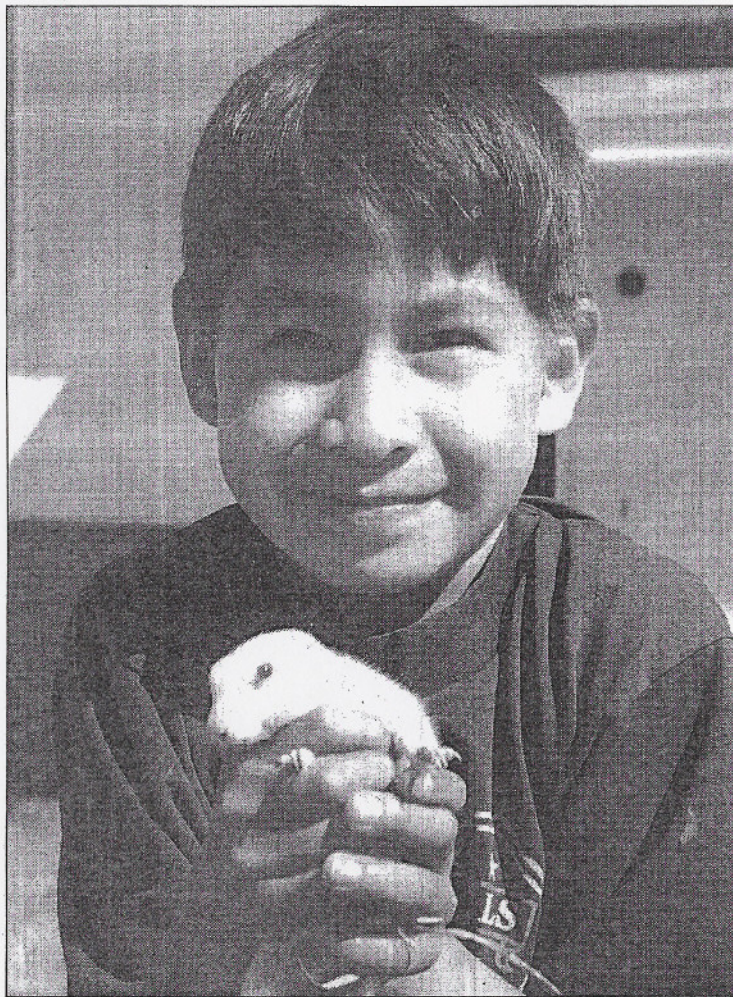


# Reserve family strikes white gold with pair of wild albino gophers

*Pink-eyed duo was found in old Blood gathering area by St. Mary's*



**WHITE GOLD:** Eight-year-old Marty Hoof beams as he shows off one of two albino gophers his father captured on the Blood Reserve.

**BY GARRY ALLISON**

Lethbridge Herald

**BLOOD RESERVE** — They are snowy white, with contrast provided by the startling pink of their eyes and feet.

Dwayne Hoof and his brother Clarence found the two albino gophers (more properly referred to as Richardson's ground squirrels) on a sacred area of the Blood Reserve, after noticing that hawks had been trying to pick them off the prairie.

The brothers enjoy watching the two-month-old rodents frolic in their light blue wire cage, piled high with prairie grass through which they love to tunnel.

"I caught them from the same hole," says Dwayne. "I was looking at one and another came out. It was like trying to catch a mouse. For sure one of these is female; we don't know what the other is yet.

Dwayne's wife Rosabel saw a third, smaller albino gopher in the same tunnel system, but the brothers either lost him in the tunnels or to a hawk.

The brothers feed the gophers grass, grain, apples and potatoes. They also appear to like dancing — the gophers, not the Hoof brothers.

"One of them starts keeping beat by bobbing around when my boys Denver and Joe play their hip-hop music.

"We don't know what to do with them yet, but if people are interested they can contact me by mail at general delivery, Stand Off."

Gary Erickson, a regional wildlife biologist with Alberta Environmental Protection in Lethbridge, says he's not

entirely sure whether the critters are actually rare, but they are the result of a recessive gene.

"From my experience we've not had any reports of albino Richardson's ground squirrels in this area," says Erickson. "I haven't heard of them provincially, either.

"I'm not saying they are not out there, but if they do appear it isn't long before predators hit them. The white colour does stand out and predators tend to pick them out immediately."

Alvin Many Chief says the St. Mary River valley where the albino gophers were discovered was a kind of central gathering area for the Bloods more than 100 years ago. And that's not the only historic site in the area: there's even a dinosaur bone sticking out of the nearby river bank.

"It's a Hoofasaurus," Many Chief says with a laugh. "There are quite a few sites along the river where there's bones and such.

"It was explained to me by my grandfather that the rivers were actually like highways in the old days and guided the movement of people. There are gulleys coming off the river in this area, and the people couldn't negotiate them with their horses, travois and loads, so they'd go around them.

"The valley is sheltered from the wind and I would consider these places sacred areas.

"One may go to these areas to seek their dream spirits, on a vision quest. That's what these special river valley sites were used for. There are old campsites and tepee rings in the area."