

# THE WONDERS OF WESTERN MONTANA

By DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE

**BLACKFEET NATION, Montana—For the «been there-done that» crowd, how about four nights on an Indian reservation?**

Blackfeet Nation signpost



Including one night in a teepee, taking part in a bucking horse roundup on the plains and watching more than 1000 Indians

representing 50 tribes in the U.S. and Canada chant and dance in their hand-made, outrageously colorful costumes.

But instead of rain, it produced a hailstorm so fierce it almost washed away our teepee.

«Maybe we were a little too colorful for the weather gods,» said Ernest Heavy-Runner, a spokesman for the Blackfeet tribe. «We can do sun dances, too, you know.»

We were in Blackfeet Nation in northwestern Montana to take part in the annual North American Indian Days celebration. Events like these are known as Pow-Wows in other Indian territories, but since attendees here came from both Canada and the U.S.

the international designation was used.

The town of Browning is the official headquarters for the Blackfeet Indian Reservation which encompasses over 1.5-million acres and extends across the Canadian border into Alberta.

To the south of Blackfeet Nation is Glacier National Park, another 1-million acre spectacle in itself, and famed Yellowstone is within easy driving distance. So there is plenty of elbow room and eye candy in this neck of the woods.

The Blackfeet, as most Indians,

Bucking broncos





don't pussy-foot with names. Their leader is Chief Earl Old Person.

The barrel-chested man who operates Tipi Village, where the hailstorm drove us out of our teepee, is Darrell (Buffalo Body) Norman.

And the man who invited us on a working horse roundup, Truman (Mouse) Hall, stands about 6-foot-5 and 250 lbs.

«We're very friendly people and say it like it is,» Ernest Heavy-Runner, a former athlete, explained.

The Indian Days celebration began with a two-hour parade with participants on horseback, stagecoach and floats on Browning's main street. As a sad commentary, Browning hasn't been affected as much by the economic downturn as other small towns across America. Like other Indian territories, it was never booming when things were good.

But old-time traditions keep ticking. Many residents still ride into town on horseback, tie their steeds up wherever



Ceremonial dancer

they can, dust off their chaps and head to the general store.

Nonetheless, about 10,000 people gathered for the parade and all seemed in good spirits.

The following events included relay races, demonstrations of Indian games, horse races, sheep shows and the 1,000-member traditional dance which preceded the violent hailstorm.

So violent that a number of guests at Tipi Village, including us, had to leave the teepees and head

for the main house where Darrell (Buffalo Body) Norman and his wife Angelika welcomed us like members of the family.

They provided sleeping bags, food and refreshments for twelve of us, quickly converting their neat home into a dormitory. I slept on the dining room floor, and could hear Darrell preparing breakfast food into the wee hours of the morning.

But it was because of the hailstorm that we were in for a special treat. A horseback ride

Chief Pow-Wow





Corraling wild horses



had been scheduled for us the next day, but was cancelled because the trail was slippery and dangerous.

Mouse Hall heading to roundup



So Truman (Mouse) Hall, who runs the trail drive and also owns about 1500 other horses used for special events like rodeos and parades, began explaining the operation to us. After about 45 minutes he glanced at his watch.

«Say, how would you like to go on a real roundup with me?» he asked.

Within minutes, we were headed up to the open plains (in a van) while Mouse and four of his hired hands went on horseback to meet us there. We gathered at an empty

corral and Mouse explained how the five of them would round up some bucking horses for that night's rodeo.

They rode off across the beautiful terrain like a scene from a Western and disappeared down a hill. About 30 minutes later they appeared on the horizon with at least 50 bucking horses and steered them into the corral.

Then the selection process began, much like an audition. Sixteen horses were to be chosen for a rodeo we would be attending the following day. Those that

Glacier Park view





Start of parade



seemed too docile or disinterested were quickly eliminated.

«What you're watching is something that's been done like this since the 1800s,» Mouse said. «My great-granddaddy rode up here from Texas on horseback and he rounded them up like this, too. The only difference is they didn't have horse vans back then...they had to herd them back.»

The 16 selected were chased from the corral into the vans by the hooping and hollering cowboys. Their eyes blazing, some of the

horses defecated as they ran, splattering the cowboys like buckshot..

«So much for cleaning up,» one shouted.

«You can take a bath next week,» another responded.

Mouse owns all of the horses and recognizes most of them by sight or by their behavior. When rodeos are in town, he is careful not to deliver the same horses twice, both for the animals' sake and so the rodeo riders will not be familiar with the bucking horses' traits.

I had a long talk with Ernest Heavy-Runner before leaving the Blackfeet Nation. He explained the close relationship the tribe has with all animals, and the land itself.

«We don't look at an animal only for its food or fur,» he said. «We want to know what the animal knows. Very few animals were killed during the tsunami...they sensed it coming before man did. Dogs can hear an earthquake before it strikes.

«Same with the land. If we take something from it, we want to give

something in return.»

After we said our goodbyes, Heavy-Runner turned and said, «Come back and see us again sometime. I'll give you a nice Indian name.»

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(For further information on the Blackfeet Nation. Go to [www.blackfeetnation.com](http://www.blackfeetnation.com). For Glacier County, [www.glaciercounty.gov.com](http://www.glaciercounty.gov.com))

Young parade performers

