Native Americans of the Great Plains

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Written by
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Correlation

LEVEL Z	
Fountas & Pinnell	U–V
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	50

Glossary

avenge get back at someone or something for a wrong (p. 11)

bison cowlike animal with shaggy mane (p. 5)

bounty great wealth of goods (p. 9)

endure to live through something painful (p. 12)

guerrilla warfare a type of warfare that allows a group to take on a larger or better equipped force (p. 15)

immunity resistance to disease (p. 16)

migrated moved with the seasons (p. 5)

nomadic moving from place to place (p. 6)

ornaments decorations (p. 8)

powwows celebrations that include dance, music, arts, crafts, and food (p. 20)

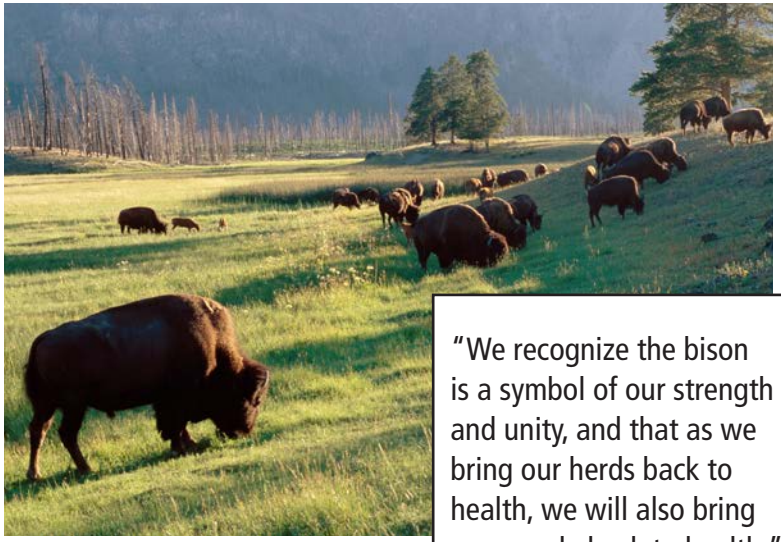
prairie flat land with gently rolling hills and tall grasses (p. 7)

prospectors people searching for gold or other precious metals (p. 17)

reservations lands set aside for Native Americans (p. 14)

teepees tentlike homes used by Plains tribes (p. 6)

tendons cord that connects muscle to bone (p. 9)



The bison population is growing, but the numbers don't come close to the sixty million that once lived.

"We recognize the bison is a symbol of our strength and unity, and that as we bring our herds back to health, we will also bring our people back to health."

—Fred DuBray,
Cheyenne River Sioux

To preserve another ancient tradition, more than forty tribes, including Lakota, Blackfoot, and Crow, came together to form the Inter Tribal Bison Cooperative. Some of the tribes were enemies hundreds of years ago, but now they are united in their efforts to bring bison back to the Great Plains. The bison reminds today's tribes of how their ancestors lived in harmony with nature; the animals also represent the spirit many tribes are trying to preserve. As of 2012, more than 15,000 bison have been reintroduced to tribal lands through the Inter Tribal Bison Cooperative's efforts.

Table of Contents

The Great Plains

The Great Plains of the United States stretch from the Rocky Mountains in the west to beyond the Missouri River in the east. The Great Plains extend north into Canada and south nearly to Mexico.

Long ago the Great Plains were characterized by gently rolling hills covered with tall grasses. With few trees to block them, strong winds whipped across the Great Plains, blowing hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. It was dry, with rainfall averaging 20 inches (51 cm) a year.

A little over two hundred years ago, in the early 1800s, there were only 150,000 people living in the Great Plains. Most were Native Americans, but there were also European settlers.

Many native languages, such as the Lakota's, are disappearing because young people don't learn to speak or use them. Thirty years ago, many Lakota children in reservation schools spoke the same language as their grandmothers, grandfathers, and many generations of elders.

One problem with learning the Lakota language is not knowing how to pronounce some words. People working on The Lakota Language Project at the University of Indiana created computer software that students can use to see and hear all the different ways a Lakota word might be pronounced. The program also shows ways a word might be used in different communities.

Cherokee children use computers to learn the language of their tribe.

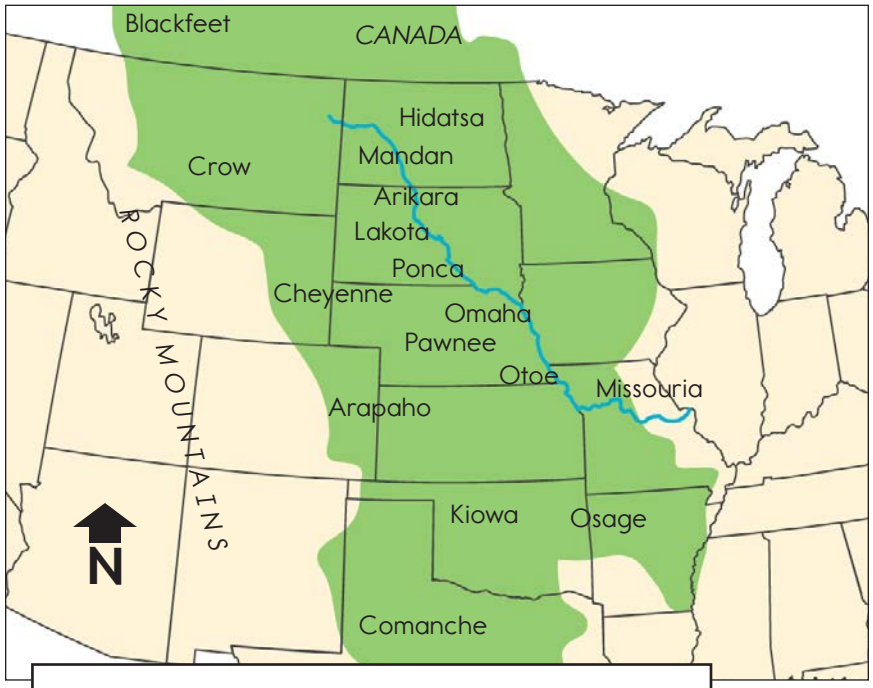
Sioux children at a powwow ceremony

The Plains Native Americans Today

Today, people from many Plains tribes come together to preserve their traditions. They hold tribal celebrations, practice speaking their native languages, and work to increase the number of bison.

Native Americans gather together across the country for **powwows**, which are a way to preserve their heritage through dance, music, arts, crafts, and food. Traditional dances have now become contests for prizes in addition to being done to celebrate a bountiful harvest or other occasion.

People shared the Great Plains with more than sixty million **bison**, or buffalo. Bison were the mainstay of many Plains tribes' diets, which meant that as the animals **migrated**, or moved with the seasons, many of the tribes moved with them. As you read about the people who lived on the Great Plains, you'll see how they depended on the bison for more than food.



Tribes of the Plains
There are more than thirty tribes that make up the Plains Native Americans. The tribes of the Great Plains all have different languages and customs, but they also have much in common based on geography.

Home on the Plains

Lots of people think of **teepees** as typical homes for Native Americans of the past, and many Plains tribes actually did live in teepees. These amazing mobile homes were ideal for **nomadic** hunters on the Plains because they were designed to be strong enough to withstand heavy winds, provide heat in the winter, and let air flow through in the hot summer months.

Wooden poles gave the teepee its cone shape, and some of the poles were 25 feet (7.6 m) tall. Bison hides were stitched together to make the walls. The poles and hides that made the teepee could be quickly taken down and transported to a new location. Once a tribe decided where to settle, two to three people could set up a teepee in less than two hours.

A Plains tribe family outside their home

Red Cloud

Red Cloud, whose tribal name was Makhpiya-Luta (ma-KAP-ee-a-loo-ta) was an important Lakota leader who led wars against tribes of Crows, Pawnees, Utes, and Shoshones. In 1866, Red Cloud began a series of attacks to protect Lakota land from miners traveling into Montana. To end the attacks, the Fort Laramie Treaty, which stated that the Lakota would abandon the warpath in exchange for money and goods, was signed. As part of the treaty, Red Cloud's Lakota band was supposed to stay only on reservation land. Although Red Cloud is said to have signed the treaty (marked with an "X"), there's little evidence that the terms of the treaty were fully explained to the Lakota leader.

Crazy Horse, who was known as Tashunca-uitco (ta-SHUN-ca-weet-co), was known as a ferocious warrior who fought to preserve the traditions of the Lakota. Crazy Horse stole his first horse before he was thirteen and led his first war party when he was still a teenager.

When the U.S. government ordered all Lakota bands onto reservations in 1876, Crazy Horse resisted and led other Lakota to resist, just as Sitting Bull did. After almost a year of battles, Crazy Horse saw that his people were struggling with the lack of bison too much to continue fighting. He was the last major chief to surrender.

Crazy Horse died in 1877. He did not allow any photographs to be taken of him, but his likeness is carved into the side of a mountain in South Dakota at the Crazy Horse Memorial.

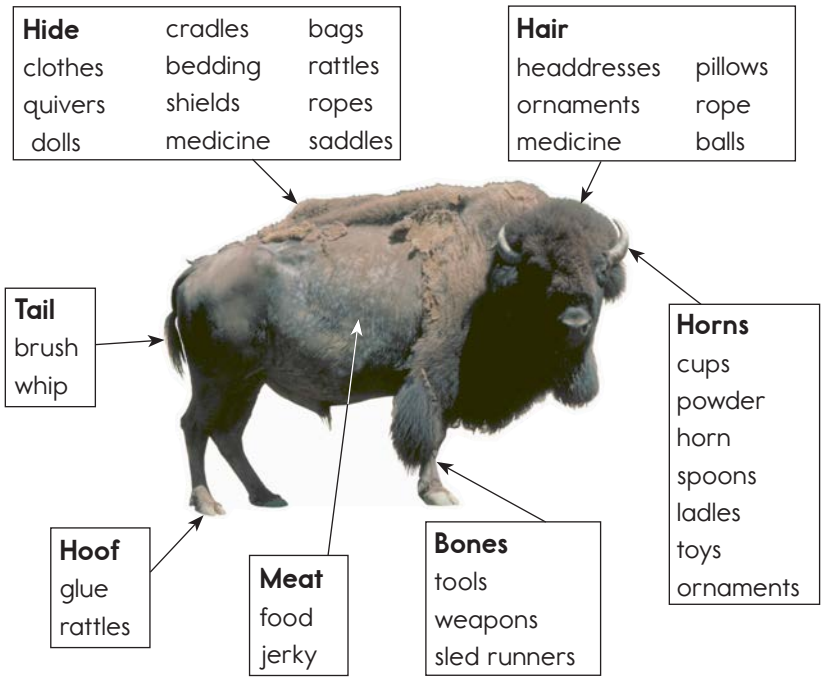
Crazy Horse Memorial

Teepees have small entrances so it's easy to keep the weather out.

A large family could comfortably live in a teepee, which had a living area about 15 feet (4.5 m) in diameter, with enough room to cook during the day and sleep at night. The opening often faced east because there was less wind coming from the east. When cooking or heating the inside, a smoke flap near the top could be opened to let smoke escape, or closed to keep heat in the teepee during the long, cold winter months.

Not all Plains tribes lived in teepees. Village tribes—such as the Pawnee, Omaha, and Mandan—built more permanent shelters. These shelters were built long and low to the ground so that they could better withstand the strong winds that whipped across the **prairie**. Wood, bison skins, grass, and mud were combined to make homes and lodges. Large families lived and cooked in the lodge, and there was even enough room inside for a horse and the family's dogs.

Making the Most of a Bison



Where Buffalo Once Roamed

Bison provided meat, shelter, and tools for many tribes in the Plains. Tribes found uses for all parts of the bison. Almost every part was eaten, including the organs. Bison skin was made into clothing, blankets, shoes, shields, and teepees. Their horns were made into spoons or scoops, or used as **ornaments**. Bison bones were used to make all kinds of tools, weapons, and everyday objects, including runners on sleds.

Leaders

Sitting Bull

Leaders of the Lakota tribes resisted the U.S. government's efforts to put their people on reservations. Three of the most well known were Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Red Cloud.

Sitting Bull was known as a courageous leader who fought to protect tribal lands. When gold was discovered in South Dakota in the mid-1870s, a rush of **prospectors** invaded tribal lands. In 1876, the U.S. government sent troops to protect the prospectors and ordered all Lakota to move to reservations. Sitting Bull refused. He called together other Lakota as well as Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes, and they gathered at Little Bighorn Valley.

On June 25, 1876, George Armstrong Custer of the U.S. Army led his troops into the valley, intending to ambush the Lakota, but Sitting Bull and his warriors were ready. The bloody battle ended with the death of Custer and his soldiers. The Battle of Little Bighorn is sometimes called "Custer's Last Stand."

However, the main reason that the Plains tribes eventually lost the wars was probably not the soldiers. By the time the U.S. Army reached many of the tribes, more than half the people had died from diseases, such as smallpox. Settlers had brought diseases to the Plains—diseases that the Indians' bodies did not have **immunity**, or resistance, to.

Settlers spread disease to Native Americans when they traded goods.

The settlers and soldiers also killed most of the bison on the Plains, and without the bison, many tribes were left without the food and materials they needed to survive. The U.S. Cavalry used the method of running bison off a cliff to kill hundreds of thousands of bison at a time, leaving them to rot. By the late 1800s, most of the bison were gone.

Eventually, soldiers and settlers forced most of the Plains tribes onto reservations, or areas of land set aside for them. Often the areas were small and were the poorest farming or hunting lands in the Great Plains.

In the fall, bison gathered in huge herds—often of more than one million. Fall was the best time for hunting, and village tribes had their annual hunts at that time. Nomadic tribes would gather in larger groups, setting up camps and celebrating the **bounty** of the bison hunt.

Hunters rode out from camp on their horses until they found the bison herd. They would ride toward the herd until the bison started running. Then the hunters would ride right alongside the animals, spearing them or shooting them with either bows and arrows or guns. Bows were made of wood, with bowstrings made of bison **tendons**.

Plains Native Americans used many weapons to kill bison. Horses made it easier, no matter what weapon was used.

Herds of bison were chased off cliffs to their deaths, but Native Americans would kill only as many as they needed.

The hunters were able to shoot the bison with amazing accuracy while their horses were galloping full-speed through the herd. Sometimes a large group of people riding horses would chase the bison off a cliff so that the bison fell to their deaths.

When winter came, the bison would break up into smaller herds, and the nomadic tribes broke up into smaller groups, too. Nomadic tribes followed the bison migration throughout the year, while many tribes living in farming villages stayed in one place for the entire year. During the winter months, they lived off the big bison hunt and the crops they harvested.

This depiction shows a U.S. Army troop fighting a Plains Native American tribe.

The Indian Wars

As settlers from the eastern United States began moving onto the Plains to mine, farm, and build towns and railroads, they came in conflict with the Plains tribes. The Plains tribes and the settlers fought over the land, and there was killing on both sides. Settlers demanded that the U.S. Army defend and protect them. The government sent troops to fight the Plains tribes, and those battles became known as the Indian Wars.

The Plains tribes sometimes evenly matched the soldiers. The tribes knew the land well, and they used **guerrilla** (ger-RIL-la) **warfare** against the soldiers. But the U.S. army outnumbered the tribes, and the Army had more powerful guns than the tribes had.

The Ghost Dance started among the Paiute tribe and quickly spread to others, including the Lakota, or Sioux (sue), tribes who were forced onto **reservations** by the United States government. The Ghost Dance recalled days when there were millions of bison and food was plentiful. It also told of a hoped-for time when all the settlers would be dead, and the Native Americans would have their land back.

Ghost Dance

Do You Know?

On December 29, 1890, U.S. Cavalry troops at Wounded Knee (in what is now South Dakota) were guarding a large group of Lakota people who had surrendered. When the Lakota began performing the Ghost Dance, it provoked the soldiers, and a bloody battle broke out. During the battle, two hundred Lakota were killed by the army. The murdered Lakota—including men, women, and children—were buried in a mass grave. It was the last battle between the army and tribal people.

Horses, Weapons, and Wars

Before Europeans brought horses to the United States in the 1500s, nomadic tribes moved and hunted on foot. Spanish explorers introduced horses in the southwestern United States, and the horses quickly ran wild throughout the Plains. Through trade (and stealing), more tribes began acquiring horses. By the 1700s, horses were fully a part of the Plains Native American lifestyle, and everything changed when people had the speed and power of these four-legged beasts. Members of the Plains tribes became excellent horsemen, and they rode horses into bison hunts and into wars.

Horses are an important part of the Plains tribes' lifestyles.

Some of the Plains tribes had reputations as warring tribes. Most of the battles were small, often fought to steal horses from another tribe or to **avenge** a death. War was seen as a way to restore honor. As the U.S. Army and other settlers moved west, they posed a threat to the livelihood of the Plains tribes, who fought for their right to hunt, farm the land, and preserve their traditions.

Sun Dance

Celebrations and Rituals

Members of the Plains tribes often gathered to sing, dance, and celebrate with friends. One important ceremony was the Summer Sun Dance. The Sun Dance was different from tribe to tribe, but all Sun Dance celebrations focused on thanking the Great Spirit for plentiful food. Because bison was an important food source, it was featured in Sun Dances.

A Sun Dance lasted for several days with nonstop dancing. Dancers also shook their heads and looked into the sun as long as their eyes could **endure** it, which could hurt them. They hoped they'd have a vision at the end of the Sun Dance and that prosperity would come to their tribe.

Even today, dances of celebration are important to many tribes. One of those dances is the Grass Dance (or Omaha Dance), which is thought to have started in the 1800s, possibly as a warrior dance. Modern dancers wear outfits with lots of fringe and ribbon to look like the movement of prairie grass. Early dancers of the Grass Dance may have tied grass to their clothes. Some tribes used the Grass Dance to flatten the grass before larger tribal ceremonies; others used it to celebrate victory over an enemy. Now, the Grass Dance is performed in tribal competitions.

Grass Dance

Do You Know?

The sound of drums played a powerful role in celebrations and rituals. Many drums were handed down in a family from one generation to the next and were often named and blessed. Older drums were made of deer, elk, horse, or bison hides stretched over hollowed-out sections of logs.