

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Plains Indians in the 19th Century and Beyond: Myths and Misinformation

MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

Below are some common misunderstandings about American Indian history, as well as some stereotypes that persist today.

1. All Indians lived in tipis and hunted buffalo.

The history and culture of Native Americans varied widely depending on the particular tribe, geographic region, and time period. The Hopi lived in adobe houses in the Southwest and grew corn, beans, and squash; some Alaska natives lived in cedar plank houses, subsisting on marine mammals and fish; the Cherokee in the Southeast lived in thatched homes of mud and clay, and grew crops and hunted. Just as it is impossible to speak of "one" African, Asian, or European experience, it is also impossible to generalize about the beliefs and characteristics of all American Indians. For this reason, it is best to be specific when studying and talking about Native Americans, or *any* large group of people.

Mission 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey" focuses on the experiences of the Northern Cheyenne between 1860 and 1900. At this time, the Cheyenne lived in the Great Plains and were a nomadic tribe. Like many other Plains Indians, they did, in fact, live in tipis (also called lodges), and hunted buffalo, which provided them with food, shelter, and other essential tools and materials. But this was not always the case. Until about 1700, the Cheyenne lived in the Great Lakes region and farmed crops. Today, the Northern Cheyenne live mostly in modern, single-family houses on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation surrounding Lama Deer, Montana.

2. Indians lived in peace until the arrival of European settlers.

Long before the arrival of Europeans in the 1500s and 1600s, Native American tribes migrated and settled in different areas throughout the Americas. Competition over land, the expansion of trade routes, cultural and language differences, and other factors often led to fierce conflict between tribes. Some Indians managed to remain in the same geographic areas for hundreds of years, while others were forced to find new homelands. However, prior to European settlement, American Indians' dislocation and warfare, though difficult, rarely threatened the survival of any one tribe.

3. Indians had no concept of land ownership and were "tricked" into giving away their land.

Most conflicts between European-Americans and Indians had to do with land, which the Indians occupied and the whites wanted. Whites attempted to get land from Indians either through treaty negotiations that involved some exchange of goods and money, or through force and warfare. In the case of treaties, Indians could be skilled negotiators, and sought terms that

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benefited their tribe. However, fundamental differences between how whites and Indians viewed land ownership led to repeated misunderstandings and conflict.

Whites believed that a piece of land could be bought and sold by an individual, company, or government. Indian tribes did not share this understanding (this is one generalization that experts agree on!). For most Indians, the idea of selling land was similar to believing a person could buy, sell, or inherit a particular piece of the ocean. Instead, Native Americans believed in the right to occupy and control access to a "homeland." When Plains Indians, for example, made treaties with the US government, they believed they were granting *temporary use* of land rather than permanent access or ownership.

4. Indians were "savage" and "bloodthirsty," and hated all white people.

From the point of view of the United States government, Indians were either "friendly" (by signing treaties and cooperating with government policies) or "hostile" (by refusing to sign treaties or follow government policies). Army reports, popular novels, newspapers, and later, Hollywood movies, portrayed hostile Indians as "primitive savages" who preferred war to peace, and who would never tolerate "the white man" in their land.

Indian tribes, like Europeans, most often acted in the self-interest of their communities. Their attitude toward whites was highly dependent on circumstances in a particular place and at a specific time. Had whites attacked or massacred Indians recently? Were treaties followed by both sides? Did skilled translators effectively communicate the positions of both whites and Indians? Both individual Indians and whole tribes responded to white encroachment in a variety of ways, and adapted their views and actions when circumstances changed. Many chiefs supported war only as a last resort, and sometimes Indians labeled as "hostile" changed positions and cooperated with United States policy.

When the Lewis and Clark expedition first encountered the Cheyenne in 1806, William Clark wrote in his journal that they were a peaceful nation and *"confess to be at war with no nation except the Sioux, with whom they have ever since their remembrance been on a defensive war."*

Between the early 1800s and the 1850s, the Cheyenne maintained good trading relations with whites, and marriages between white traders and Cheyenne women were not uncommon. By the 1860s, however, the Cheyenne (now allied with the Lakota Sioux and divided into two tribes, the Southern Cheyenne and Northern Cheyenne), were considered among the most "savage" and war-like of Plains Indians.

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5. Indians are a dying race.

Some white people, now and then, view Indians as a "vanishing race" that has largely disappeared from the North American continent. It is true that millions of Indians died as a result of the disease, warfare, and starvation that accompanied European settlement and encroachment into Indian lands.

But even at the low point of the Indian population in 1900, there were still around 250,000 Indians living in the United States. According to the 2010 US census, there are more than 5 million people who identify as Native Americans (alone or in combination with other races), or 1.7% of the population. Far from vanishing, Native Americans are among the fastest growing populations in the United States. Between 2000 and 2010, they grew at a faster rate than the total US population, increasing almost 10 percent.

6. All Indians live on reservations (somewhere "out West.")

According to the most recent 2010 census data, 78% of Native Americans live off tribal reservations and 57% of those live in metropolitan areas. On and off reservations, American Indians are represented in all professions, including doctors, lawyers, teacher, professors, actors, and professional athletes.

American Indians are spread throughout the entire United States, with the largest populations located in California, Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas, New York, New Mexico, Washington, North Carolina, Florida, and Michigan.

In some Western states, including Montana and South Dakota, many Indians live on or near a reservation. In some cases, the reservation is located on land that was part of Indian tribes' 19th-century homelands. Both of these are true for the Northern Cheyenne. Today, there are 10,050 enrolled tribal members, with about 4,939 residing on the reservation centered in Lame Deer, Montana near the Tongue River.

For a map of where American Indians live today, based on the 2010 US Census, go to:
http://www.census.gov/geo/www/maps/aian2010_wall_map/aian_wall_map.html



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7. "Native American" is the correct term for Indians.

There is no single label to describe any large ethnic group or race of people. Instead, multiple terms are used, as in the case of whites/Caucasians/European-Americans, or blacks/African-Americans, although individuals often prefer use of one term instead of another.

There was a time when "Native American" became more popular and more frequently used than "Indians," because the term "Indian" was associated with Christopher Columbus and the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Today, however, it is very common for both Indians and non-Indians to use the terms "Indian," "American Indian," "Native American," and "Native" interchangeably.

But, for reasons explained above, it is better to use tribal names (e.g. "Northern Cheyenne," "Lakota Sioux," "Crow") whenever possible.

8. Indians get special privileges, or "free stuff," from the US government.

Many non-Indians believe that contemporary Indians automatically receive free education, medical care, and cash payments to which other US citizens are not entitled. Some also believe that Indians do not pay taxes.

The reality is much more complicated. While Indians are eligible for various types of federal assistance and programs, they must apply for these services. Many other groups of Americans, including senior citizens and veterans, are eligible for similar benefits. Some existing health and education benefits Indians receive are part of legally-binding treaties with the US government that Indian tribes received in exchange for land many years ago.

Indians who are members of a sovereign nation do not pay state taxes (because they do not legally reside within a state), but all Indians must file federal income taxes.

9. Indians are not US citizens, and have their own laws and government.

Several Indian tribes remain nations within the United States, and therefore retain certain powers of self-government. Tribal governments can pass and enforce laws and regulations that are separate from local or state laws. This legal status was developed mostly over the course of the 19th century through a series of treaties, or contracts, between the United States government and sovereign Indian nations.

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The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted full US citizenship to Native Americans. Like other citizens, American Indians vote in elections, hold public office, pay taxes, serve in the military, and are protected by the US Constitution. And as US citizens, Native Americans are subject to federal, state, and local laws, with some exceptions. For example, on Indian reservations, only federal and tribal laws apply to members of the tribe.

Sources: Walter C. Fleming, "Myths and Stereotypes About Native Americans," <http://www.jcu.edu/education/ed350/Myths%20and%20Stereotypes%20About%20Native%20Americans.pdf>; David Walbert, "Who Owns the Land?," <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/2027>; U.S. Census Bureau, American Indian and Alaska Native, http://www.census.gov/aian/census_2010/; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, <http://www.bia.gov/FAQs/>

