The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all – freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.

Volume II Lesson Seventy-Five

Indians On The Warpath

LESSON IDEA

As the American West was being settled by white men, resistance by Indians and clashes between the two forces were inevitable. That prolonged conflict is the theme of today's lesson.

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1848 WAS THE YEAR Europe was set afire by revolution; and farmers, merchants, craftsmen, and workers were crushed like grapes in a winepress by revolutionaries conspiring to destroy civilization in the name of "liberty and equality." It was the year of Karl Marx, the *Communist Manifesto*, and the growth of the cancer of collectivism – in the Old World.

But in the New World, in America, it was a year of discovery and opportunity. Gold was found in California! And its glittering promise attracted thousands of people from every country in the world. Better to risk health and future in a long ocean voyage than to be terrorized by the revolutionaries of Europe. The war whoops of Plains Indians might even be less dangerous than the deadly lies of socialists in Paris. Never was there a sharper contrast between the Old World and the New than in 1848.

Which world would you have chosen if you had lived in 1848? The Old World of revolution? Or the New World of promise? Why? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

Those who knew the Plains Indians were certain that war would be inevitable soon after the first white settlers moved past the Missouri River. For one thing, war was the principal amusement, sport, and status symbol of Plains Indians. To have any prestige, authority, or safety – even to marry – a Plains Indian had first to prove his worth as a warrior. Hunting was his business, a drudgery and a necessity; but war was his entertainment. As the old warriors put it: "Plains Indians will always be fighting; they are like two mean dogs. If you catch them fighting, you can drag them apart, but as soon as you turn them loose, they will go right back to fighting again."

During the long winter months, when there were no buffalo to hunt or councils to attend, recounting past victories was the favorite pastime of the warriors. Seated around the fire that warmed his tepee, the warrior would relive his moments of bravery, the "coup" he counted – meaning the times he had touched an enemy with weapon or hand – while the young braves of the tribe listened in admiration.

Moreover, as historian Stanley Vestal explains, "for the Plains Indian the change from peace to war was only the work of an instant. He had no problems of reconversion. The tools with which he earned his living were the weapons he used in his wars. Any Indian, when affronted, was likely to change from a killer of buffalo to a killer of men at a moment's notice."

There were as many as one hundred intertribal feuds. "Even so," says Vestal, "the balance of power on the Plains might have remained fairly steady but for the coming of the white man with his deadlier

weapons, his wagons, his liquor, his diseases, his greed – and his good intentions.

"Emigrants heading for Oregon and Salt Lake had disturbed the tribes along the trails . . . . Epidemics of smallpox and cholera had already destroyed fully half the Indians on the Plains. The Forty-Niners, one-hundred-thousand strong, pouring through the buffalo pastures, had cut down the scanty timber, burned off the grass, and swept the game away, turning that great hunting ground along the Platte [*River*] into an empty desert. Everyone saw that the government must take a hand, and in 1849 Fort Laramie [*in Wyoming*] had been purchased and garrisoned."

TWO YEARS LATER, with the help of the most knowledgeable and trusted white men on the Plains – Father De Smet, Jim Bridger, and many other traders and mountain men – fourteen thousand Plains Indians and their chiefs agreed to come to Fort Laramie to talk peace with the "Grandfather in Washington." It was the greatest assemblage of Indians in the history of the Plains, and it was marked by the greatest degree of sincerity and honesty ever achieved in Indian treaty-making.

The Commissioners, representing the United States government, offered to pay the total Indian community fifty thousand dollars each year for fifty years for the right to build forts and roads to California, Salt Lake, and Oregon. In return, the chiefs of each tribe accepted certain land boundaries and agreed to stop fighting each other. Both sides promised to make restitution for any wrongs committed by their side. All in all, it was probably the fairest treaty ever made with the Plains Indians. But it was doomed to fail – first, because the United States Senate refused to ratify it, and second, because both white men and red found it impossible to enforce fairly.

The formal rupture came in the summer of 1854, when a Minniconjou brave shot an aged and abandoned cow to get a piece of rawhide. The Brule Sioux chief, Stirring Bear, immediately reported the incident to the commandant at Fort Laramie and asked for soldiers to go with him to arrest the Minniconjou, who was not a member of Stirring Bear's camp. The commandant, who felt the cow was worthless except as roaming shoe leather, decided to forget the incident.

But one of the eager young officers at the post took a very different view. He was a second lieutenant named J.L. Grattan, and he had come West to "kill Injuns." Grattan begged so hard to be allowed to go after the Minniconjou that the commandant reluctantly consented. But he directed the lieutenant to make the arrest only "if practicable and without unnecessary risk."

Grattan, however, stretched his authority beyond its limits. He rode into Stirring Bear's camp with thirty men, a drunken interpreter, and two cannon. He jerked his lathered horse to a stop before the council lodge and called out: "Hey you! You infernal red devils, come out here!" In the talks that followed, Stirring Bear offered horses in payment for the cow; he offered a mule; he asked Grattan to wait until the Indian agent could come and settle the matter. But the hot-headed lieutenant had only one answer: bullets. He ordered his men to open fire, and Stirring Bear went down with the first volley. Then the enraged Sioux warriors went into action. In less than ten minutes, Grattan and his thirty "blue coats" were dead.

In the East, newsmen inflamed their readers with the gory details of the "Grattan Massacre." The public responded by demanding action by the Army. As Stanley Vestal comments: "The Indians, of course, had no newspapers. Had they been wiser, they would not have accepted annuities when they 'touched the pen.' A controlling interest in the New York *Herald* would have been far more valuable to them. Had they had it, they might have published their own story of the 'Grattan Massacre' . . ."

But, as it was, the Army sent its soldiers to "punish" the Sioux; and not sure who the "murderers" of Grattan were, they attacked the first Sioux they found. These happened to be friendly Indians, yet the troops killed many innocent red-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Warpath And Council Fire by Stanley Vestal gives a complete account of the forty-year conflict between white men and red on the Great Plains. We recommend it for your reading, as well as other titles by the same author: *Sitting Bull, Warpath, The Old Santa Fe Trail,* and *Jim Bridger.*

skins, destroyed their camp, and carted off seventy women and children.

In the years that followed, taking revenge on innocent parties became a normal practice for both sides. Soldiers and Indians butchered noncombatants, scalped the dead, took hostages, looted, and burned the homes of their enemies. Soon, neither white men nor red could distinguish their friends from their enemies, with the result that both continually made enemies of friends. Had you been a soldier sympathetic to the Indians, or a redskin anxious to be friendly with the white men, how would you have felt? What would you have recommended? [*Encourage discussion.*]

MANY LIVES MIGHT have been spared if the "Grandfather in Washington" had put the Indian problem into the hands of one government agency and insisted on a policy of justice backed by force. Instead, the authority was divided between the Indian Bureau, which was charged with "mothering" or "taking care" of the Indians, and the War Department, which was directed to subdue them by force. The two worked at cross purposes. The Army talked of "wars of extermination," the Indian Bureau spoke of "progress" and "humanity" – while its agents helped themselves to Indian funds.

"From the point of view of the Indians," says Vestal, "it was generally a toss-up as to whether the Army was to kill them, or the Indian Bureau was to rob and starve them. However, an impartial compromise was effected, so that these enterprises were attempted alternately and in rotation."

SOMETIMES THE Indians took justice into their own hands. They caught one trader who habitually rested his hand on the scale while weighing out groceries. They cut off his hand and laid it on the scale to see how much he had cheated them. Another agent, hearing the chiefs plead that their people were hungry and needed the long-withheld annuities, replied, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass." When his body was discovered a few days later, the Indians had stuffed his mouth with grass. As the famous Sioux war chief, Sitting Bull, phrased it: "I would have more confidence in the Grandfather at Washington if there were not so many bald-headed thieves working for him."

But neither were all Indians the soul of honesty. In the south the Kiowas and Comanches, who had raided New Mexico, old Mexico, and Texas for generations, had become professional kidnappers, horse-thieves, and dealers in stolen goods. Treaty or no treaty, most had no intention of giving up the profitable life of raiding. Captives brought ransom. If one government officer or agent refused to pay, there was always some other white chief who would take pity on the wretched captive and save him, or her, from torture and death.

The Kiowa chief Satanta, for example, was described as a "strapping boaster" who had "more words than brains." As one historian comments: "He must also have had some inner doubts about his courage, for he allowed the taunting of his comrades to make him forget all his pledges and policies. When they called him 'coward,' he took to the warpath instantly to save his face."

And the Kiowa on the warpath were fearsome indeed. After one of their attacks on a government wagon train, an assistant Army surgeon filed a report which said, in part:

> *All the bodies were riddled with bullets, covered with gashes, and the skulls crushed, evidently with an axe found bloody on the place; some of the bodies exhibited also signs of having been stabbed with arrows. One of the bodies was even more mutilated than the others, it having been found fastened with a chain to the pole of a wagon lying over a fire with the face to the ground, the tongue being cut out. Owing to the charred condition of the soft parts it was impossible to determine whether the man was burned before or after his death. The scalps of all but one were taken.*

How would you have reacted to reports of such massacres? Do you think peace could have been obtained under such circumstances? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

TO MAKE MATTERS worse, the War Between the States which began in 1861 pulled soldiers from the frontier and left the settlers virtually unprotected – a situation which delighted the Indian

tribes. The arrogant Kiowa, for example, immediately increased their raids. And to emphasize their hostility, they even held a "scalp dance" near Fort Larned in Kansas, to celebrate the murder of several whites and the capture of Mrs. Dorothy Field in Texas. After the dance, Kiowa braves stole all the troopers' horses from the nearby fort. Chief Satanta then brazenly added insult to injury, by sending a message to the fort's commandant telling him to get better horses next time, as those the chief had just stolen were "no good."

The end of the War Between the States brought no improvement, as the military forces that might have been used to protect the frontier were sent South to establish military dictatorships in the defeated Confederacy. And in short order, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, drawing another horde of prospectors across the Plains; construction started on the transcontinental railroad; Texans began their cattle drives, which infringed upon the hunting grounds of many tribes; Southerners who had lost their homes and farms in the war moved westward to begin a new life; and Europeans continued to surge into the New World in increasing numbers. All of these developments put more pressure and greater restrictions on the nomadic life of the Plains Indians.

What was the solution? Many frontiersmen, who held to the theory that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," favored a "war of extermination." Others, who called themselves humanitarians but who had never slept on the lice-infested buffalo robe in an Arapaho tepee or buried a six-year-old child whose skull had been crushed with a tomahawk, clung to the "poor, ignorant savage" theory. The bronze-skinned warriors of the Plains, said the humanitarians, could be converted to farmers if only they were given a kind word, a pair of trousers, a piece of land, and a plow. Reservations were established for those warriors who could be persuaded or bribed into living on them; and war was declared on those who would not.

Neither theory produced peace. Raids and massacres continued. In summary, we could say that none of the white men's strategies – pacifism, appeasement, disarmament, isolation, bribery, moral persuasion, negotiation, swindling, or extermination – was sufficient to tame the Plains tribes. It was the destruction of the buffalo which destroyed the tribes and ended their freedom. And that is the story we will hear in next week's lesson.

DURING THE WEEK

Ask one or more members of the family to find out as much as they can from encyclopedias or reference books about General George Armstrong Custer and the battle at the Little Big Horn River in Montana. While this is only one of many Army-Indian battles, the numerous historic references to "Custer's Last Stand" probably make it the most famous. Discuss the massacre, the reasons for it, and other aspects of Indian life during the week.

The Family Heritage Series

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