

History of Survival: A Pine Ridge Example

Since the arrival of Europeans on the shores of the North American continent, indigenous peoples have struggled to survive in a dominant culture that does not want them. Since this moment of invasion, Europeans in what is now the continental United States have been trying to fix the “Indian problem” by removing indigenous communities from valuable land (arable, rich in ores and other natural resources) to lands that were less valuable. This removal was forced through war and unwanted treaties and without regard to the effects it would have on the cultures of the Native American people.

The Oglala Lakota are an example of a native community still dealing with this legacy. One of the 6 bands of the Lakota branch of the Sioux Nation, the Oglala Lakota currently live on the Pine Ridge reservation, located in the southeastern corner of South Dakota. The current conditions of homelessness, joblessness, poverty, and loss of traditional language fluency as described in segment three of “Matters of Race” are a direct result of the United States Indian policy of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The purchase of the Louisiana Territories from France in 1803 and its subsequent exploration by Lewis and Clark one year later brought much needed land for the growing American population. White settlers traveled across this new land, as they headed to the Oregon, California, and Alaskan territories for their respective gold rushes. Most of the land these fortune seekers traversed was used by the Sioux Nation. Indian leaders asked the United States to keep its citizens off their land while White settlers demanded that the U.S. protect them from Indian attacks that were in retaliation for the white settlers’ trespassing. Thus, the United States government began making treaties with Indian nations.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 created the Great Sioux Reservation. The Reservation covered all of present day South Dakota west of the Missouri River. It also included the Black Hills, an area of spiritual significance to the Sioux.

The Indian nations soon realized that even with treaties, promises made were made to be broken. In 1874, General George Armstrong Custer verified the report of gold in the Black Hills. The United States seized the Black Hills in 1877.

Additional treaties forced the Lakota to cede more of their land resulting in the reservations they occupy today. This loss of land made it increasingly harder for the Lakota to be self-sufficient and soon they had to rely on government annuities for survival.

This history leads to the dismal statistics that currently haunt Pine Ridge. The latest census states that 76% of the Lakota are jobless although other sources quote the reality as high as 90%. This is due to the lack of sustainable businesses and industries on the reservation. Those who do have jobs have to travel over 100 miles to reach the nearest urban center.

Sixty-nine percent of residents live below the poverty line with hundreds homeless and thousands living in overcrowded and substandard housing. Thirty years ago more than 90% of children spoke Lakota fluently, today only 3% do.

Although the picture on the reservation seems bleak, there has been a revitalization of cultural traditions by members of the Lakota community. The Lakota are investigating businesses that can bring jobs to the reservation. They are also creating language preservation plans to increase the number of fluent Lakota speakers. Organizations like Woihanble Yuwita, the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, are trying to provide affordable housing for members of the reservation. These revitalization efforts will not only sustain the nation through the 21st century, but hopefully for many centuries to come.

Want to find out more about the Oglala Lakota and Native Americans in general? The following web sites, books and articles will provide more detailed information on the topics covered above

Information About the Oglala Lakota

Pine Ridge Reservation Profile. (<http://www.airc.org/reservations/pineridge.html>). The American Indian Relief Council provides demographic information of the Oglala Sioux who live on Pine Ridge.

Map of South Dakota. (<http://www.kstrom.net/isk/maps/dakotas/sd.html>).

Constitution and By-Laws of the Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Pine Ridge. (<http://doc.narf.org/nill/Constitutions/OglalaConst/oglatoc.htm>)

Oglala Lakota Oyate. (http://www.olc.edu/culture/oglala_culture/welcome.htm). Put together by Oglala Lakota College, this website describes Oglala Lakota culture. It also provides links for more information on the Lakota and Native Americans in general.

Black Hills Controversy

Black Hill National Forest. (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/blackhills/>). A website which describes the natural resources of the Black Hills.

Wind Cave National Park. (http://www.nps.gov/wica/History_of_the_Black_Hills.htm). Created by the United States National Park Service, this website gives a brief history of the Black Hills.

Black Hills. (http://www.sacredland.org/black_hills.html). Supported by the Sacred Land Film Project, the website discusses the history of the Black Hills conflict and its current status. Also provides links to other web sites and news sources on the Black Hills conflict.

Laws and treaties

Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.

(http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/american_originals/sioux.html). See original scans of the treaty which designates the Black Hills as part of the Sioux Reservation.

Prominent Indian Leaders

Sitting Bull. (http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/sittingbull.htm). This portion of the PBS website for the program "New Perspectives on the West" provides biographical information on Sitting Bull, a Hunkpapa Lakota leader. It also gives background information on the Fort Laramie Treaty. Includes maps.

Housing

Woihanble Yuwita Habitat for Humanity. (<http://www.orgsites.com/sd/pine-ridge-hfh/index.html>). This organization is trying to bring decent housing to members of the Pine Ridge reservation. This web site describes some of their activities.

Language Revitalization

Teaching Indigenous Languages. (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html>). A website which discusses the best ways for Indian nations to preserve and protect their languages.

Meeting to Preserve the Lakota language.

(<http://www.indiancountry.com/?1035387009>). Article by David Melmer in the Indian Country Today newspaper which discusses the Oglala Lakota's plan to revitalize their language.

General Native American Links

Culture and History

Who Stole the Teepee. (<http://www.conexus.si.edu/teepee/indexfla.htm>). A website created by the National Museum of American Indian, which highlights contemporary artists who address the effects of United States culture to traditional Native American lifeways.

Native American History and Culture. (<http://www.si.edu/resource/faq/nmai/start.htm>). Created by the Smithsonian Institution, this list brings together Internet sites which address the lifeways and history of Native Nations, past and present.

Laws and Treaties

Treaties and Laws. (<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/>). An online version of Charles J. Kappler's Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties which contains most of the treaties between Indian nations and the United States.

Organizations

National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). (<http://www.ncai.org/index.asp>). Founded in 1944, NCAI educates the public and the United States "Congress on the governmental rights of American Indians and Alaska Natives". The website contains

information on Indian Country issues such as governance, economic development and management of natural and cultural resources.

Newspapers and News Outlets

Indian Country Today. (<http://www.indiancountry.com>). Indian Country Today is the leading newspaper which reports news from Indian Country. It also provides editorials and analysis from a Native American perspective.

Indianz.com. (<http://www.indianz.com>). Operated by the HoChunk, Inc., the economic development corporation of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, and Noble Savage Media, a Native American-owned media firm, the website provides news and entertainment on topics relating to Native American nations and communities. It also provided links to news stories from other news outlets.

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