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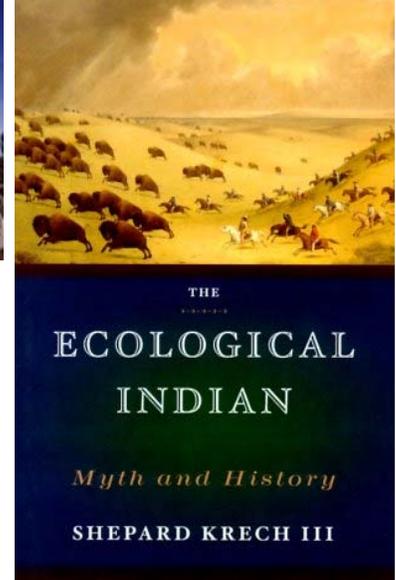
## The Basic Indian Stereotypes



For a subject worked and reworked so often in novels, motion pictures, and television, American Indians are...the least understood and the most misunderstood Americans of us all.

John F. Kennedy, 1963

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### Stereotypes about cultural traits

Joseph Riverwind wrote the following for this site:

### The Basic Indian Stereotypes

By Joseph Riverwind (Taino)

It is the goal of this page to dispel the common myths which surround the Native people of this continent. Stereotypes abound thanks to the lack of education and the media's shortsightedness. The following is a compilation of the most prevalent stereotypes of our people:

#### Few of us lived in tipis, wore feather bonnets, or fought like "braves"

Cowboy movies during the 20th century portrayed the Plains people as living in tipis, wearing war bonnets or feathers in their hair, riding horses, brandishing war lances, and more. As a result of this, the common assumption is that all Native people were like those portrayed in films. This is very far from the truth.

Yes, the Plains people did live in tipis, and they were nomadic. They readily adopted horses, introduced by the Spaniards, into their nomadic life and used them war as well as for travel. (Before horses, they used dogs to pull loads.) In the East, the people lived in longhouses, wigwams (wooden structures similar to log cabins), and (in the Southeast) thatched-roof houses. Out West, the desert people lived in structures made of adobe—mortared sand and water—which they shaped into bricks to make homes. You can research more on the different dwellings of Native people at your local library or online.

#### We had no inherited royalty

The nations of this country have never had a concept of Indian royalty. The Indian [princess](#) is strictly a European concept. We do not have kings, queens, or princesses. If someone in your family tells you his or her great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess, please correct the person on that issue.

As James W. Loewen writes in his book [Lies Across America](#), "Indeed, most American Indian '[chiefs](#)' were never chiefs. Europeans projected chieftdom onto Native Americans because they

could not easily conceive of people living in a civil society without permanent formal rank. Also, making a 'chief' of a respected Native (and sometimes any Native who happened to be handy) gave a European leader an opposite with whom to deal—someone who could sell land, for instance."

### We did not smoke a peace pipe

Sitting Bull once said that there is no such thing as a peace pipe because there has never been peace. The pipe is sacred to many people, and we treat it with much respect. It teaches us just as the Bible teaches Christians. *We never* put illegal narcotics into a pipe, so people can't get "high" from smoking one. We use blessed tobacco and often add other herbs, such as spearmint, red willow bark, and bearberry leaves, for a pleasant taste or aroma.



### We did not whoop

At many exhibitions we see this behavior of putting your hand in front of your mouth and making the "whoop whoop" noise. It is even funnier when we see boys and men doing it. The ululation was done by women when their husbands went to war, when they returned from a successful hunt or raid, or at the death of a loved one. The women made this sound with the tongue and the mouth slightly closed (no hands).

The men had a war cry that they issued in battle to intimidate and scare their enemies. This sound, coupled with the warriors' painted faces, had a crippling psychological effect on the recipients, often making them flee for their lives. So when we see men doing the "whoop whoop whoop" thing, we laugh because to us they sound like the women.

### We do not pound a drum or "chant" primitively

The drum is the heartbeat of our people. It unites us all in dance and fellowship at powwows or traditional events unique to each tribe. The songs we sing are old and new. Many span hundreds of years, having been passed down from generation to generation. Yes, I said songs, *not* chants. We are not Gregorian monks; they are the ones who chant.

### We do not have shamans

Thanks to the [New Age craze](#) that has spread around the world, there are many self-proclaimed "medicine men" and "shamans"—people who claim to follow our spiritual ways, having "learned" everything they know from books bought at the local book store. After the book [Black Elk Speaks](#) was published, people thought they could become instant medicine men and women. Little do they know that Black Elk did not tell the whole truth to the book's writer.

Some people go so far as to charge for vision quests or sweat lodge ceremonies. Never get taken in by someone like this, much less by



self-proclaimed spiritual leaders who cannot tell you truthfully where they received the permission and training to perform these ceremonies. It is dangerous when these people attempt to perform these ceremonies and involve others who do not know any better. We do not tolerate these people within our Native communities, and lately many of our medicine people have traveled off the reservation to put a stop to these charlatans.

Some quick definitions of the most common names for our spiritual leaders: **Medicine Man**—A medicine man is a person who is knowledgeable in herbs and cures for various ailments and ills. **Healer**—A healer uses prayers and ancient methods for curing and healing. **Shaman**—This is not a Native American word. "Shaman" is derived from Russian Siberia and is not used by us.

### We do not worship nature

Everyone seems to think we worship the sun, trees, animals, and [spirits](#). There is one Creator, and we call him/her by different names. The first priests who set foot on this land watched as Native people raised their hands to the sun and prayed. Since they were "civilized" rather than "savage" like us, they took this to be worship of the sun. If the priests had asked, we would have told them the prayers were for the force that created the sun, not the sun itself.

The same goes for animals and other aspects of nature. We believe they have a living spirit within them. We honor and respect them. But we do not worship them.

Our ancestors learned from observing these aspects of nature. The traits of different animals showed them how to survive. Our ancestors learned to hunt from the wolf, for example; they copied the way a pack would corral and kill its prey. The first Americans were not the only ones who learned this method. At one time, everyone on this earth was a hunter/gatherer. Observance and respect for nature was a learning process which ingrained itself in our ancestors' lives and continues to this day.

### We do not all have spirit animals or funny "Indian names"

Another New Age misconception is that people can "choose" their ["Indian names,"](#) "spirit animals," or "totems." Not all Native people have animal spirits as guardians or protectors; if they did, it is not something easily earned. And many of us are given names, but these names are not spoken out loud or used as a tool for self-aggrandizement.

Both things are very personal, and I will only say that yes, this is a part of our spiritual lives and is not something to be discussed in this type of forum. But I will add that we do not get the names as a result of a dream, a feeling, or a natural affinity for a certain animal—and certainly not from some plastic shaman ceremony. I will say no more on this subject.

### Additional notes from Rob

Joseph limited himself to cultural stereotypes involving beliefs and practices. Our [Hall of Shame](#) combines the cultural and personal stereotypes—the stoic, drunk, or good-for-nothing Indian—in one comprehensive list. Each item provides a summary of the subject but is by no means comprehensive. One probably could write a book on each of these subjects.

One overriding stereotype is that all Indians were the same—that



they all wore

buckskins and feathers, lived in tipis, followed a great chief and his medicine man, danced and prayed to nature, etc. The Playmobil Indian Village set suggests the problem. It intermingles what looks like an Apache warrior, a Plains Chief, a Navajo weaver, and an Algonquin canoe.

Actually, these come from several separate, largely unrelated cultures. As the *500 Nations* title suggests, thousands of different Indian cultures existed before Columbus arrived. They were as distinct as the European cultures of the British, the Spanish, the Vikings, the Russians, and the Greeks.

## Stereotypes about personal traits

The following posting lists many of the traits associated with the Indian person. Many have corresponding pages on this site.

For comparison's sake, the posting also lists Native stereotypes about non-Natives.

## [How Each Side Sees The Other Side](#)

Some Anglo business stereotypes of Native Americans:

- 1) [Lazy — not motivated to work](#)
- 2) [Savage or wild](#)
- 3) [Get drunk quickly or drink a lot](#)
- 4) Lack sense of humor
- 5) [Soft spoken or quiet](#)
- 6) Have no money sense
- 7) Make little effort to get an education
- 8) [Close to nature all the time](#)
- 9) Adhere to "Indian time"
- 10) Most of the work they can do is associated with handicrafts
- 11) Want their land back
- 12) Wallow or live in the past
- 13) [Always asking for handouts](#)
- 14) Feel world owes them a living
- 15) [Ostracize themselves by failing to blend into society](#)
- 16) Lack of unity and tribal factionalism
- 17) [Worship pagans](#)

Some Native stereotypes of Anglo-Americans:

- 1) [Not trustworthy or back-stabbing](#)
- 2) Speak with forked tongue
- 3) [Materialistic and money hungry](#)
- 4) [Greedy — don't share with fellow man](#)
- 5) [Competition or power hungry](#)
- 6) Evasive
- 7) [Business oriented/selfish, self-centered](#)
- 8) [Narrow minded and prejudiced](#)
- 9) Live by time clock
- 10) No respect for fellow man
- 11) [Manipulate nature/have no respect for nature](#)



- 12) [Want others, especially minorities, to conform to their ideals](#)
- 13) Fail to show equality in court
- 14) [Hypocrisy in Christianity](#)

### More on the differences between groups

[A shining city on a hill: what Americans believe](#)

[Hercules vs. Coyote: Native and Euro-American beliefs](#)

[Native vs. non-Native Americans: a summary](#)

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### A brief history of Native stereotyping

It's fairly well accepted these days that America's "Wild West" is a myth. Americans invented it to give context to their national icon, the [cowboy](#). A book review in the LA Times, 4/4/04, hints how this happened:

Larry McMurtry, one of the few contemporary novelists who still write unapologetically about the Old West, once set himself the task of compiling a list of people "who had a hand in inventing the West." Tellingly, the list was far more expansive and eclectic than we might have expected, beginning with Thomas Jefferson and ending with Andy Warhol.

"In between came gunmakers, boot makers, saddlemakers, railroad magnates, painters, Indians, actors, directors, liars of many descriptions, but not, by golly, very many writers: only Ned Buntline, Zane Grey, Max Brand, and [Louis L'Amour](#)," McMurtry declares in "Sacagawea's Nickname," a collection of 12 essays that first appeared in the New York Review of Books.

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McMurtry despairs of the vast gap between myth and reality in the depiction of the West in arts and letters as well as in popular culture. "[M]ost of the traditions which we associate with the American West," he insists, "were invented by pulp writers, poster artists, impresarios, and advertising men" — a complaint that casts his own work in an intriguing new light.

He points out that celebrated scout Kit Carson was transformed from a flesh-and-blood human being into an artifact of pop culture in his own lifetime. "[He] had become a dime-novel hero as early as 1847-1848," McMurtry writes. "Today it would be hard to scare up one hundred Americans who could say with any accuracy what Kit Carson actually did, and ninety-five of those would be Navajos, who remember with bitterness that in 1863 he evicted their great-grandparents from their homes and marched them to an unhealthy place called the Bosque Redondo, where many of them died."

Not only did Indians help invent our national mythology, but they were key players in it. Since we invented the cowboy to represent our best and brightest side, we had to invent the Indian to represent our deepest and darkest side. Indians became the enemy or obstacle we



had to overcome to realize our potential—to manifest our destiny, one might say.

From "The Tonto Syndrome," Scholastic Update, 5/26/89:

### **Cowboys and Indians**

Most non-Indians form their first impressions of Native Americans on the playground. "When little kids play cowboys and Indians," says Robert Thomas, of the University of Arizona, "the Indians are always the bad guys. The [cowboys](#) win, the Indians get defeated. Children learn that Indians are bad."

Such games, and the stories that inspire them, seek to reenact the conflict between Native Americans and the first white settlers, who arrived in this country in the early 1600s. The problem, say most scholars, is that they draw on a one-sided view of history. "From contact with the first European settlers, the people writing the books were the Europeans," says Duane Hall of the American Indian Institute at the University of Oklahoma. "There were very few [Indian writers](#) giving an Indian account of the story. Down through the pages of history, Indians became people without names and faces, people who are very stoic, and have no feelings."

### **Buffalo Bill's Wild West**

The myth of the American Indian was further refined by frontiersman William Frederick Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill. In 1883, Cody formed Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a traveling show. The act included a mock battle with Indians, played, for the most part, by members of the Lakota Sioux tribe. Because Buffalo Bill's Wild West was as close as most Americans got to "real" Indians, Sioux traditions became, in the public mind, synonymous with all Indian customs.

By the time "Injuns" made it to the Western movies of the 1950s, directors generalized many Sioux traditions—such as hunting and feather headdresses—to all Indians. In fact, the hundreds of Native American tribes each have their own customs. The [Hopi](#), for example, lived in villages, cultivated corn, and crafted elegant pottery.

"The old movies rely on a homogenized Indian," says Karen Biestman of the University of California. "He is usually male, wears buckskin, beads, feathers, has a pinto pony, and is [savage](#), uncaring, and brutal. But it's a shallow image. We don't see families, caring, a sense of community, spirituality, or day-to-day life."

And much of what we see is simply made up. "We rarely see women," says Biestman. "If we do, it's the [princess](#), the daughter of a [chief](#). But there's no such thing as royalty in Indian



culture. These images are largely perpetuated by non-Indians. They are simply inventions."

Those inventions live on in the form of [cigar-store Indians](#), and roadside attractions such as giant Indian statues, made-for-tourist totem poles, and "ceremonial" dance pageants. The [Tomahawk Indian Store](#) in Lupton, Arizona, for instance, looks like an enormous yellow brick teepee, but actually serves as an Indian craft gift-shop and restaurant.

### Rob's comment

A few small corrections to the Scholastic Update's essay:

- The first white settlers arrived in the American Southwest from New Spain (Mexico) in the 1500s.
- Dime novelists and painters like Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell also contributed to the mythologizing of the American West.
- A few American tribes, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, did have royalty...as did the great Indian civilizations in Central and South America.
- The Hopi still live in villages, cultivate corn, and craft elegant pottery.

### More on the history of Native stereotypes

From the Baltimore Sun:

## [Challenging old views of the American Indian](#)

**Duality: Images accepted for 500 years are in question. A new Smithsonian museum could supply some answers.**

By Michael Hill  
Sun Staff  
Originally published  
August 29, 2004

Close your eyes and conjure up what comes to mind when you hear the words "American Indian." No matter your political correctness, the dominant image is probably one of feathers and war paint, bows and arrows, buffalo and teepees, beads and skins, wisdom and warfare.



It is an image derived from [adventure movies](#) and childhood books, from sepia-tinged photographs and [museum exhibitions](#), from exploitative [television shows](#) and earnest documentaries. Even recent publicity about Indian casinos cannot blemish its iconic power.

Whether the Indian in your image is villain or victim, it is likely some exotic "other," a more primal being somehow in touch with elemental nature which can be a source of [savagery](#) and [spirituality](#).

Next month, the Smithsonian Institution - which had as much to do with cementing the image of the Indian in the American mind as any institution - opens its Museum of the American Indian, probably the last great museum to be built on the Mall in Washington. This \$200 million facility, decades in the making, could go a long way toward challenging views of the American Indian developed since Europeans encountered these people in the 15th century.

"There really is a duality in the many, many images of the Native American over the last 500 years," says Rennard Strickland, an expert on Indian law at the University of Oregon. "It goes between what I call the 'savage sinner' and the 'red-skinned redeemer.' We tend to use the Indian as a mirror on which we reflect a lot of our own particular neuroses."

The duality can be seen in some of the earliest accounts: the noble friend who sat down for the first [Thanksgiving dinner](#), the fool who sold Manhattan for \$24 in beads, the enemy who kidnapped white women and raised them in savage ways.



"I think there has been a schizophrenia in the American perception of the Indian from the very beginning," says Orin Starn, an anthropologist at Duke University. "From very early on, there is this dual desire to, at the same time, on the one hand, [exterminate](#) them - either kill or remove them to make way for the United States - and to [romanticize](#) them, to admire them, to be like them.

"Go back to the Revolutionary War and the Boston Tea Party," he says. "Colonists there dressed up as Indians. There was this identification with being proud and wild and savage in rebelling against the British."

This continued, Starn says, in the 1800s, when U.S. troops were fighting Indians in the West. "You are fighting to defeat these people but at the same time you are fascinated by these people who ride bareback with eagle feather headdresses, who know how to hunt with a bow and arrow," he says.

Akim Reinhardt, a historian at Towson University, points out that Indians had a different role in the life of early colonists.

"Indians, from the initial settlements in the colonial period up through the 1700s and the beginning of the nation, represented something scary to the colonists," he says. "It now seems preordained that those 13 Colonies would persist, but it was not clear at the time. The Iroquois confederacy in the North, the Cherokee and Creek confederacy in the South were, in fact, much stronger than the early European colonies. So they had a very different perception of Indians than we do now."

Reinhardt points to the popularity of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and the widespread captive narratives - some fraudulent, some true - of people taken by Indians and later returned to white society, as evidence of the fear and fascination Indians represented to early settlers.

From the beginning, the settlers' attitudes toward the Indian were a mixture of avarice and altruism. Moving them out of the way to reservations was a way to get their land for expansion of the new country. But many also saw it as a way to protect these innocent people until they could be educated and brought up to the [standards](#) of Western civilization.

A change in the nation's view came about a century ago. Geronimo was captured in Mexico. The Battle of Wounded Knee ended the last Indian threat. Most thought their culture was on the verge of extinction. The romanticization began.

Buffalo Bill Cody had earlier put Indians on display in his Wild West Show. Others were seen in exhibitions at turn-of-the-century World's Fairs.

Edward Curtis began his photographic odyssey to document the cultures. Anthropologists and amateurs went about preserving a way of life that was seen as disappearing, a tragic, but inevitable byproduct of civilization. Many objects in the collection of the new museum were collected at this time.

### Portrayal in movies

For the most part, this is the Indian culture that was put under glass in museums and declared "authentic." This is the one portrayed in movies, even if it meant - as Strickland says in his 1997 book *Tonto's Revenge* - putting Seminoles from Florida in headdresses from the Plains. Or in the case of many Curtis photographs - as Reinhardt notes - dressing subjects in inappropriate attire to make them more photogenic.

Ignored was the fact that the culture being documented and preserved was far from that of a pure indigenous people. The horse came from the Spanish. Beads came from Europeans.

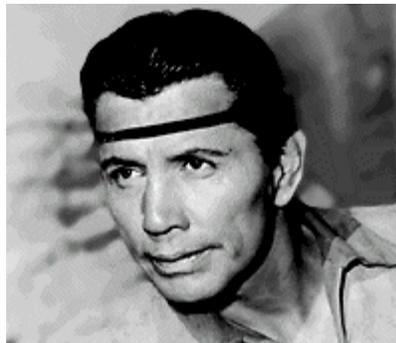
Roger Nichols, a historian at the University of Arizona, says that these cultural transitions are rarely examined from the Indians' point of view.

"We tend to think they were ripped off in the fur trade, but they thought they were ripping off the traders," he says. "They were getting glass pots that were a lot better than the clay ones that would break every time you dropped one. ... "People tend to think of everything their ancestors did with the Europeans as negative, but the Indians didn't see it that way."

Starn examined one aspect of this era in *Ishi's Brain: In Search of America's Last "Wild" Indian*. The book documents the story of the last survivor of the Yahi tribe who was captured in California in 1911, handed over to an anthropologist and put on display in a museum until his death five years later. Starn tells of finding Ishi's brain preserved in the Smithsonian and eventually repatriating it to a California tribe.

"In the 1860s and '70s, Ishi's tribe was described as bloodthirsty [redskins](#) and killers," Starn says. "By the time he was captured, the Indians had been defeated on the battlefield and America was moving much more toward a frame of imperialist nostalgia.

"In the 1910s, the Indian tends to be viewed as a noble, primitive man in touch with nature, a master of the arts of hunting and fishing and making arrowheads, who knows the myths of his people," he says. "This was all



disappearing. Ishi was viewed as the last of his kind, the last real Indian."

There was a problem with this romanticization of a disappearing culture: It failed to disappear.

"I think it was 100 years ago almost exactly that Edward Curtis took one of his most famous photographs," says Peter Iverson, a professor of history at Arizona State University. "It was of a group of Navahos riding into the distance. It was called [The Vanishing Race](#)."

"Today, there are more Navahos than there were Indians 100 years go. There's more Indian land. It has not turned out as many people anticipated."

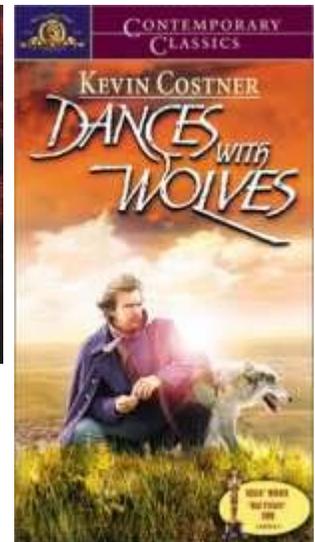
The [reservation system](#), which was supposed to protect Indians while getting them ready for civilization, became places where culture could be protected and, despite poverty and other social ills, preserved. The schools that were to raise Indians into whites, often served similar consciousness-raising functions.

The Indian had refused to be preserved under museum glass, smoking peace pipes, riding horses and signing treaties that would be ignored by greedy white men. Instead, the Indian smoked cigarettes, drove pickup trucks and, in some cases, opened [casinos](#) visited by greedy white men.

Even as the pendulum swung from viewing Indians as wholly despicable to wholly admirable, the Indian story was still based on that small window of time at the end of the 19th century - and inevitably told not by Indians, but by whites.

"You think about those [John Wayne](#) films when the Indian was the savage and you hear the bugle and you imagine that old line from Mighty Mouse - 'Here I come to save the day,'" Iverson says. "Then you think about that Kevin I-will-be-in-every-scene Costner film, Dances With Wolves, and instead of the bugle, you have a flute. Every time you heard the flute, you knew something terrible was going to happen to the Indians."

Strickland, of Osage and Cherokee heritage, says Indian films almost always involve war. "They become a mirror for examining what was happening in the nation," he says. "Before World War II, you have films like Drums Along the Mohawk in which settlers are fighting vicious Indians who are stand-ins for Nazis and other fascists. Then in the '60s and '70s, you have the Vietnam war played out on the American Plains. Instead of the massacre at My Lai, you have Sand Creek."



### Stereotype

Reinhardt says that any stereotype does damage. "Even as they change over time and become ostensibly positive, they were still limiting in their own way by pigeonholing Indians ... ," Reinhardt says.

"So today's Indian people still have to battle these stereotypes. What some of them have voiced to me on numerous occasions is that they continue to fight to say, 'We are still here.'"

Gerald McMaster, a Plains Cree who is head of exhibitions at the new museum, says that is one of the main messages the museum hopes to convey.

"It is this story, principally, that we really want to tell the visitor, that indeed native peoples not only exist today, but that we are diverse, we live across the hemisphere, in almost every country in the Western hemisphere," he says.

"We have engaged the communities at every turn, because we realize that they are the authorities of their cultural information, their histories, their cosmologies and their philosophies," McMaster says.

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