

## ***A Blackfeet Encounter***

### **Curly Bear Wagner Bio**

In recent years, Curly Bear Wagner has become known throughout Montana and the West as the foremost cultural leader of Plains Indian tribes and one of Montana's most colorful and dedicated ambassadors.

In this capacity, he successfully worked with others to return the remains of twenty-nine tribal ancestors from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Field Museum in Chicago. He has worked to register the Sweetgrass Hills in the National Register of Historic Landmarks, and has constantly toiled to identify and preserve sacred sites in and around the Blackfeet Reservation. Wagner has also developed a cultural program for visitors to the Blackfeet Reservation and offers a regular presentation during the summer in Glacier National Park. For the past several years he has been principal speaker in the *Blackfeet Indians in Life and Legend* program at The Nature Conservancy's summer workshop at the Pine Butte Swamp Preserve, Choteau, Montana.

Wagner's continuing cultural preservation efforts on behalf of the Blackfeet and Indian people in general have been rewarded by the state of Montana. Wagner has served on several national committees, including the national Congress of American Indians, and the National Symposium Advisory Committee on Arts Promotion and Cultural Tourism.

Wagner has followed a difficult road to get to his present position. Born in Seattle, he was raised in Babb, Montana. After his mother died when he was five, he was transferred from school to school, finally graduating from Browning High School in 1963. He attended Western Montana College and Palomar Junior College in California. He served in Vietnam and then worked at the Indian Center in Los Angeles. Returning to Montana, Wagner attended Eastern Montana College in the early 1970's, majoring in business administration. After spending a few years in Washington, D.C., he decided to confront his alcohol problem. Finally, with his belief in Christianity and the spirituality of his people, he was able to overcome his problem and return to the reservation in 1980.

The history and culture of the Blackfeet mean a great deal to him. He firmly believes it is what saved his life. That's why he works to save and enhance that culture, "*to give something back,*" he states.

Wagner is an entrepreneur with many ideas on new cultural projects to implement on the reservation. He is currently developing a CD-ROM to give children and others the "First Nations" perspective on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Wagner believes that creation and operation of a business is the best way to renew pride and dignity within his people.

He worries that Indians fight too much among themselves and says, "*Nothing is more important than getting along with one another. Our traditions and spirituality should help us come closer as a people. This is essential as we go about defining a viable future for ourselves.*"

This is the message visitors hear when they tour the reservation on one of Wagner's Blackfeet Historical Tours, along with a lesson in Blackfeet history and culture, and firsthand knowledge of issues facing Indian people today.