

“My first language, spoken at home, was the Blackfeet—my brothers, sisters and I had to learn the English pretty much in school. That’s where I began to learn about books, to read books. They helped me to learn this other language.

I enjoyed books, once I learned to read. There were stories told in them, in the white man’s way, that I enjoyed. It was teaching me the English words. We used to have some teachers who really paid attention to us—to help us along. Sometimes I’d stay after school and the teacher would go over the books with me, to help me. That was further teaching for me.

As I got older, I could see that books were something we would be using in our future. In my time we didn’t leave our native way—we still used our native language, even while we were trying to learn the white man’s way, the English language. We expressed our ways—we used our own expressions—within our family. Now we don’t have that anymore, and it makes me sad. Our children can’t sit down and converse with their parents in our native language, like we did when we were young.

Our traditional ways are almost gone from daily life, for most Blackfeet today. In order to be part of the system, we use that other language in most everything we do—to be part of what’s going on today. For instance, in my leadership work, it’s part of politics—you need to know the white man’s language—to know what to do with it, so you won’t be left on the side.

Books have meant quite a bit to me—I’ve always enjoyed reading them and looking at them. Sometimes I’ll see a book—see a title—and I get curious, I want to buy it and read it. I especially like history books—native history or general history, it doesn’t matter. If I see something about our Indian ways of the past, I want to read about it. That is something I’ve always enjoyed.

Books are good to read and to have. But I haven’t seen that many books about our own Blackfeet people. I mean, I’ve read the books by John Ewers, Clark Wissler, and so on, but in most of them you don’t really see a lot of family, and that’s what I like. Their names may be mentioned, but mostly these books have scientific and scholarly information.

The old people that I grew up around didn’t have a problem with books and other writings. I used to interpret for some of them, and I never heard them complaining about books or writers. They always felt

Introduction

By Chief Earl Old Person



Earl Old Person, at Judith Landing, Montana, October, 2005. AHW Photo

good if there was something written about them, like their names, or their stories. They especially liked seeing pictures showing their people, their lives. They liked to see what was being written about. That’s the reason I know they would have liked these books, with

all their pictures and stories about the different families.

These books are a tribute to our Blackfeet people. It will be good for them to have these books to hold in their hands, to share them with their children and grandchildren. Perhaps they can tell what they know, to add with what is written in here. It is very important for us to pass on our heritage. A lot of our kids—our younger people—know very little about their past, their history. They need something like these books, so they can refer to the pictures and stories of our traditional life, of our people from the past. This work is going to help our young people a lot, especially because nowadays they are becoming more and more interested in this kind of information.

Over the years I’ve often spoken to school groups, to classes. At the start, the young in those times didn’t know much about our ways, and they didn’t ask. But today, when I go to those same classrooms and schools, the students come up with a lot of questions. Sometimes it almost seems like they know more than I do, or they want to know more than I can answer, regarding our culture, our history, and even our tribal government. When I was going to school, I didn’t know anything about our tribal council—it didn’t seem to matter to us then. But now, just about every day, the people talk about our tribal council, our tribal politics. The younger people hear that, so they’re becoming interested and concerned. They want to know: What is it about? The same with our traditional ways: They want to know about them, to learn about them. That’s different from how it was on the reservation not so many years ago.

Our young people today might know something about their immediate family, but most of them don’t know much about their relatives from way back. Even adults often ask: Who is this or that person to me? Who are my people? In the future, about the only way that they will be able to learn that kind of information is through books like these, that they can look at and read. The ones who actually do know this kind of information are just about all dead and gone now. Even myself, I grew up around old people, but sometimes there are things that I’m not sure about, things I want to know, and I wonder to myself: Who am I going to see in order to find out? I may have to turn to these books in order to learn. The old people aren’t around anymore, but at least these pictures and stories