A Cheyenne Odyssey Full Historical Background

Who were the Cheyenne and when did they settle in the Great Plains?
During the 19th century, hundreds of distinct American Indian tribes lived in large and small bands spread across North America, having migrated over time to homelands with ever-changing boundaries. Each tribe embraced their own creation story, and passed down unique history and culture.

For centuries, the treeless, semi-arid Great Plains (Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and surrounding areas) were home to several different native peoples. These included nomadic, buffalo-hunting tribes, such as the Arapahoe, Blackfeet, Comanches, Cheyenne, Crow, and Lakota Sioux, as well as semi-sedentary tribes that lived in villages and grew crops in addition to hunting, such as the Omahas, Pawnees, and Wichitas. Both groups depended heavily on bison (also known as the American buffalo), not only for meat, but also for hides to make tipis and for robes to keep warm.

The Cheyenne, numbering in the low thousands, migrated from the Great Lakes region to the Great Plains around Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota between the 1680s and 1830s. The Cheyenne language, *Tsesenestsestotse,* is an Algonquian language. The Algonquian-speaking peoples inhabited the area stretching from the Hudson Bay to the Upper Mississippi River, and from the Atlantic coast to the Rocky Mountains.

As the Cheyenne acquired horses in the mid-1700s, their society shifted from an agriculturally-based culture to a more nomadic lifestyle centered on buffalo hunting. Cheyenne territory spread from the Northern Plains of Montana south to the Arkansas River in Oklahoma. As a small tribe, the Cheyenne thrived by forming alliances and inter-marrying with other tribes, especially the Lakota and Arapahoe.

Early Encounters and Trade between Plains Indians and European Settlers
Trade between Plains Indians and European fur traders dates back to the early 1700s, as British and French fur traders traveled from the Hudson Bay into what is now North Dakota. By the late 1700s, there were fixed trading posts on the upper Missouri River in present-day Montana. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States acquired a vast new territory that it hoped to open to settlement.

In 1804, the federal government funded an expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map the region, gather information on water routes for trade, collect information on Indian tribes and languages, and open diplomatic and trading relations with the Plains Indians.

During the two-year trek, Lewis and Clark made contact with over fifty different Indian tribes in both formal councils and individual meetings. The expedition forged strong bonds with some groups, such as the Mandan, Hidatsa and Nez Perce, and had hostile encounters with other groups, such as the Lakota and Blackfeet.

The detailed and scientific records produced by the expedition provided rich knowledge for future land surveyors, military expeditions, prospectors, and increasing numbers of settlers

heading west. Shortly after the Lewis and Clark expedition, US-sponsored fur trading posts began opening up along the upper Missouri River. Until the 1860s, there were few major hostilities between American Indians and white Americans in the Northern Plains. The brisk trade in buffalo hides benefited both parties, but some disadvantages emerged. In order to meet the market demand for hides, the Northern Plains Indians, as well as white traders, began to overhunt the buffalo herds. Increased contact also brought European diseases like smallpox and social problems such as alcoholism to the Plains Indians.

Manifest Destiny

Beginning in the early 1600s, English settlers on the east coast of North America moved progressively westward. As time passed, colonists (and later, United States citizens), created homes, towns, and cities, transformed nature, and built transportation networks of trails, roads, canals, and railroad lines.

Through treaties, purchases, and war, settlers took control of land already occupied by Native American, French, Spanish, and Mexican peoples. With the founding of the United States, the new republic privileged the rights of property-holding white men, and developed an expansive capitalist economy that ran counter to many of the Indian cultures.

Many white Americans regarded Indians as “uncivilized savages,” and attempted to convert them to Christianity. American Indians that did not assimilate were deemed incompatible with the young nation, setting the stage for their forcible removal across the Mississippi River after 1830.

During the 1830s and 1840s, the United States pushed relentlessly westward. In 1836, southern cotton planters moved west into Mexican territory, and claimed Texas as a separate republic that immediately sought statehood.

In the 1844 Presidential election, candidate James Polk called for the annexation of the Oregon Territory, as well as Texas. After winning the election, his vision of expansion accelerated, as he instigated a war with Mexico in 1846 that resulted in the US acquiring one-third of Mexico’s North American territory, including what would later become New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California in 1848.

The next year, the discovery of gold in California brought thousands of new settlers to that territory, and caused a rapid transition to statehood. White settlers found all sorts of ways to defend the destruction of Indian communities in the West. The “Manifest Destiny” ideology held that God sanctioned the Americans' westward march. Social Darwinists adopted the idea of "survival of the fittest," suggesting a natural and inevitable order to the destruction of one race and the rise of another.

By 1850, the US claimed legal authority over lands stretching west to the Pacific Ocean, but the nation had not fully settled, much less conquered, the vast territory west of the Mississippi. In the 1860s, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the rapid spread of mining, cattle

ranching, and homesteading, violent conflict emerged, not only between American Indians and whites, but also among the tribes themselves, especially on the Great Plains, as land and buffalo herds became scarcer.

Clashes between western indigenous tribes, as well as between American Indians and the growing number of white settlers, prospectors, and railroad builders, became more frequent. The US government decided to increase its military presence on the Plains by building forts and roads, and sending more infantry and cavalry soldiers. Between 1860 and 1865, the number of US troops stationed in the West almost doubled from 11,000 to 20,000, as full-scale wars broke out with the Lakota, Apache, and Navajo.

Southern and Northern Cheyenne and the Sand Creek Massacre

The Cheyenne camped and hunted across a broad stretch of the Plains, ranging from the Powder River and Tongue River areas in present-day Montana and Wyoming to south of the Platte River in present-day Nebraska and Kansas. As the Cheyenne's trading and hunting patterns came into conflict with white settlers and travelers in the Platte River area during the 1840s to 1860s, the tribe divided into Northern and Southern groups, but maintained strong ties.

In 1864, the US military slaughtered more than two hundred peaceful Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe—including many women and children--at Sand Creek, Colorado. The Cheyenne at Sand Creek, led by Chief Black Kettle, had come there to negotiate peace. The massacre, which killed eight elder chiefs, devastated the Southern Cheyenne social structure, discouraged many Plains Indians from negotiating with whites, and encouraged retaliation throughout the region.

War and Treaties (The Bozeman Trail, Red Cloud's War, 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty)

With the discovery of gold and silver in the Montana Territory, war expanded to the Bozeman Trail, a route to mines that cut through the center of Lakota territory. In 1865, the government built a series of forts along the Bozeman Trail to protect white travelers. Red Cloud, an Oglala (Lakota) chief, decided to take a stand against the whites' intrusion, and Northern Cheyenne warriors joined him in what became known as Red Cloud's War (1865-1868).

With the end of the Civil War, the US government and military turned its attention to the conflicts on the Plains. Many reformers who had successfully worked to abolish slavery reacted in horror to events such as the Sand Creek massacre, and argued that white settlers' aggression was the cause of the Plains Indian wars. In 1867, they encouraged the creation of an Indian Peace Commission made up of four civilians and three army officers to pursue peaceful negotiations with the Plains Indians. The commission successfully negotiated treaties with the southern tribes at Medicine Lodge Creek, but could not persuade Red Cloud and his allies in the North to consider negotiations until the military pulled out from forts along the Bozeman Trail. A year later, the commissioners returned and agreed to close the forts and turn them over to the Indians.

Red Cloud and the Cheyenne then negotiated a treaty with the US government at Fort Laramie in 1868. The treaty provided for specific reservation lands, as well as large territories designated as hunting grounds and unceded Indian Territory.

Each group in the treaty negotiations had different priorities and understandings of what the treaties would accomplish. For the US government, restricting the Plains Indians to well-defined reservation lands was their central goal, and by providing rations for a set number of years and limiting hunting territory, they hoped to convert the Plains Indians to a settled agricultural life that followed the model of American homesteaders. The treaty also called for mandatory education for Indian children, and supplied European clothing to Indians, in further efforts to assimilate the Lakota and Cheyenne.

Most accounts of the Plains Indians' understanding of the treaties differed considerably. They viewed reservations as land protected from any white incursion, and the unceded hunting grounds as territories under their control through which they would allow whites to pass with permission. The annuities and rations were viewed as peace offerings, and as payment for the continued destruction of the buffalo.

Gold in the Black Hills Brings More Conflict

The Fort Laramie Treaty did not bring peace. In 1871, railroad surveyors and engineers, protected by one thousand troops, moved into the Yellowstone Valley to locate a route for the Northern Pacific Railroad (the second transcontinental railroad). This expedition resulted in a series of skirmishes with the northern Plains Indians. In addition, rumors of gold brought a persistent stream of prospectors to the Black Hills of present-day South Dakota. The Lakota considered the treaty-protected Black Hills to be sacred land.

With the conflicts continuing on the Plains, and social unrest in the East increasing with the severe depression of 1873, President Grant's "Indian peace policy" began to wane. Grant authorized a military expedition into the Black Hills in the summer of 1874. The military's stated purpose was to maintain peace and arrest the illegal miners, but its verification of gold in the region shifted the US government's goals.

First, the Grant administration attempted to purchase or lease the Black Hills from the Lakota. When this failed, they ceased protecting Lakota lands from white intruders, knowing the rush for gold would provoke a full-scale war and allow the military to take the land by force. In December 1875, all Plains Indians residing outside of their reservations were ordered to report to agencies or be considered hostile.

In March 1876, the military moved against a band of recalcitrant Indians camped at the Powder River, but quickly retreated in the face of a counterattack. Three months later, General George Crook again went after a group of Cheyenne and Lakota in the Montana Territory, with little success at forcing them onto a reservation. The Battle of the Rosebud Creek is known by the Cheyenne as the Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother, because a Cheyenne warrior,

Comes in Sight, was fleeing on foot from advancing soldiers when his sister, Buffalo Calf Woman, rode to his rescue.

Eight days later, on June 25-26, 1876, seven hundred US troops led by General George Armstong Custer faced an estimated 2,000 Lakota, Arapahoe and Cheyenne warriors at the Battle of Little Bighorn, known to the Cheyenne as the Battle of the Greasy Grass. The indigenous warriors won an overwhelming victory. The Battle of the Greasy Grass, or Little Bighorn, is one of the most prominent battles of what is known as the Great Sioux War of 1876.

The Northern Cheyenne Surrender

In the wake of the battle, the US military sent even more troops to try to enforce the reservation policy and force the Lakota to surrender rights to the Black Hills. In November 1876, soldiers under General Crook attacked 1,500 Cheyenne under the leadership of Chief Dull Knife and burned all of their possessions, including tipis, clothing, food, and horses, forcing the Cheyenne to surrender.

Despite the Cheyenne's efforts to remain in their northern homelands, they were forced to join the Southern Cheyenne at the Darlington Agency in Oklahoma. At the Darlington Agency, the Northern Cheyenne faced inadequate rations, few buffalo, elk, or deer to hunt, and limited ability to grow crops. Starvation and disease demoralized the northern bands and reduced their numbers.

In September 1878, Chief Dull Knife and Chief Little Wolf requested that they be allowed to leave the Darlington Agency and return north. When the request was denied, they asked the sympathetic Indian Agent to at least give them a head start before pursuing them. Many in the tribe stated they would rather die trying to escape than die of starvation and malaria in Oklahoma. Approximately three hundred Northern Cheyenne, including many women, children, and elderly people, already weakened by hunger and illness, agreed to try and make the 1,500 mile escape to their homelands in the north.

The Northern Cheyenne Exodus

For over six weeks, the Northern Cheyenne moved north, hiding from soldiers, running out of supplies, and facing cold weather. Some young warriors raided settler homesteads in Kansas and Nebraska, stealing horses and supplies. Along the way, the Northern Cheyenne also killed over forty whites and raped some women.

At the Platte River, the group divided, with Little Wolf's band planning to wait out the winter and then head to Tongue River country, a common hunting and camping area. A second group under Chief Dull Knife hoped to find refuge with the Lakota at the Red Cloud Agency, but within days they encountered soldiers who took them as prisoners. They remained at Fort Robinson for two months before they escaped once again.

Eventually, those following Chief Dull Knife joined Chief Little Wolf's band at Fort Keogh near the Tongue River, where they were able to hunt and camp along Lame Deer Creek. Finally, in

1884, President Chester A. Arthur issued an Executive Order creating the Tongue River Indian Reservation for the Northern Cheyenne.

The Northern Cheyenne Today

The Northern Cheyenne have 10,050 enrolled tribal members, with about half of them living on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. The reservation is approximately 444,000 acres in size, with 99% tribal ownership. It is located in southeastern Montana, and centered on the town of Lame Deer. In 1972, the Northern Cheyenne became one of the first tribes to convert the Bureau of Indian Affairs school into a tribally controlled school. Also in the 1970s, a vocational training program was converted into a higher education program, with the creation of Chief Dull Knife College, a tribal college on the reservation that continues to the present.

The Northern Cheyenne also successfully fought for tribal control of mineral rights and led a movement for clean energy on American Indian reservations that continues today, as the tribe debates its policies for development of the coal and methane fields located on tribal land.

Despite all of the challenges they have faced, the Northern Cheyenne culture and language continue to thrive in southeastern Montana.