheep and initiate the contract for marketing the sheep wool and lambs. The income from the wool and lambs was used to pay land leases and loans.

FARM FAMILY SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Some of the farmers began to leave the project early on during the sheep period. “New homesteaders came to take their place,” states LeRoy.62 Although it seemed to be a good deal, “there was real difficulty in securing big enough loans in order to carry out the intentions [of the project].” Because of the limited availability of capital, “a lot of the people abandoned their farms and left the project.”63 Eileen states, “Personal loans were by application to the BIA Credit Board for livestock, machinery, and leases. Loans were secured by mortgaging the Individual Allotted Land and any income of the IIM accounts.”64 According to LeRoy, some of the Indian farmers were eventually able to “secure loans from local banks (Valier and Conrad) to get into the farming business”65 (Fig. 6).

Eileen’s comments reveal that they eventually paid for their home, despite the government’s (unfulfilled) promise of turning the home over to the participant after five years. Although they had to lease land for farming, LeRoy and Eileen were able to trade some of their own inherited shares in allotted land for plots on Badger Fisher. This process took several years because land trades through the tribal and federal government are a challenging bureaucratic process. The Pepi-
ons were obviously persistent in accomplishing this often complex and daunting affair. As a result, they ended up owning what was probably the largest Indian farm on Badger Fisher.

According to Eileen, the project financing included a provision of twenty dollars for subsistence. However, the living arrangement was rather sparse. Some of the subsistence came from a garden of vegetables such as carrots, peas, red lettuce, beets, and sometimes potatoes. The chickens produced eggs, and the poultry were harvested for food. Nevertheless, chickens and other poultry sometimes had difficulty surviving the freezing weather in the winters, and sometimes a wild animal such as weasel or skunk would kill them. Sometimes they raised hogs as a farm product and food source.

During World War II, the family was able to subsist with the basic necessities as they had during the late 1930s after the depression. Yet poverty on Indian reservations, as pointed out in the 1928 Merriam Report, had become progressively more severe after the treaty period of the mid-1800s. In fact, Ewers and others documented the loss of over one-third of the Blackfeet population in 1883–84, when the people died of starvation and disease. Thus, many Native populations in the United States may not have been acutely aware of the depression because they were already living in desperate conditions.

Eileen surmised that because of Leroy’s age and occupation as a farmer, he was not drafted into the military. She pointed out how the wool from raising sheep during this time was an important product they supplied for the war effort.

LIFE ON THE FARM
Since wood is scarce in the Badger Fisher area, the families obtained coal from a mine on Birchcreek about four miles east of the farm. As mentioned, the water was drawn from a deep well by way of a hand pump and a windmill. Eileen said that electricity came in 1943 from the regional electrical cooperative stationed in Fairfield, Montana, about eighty miles to the southeast (Fig. 7).
The Pepions’ original farming operation started in 1940, as they had moved to the farm during the fall of 1939, after most of the crops had been planted and harvesting was imminent. They had to buy two teams of horses and harnesses in order to begin farming. Besides plowing and preparing the land for planting wheat and barley, they had to purchase haying equipment such as a wagon, mower, and rake.

Even though LeRoy had purchased the horses from a cousin, Polite Pepion, who had a cattle ranch over ten miles to the west on Blacktail Creek, one of the horses originally came from north of Browning (over forty-five miles away). LeRoy tells a story about how the horse came up missing one day. Later, someone told him, “I seen your horse walking through the town of Browning.”

Eileen told about how the families would cooperatively pay for the shearing and branding of sheep. The families would gather on Two Medicine River in the “Old Grove” of cottonwoods by the cooperatively leased sheep-grazing area near Alkali Lake. “We would make a picnic out of it—cook or roast mutton.” The kids would have foot races, and sometimes the adults would join in a baseball game. The working event thus became a social gathering for some of the Badger Fisher Farm Project participants.

Later on, after the Pepions used the BIA loan program to buy a tractor and other farm implements, they started raising more grain. “I bought an International tractor with a crank start from a farmer south of Valier,” stated LeRoy.

“The kids sometimes helped with the sheep. Lee liked sheep but Howard did not,” stated Eileen. The boys sometimes raised “bum” lambs (those whose mother had died) and used the sale proceeds for school clothes.

After moving from sheep to more farming, the family began to acquire cattle. At first, LeRoy managed the cattle herd in a cooperative arrangement with his brother Webb. Webb lived to the west about twelve miles up Birchcreek, where the first generation of the extended Pepion family had allotments. LeRoy would utilize inherited land north of Blacktail Creek to graze the cattle.
Most of the land to the west of Badger Fisher merges into hilly grazing land as it rises to meet the Rocky Mountains about twenty miles to the west. After several years, the cattle operation was reduced at Birchcreek because of economic loss; it had proved unmanageable due to the distance from the farm.

Eventually the Badger Fisher area received a one-room schoolhouse, and it was added to the local school district. Prior to this time, families had to send their children to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Cut Bank Boarding School located south of Browning. Thus, the Pepion family was able to send their children to the Badger Fisher School located about quarter of a mile away. The schoolhouse was moved from Birchcreek and installed next to the former Goff farmhouse and large barn so that living quarters were available to the teacher. The tribal government had used the land purchase program to buy the Goff land and property.

The schoolhouse provided an opportunity for the participants in the Badger Fisher Farm Project to socialize on a more organized basis. Eileen talked about the community holding basket socials, picnics, and barn dances at the schoolhouse.

Eileen provided a handwritten copy of the twelve original families involved initially in the Badger Fisher Farm Project:

- Those families who occupied the farms on the most easterly end of the Badger Fisher Farm Project were as follows: (1) Joe and Hildegard Marceau, (2) John and Annie Irene Russell, and (3) George and Sara Hall.
- The families having farms east of the roadway that crossed the Badger Fisher area included: (4) Dick and Stella Vielle, (5) Dewey and Annie Rutherford, (6) LeRoy and Eileen Pepion, (7) Joe and Mary Russell and (8) Philip and Alice Marceau.
- West of the roadway the families included: (9) James and Maude Spotted Bear, (10) George and Mary Calf Robe (11) John and Annie Calf Robe and (12) Jim and Nellie Reavis (Fig. 8).67

CONCLUSION

The Pepions were the only family of the original assignees to the Badger Fisher Farm Project that persevered through the years. The family raised nine children on the farm. Since the local one-room schoolhouse served only grades one through eight, the children had to attend high school away from home. The three older children had to board out in Browning to attend high school on the reservation. The six others were able to attend high school in the off-reservation town of Valier after the school district decided to operate a school bus system serving the reservation over twelve miles away.

In 1987, after almost fifty years on the farm, Eileen and LeRoy were persuaded by the family to sell the farm and use the proceeds for retirement. They lived as a retired couple at their home in Browning, Montana, the commercial center of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. On February 18, 2010, LeRoy J. Pepion passed away at the age of one hundred years. On November 16, 2012, Eileen B. Pepion died at the age of ninety-three years.

NOTES


3. The 1887 Allotment Act (or Dawes Act) allotted individual plots of reservation land from the formerly communally owned tribal lands. The act was another effort to “civilize” the Indians and compel the European idea of individually owned property. However, any remaining lands not allotted to individual Indians reverted back to the federal government, and in most cases the land was opened for homesteading by U.S. citizens. Incidental to this act is the fact that individual Indians could change from “trust” status (the federal government is the “trustee” for Indian lands, which means the property has a unique status of being under the federal umbrella, while recognizing the sovereign
14. Ibid.
16. Cotts to Aspach, NARMR, 3. Four Horns Lake was formerly called Owl Child Lake by some of the Blackfeet tribal elders. There are stories of certain spirits frequenting the area. However, some tribal elders used certain roots and plants from the area for medicinal purposes.
17. Ibid., 2.
18. Ibid., 3.
19. Ibid., 3.
20. Ibid., 4.
21. Ibid., 5. There were three or four wood garages, storage, and shop structures built by the government for federal employees who were hired to manage the maintenance of the irrigation canals and ditches. Included were three wood frame houses for living quarters. Over the years, some of the houses were moved, and the outbuildings slowly deteriorated. With the improvement of paved roads, government workers could drive from Browning forty-five miles away to do irrigation project maintenance.
23. Ibid.
26. C. L. Graves, Superintendent, to Commissioner of Indian Affairs [no name on the salutation], October 5, 1936, 8NS, General Correspondence, 1909–1957 (GC 1909–1957), RG 75, NARMR.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. C. L. Graves, Superintendent, to W. S. Hanna, Supervising Engineer, October 26, 1936, 8NS-075-96-133, GC 1909–1957, RG 75, NARMR.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Hanna was listed as one of the persons receiving a copy of the October 5 letter regarding the proposed irrigation project (Graves to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, NARMR).
34. John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to Superintendents and other Field Officials, November 9, 1936, 8NS, GC 1909–1957, RG 75, NARMR.
35. John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to Honorable Morris L. Cooke, November 6, 1936, 8NS, GC 1909–1957, RG 75, NARMR.
36. Ibid., 1–3.
37. Ibid., 3.
38. Ibid., 3.
41. Collier to Cooke, NARMR, 3.
42. Ibid., 4.
43. Ibid., 4–5.
44. Ibid., 5.
45. Ibid., 5.
46. William Zimmerman, Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to Joseph W. Brown, President, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, November 30, 1936, 8NS, GC 1909–1957, RG 75, NARMR.
47. Ibid.
49. The typewritten minutes indicate councilmen present at the meeting as follows: “Joseph W. Brown, Chairman; Richard Grant, Sr.; Wright W. Hagerty; Wm. J. Spanish; John W. Horn; James Choate; Frank Vielle; Joseph Racine; Medore LeBreche; Peter Vielle; and Wm. Fitzpatrick.” Absent Councilmen included: “Leo M. Kennerly, Secretary, and Oscar Boy.” The minutes reflect the following people that were also present at the meeting: “Mr. John Herrick, Assistant to the Commissioner; Mr. D. E. Murphy, Director, Indian Division, CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]; Mr. Ralph Bristol of the Extension Division; Mr. W. S. Hanna of the Irrigation Department; Mr. Kenneth W. Green of the Land Acquisition Program; Mr. H. D. McCullough [indecipherable spelling], Credit Agent for this District; Mr. C. L. Graves, Superintendent of the Blackfeet Agency; and Mr. John A. Krall, Agricultural Extension Agent of the Blackfeet Agency.”
50. Minutes, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, March 2, 1939, ACT, 8NS, RG75, NARMR, 11, 12.
52. Minutes, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, March 2, 1939, NARMR. Attachment: Blackfeet Tribal Business Council resolution signed by Stuart Hazlett, Chairman of the Tribal Business Council, and Mae A. Cobrin, Secretary, dated April 7, 1938.
53. Minutes, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, March 2, 1939, NARMR.
54. Ibid.
55. LeRoy Pepion, handwritten account of the Badger Fisher Farm Project, undated.
56. Ibid.
57. Eileen Pepion, handwritten notes, undated.
58. L. Pepion, account of the Badger Fisher Farm Project.
59. Ibid.
60. The Superintendent of Indian Affairs was still apparently the “father” of the Blackfeet as related by Indians during the Treaty of 1855. Thus, the “father” handled all the income and disbursements of funds for individual Indians and their families even at this time in the late 1930s. The Bureau of Indian Affairs had initiated what was called an “Individual Indian Money” account after the 1887 Allotment Act to keep track of income and disbursements for individual Indians. (Eloise Pepion Cobell, beginning in the 1980s, began a quest that has resulted in a series of federal lawsuits that found the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs had mismanaged these funds and could not reconcile amounts in the accounts.)
61. L. Pepion, account.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. E. Pepion, notes.
65. L. Pepion, account.
67. E. Pepion, notes.