

America, At Whose Cost?

By Brandi Waters

In the early days of America's history, millions of people flocked to this newly formed nation hoping to make a fresh start in America's growing cities or by claiming a piece of land in the wild, unsettled territories in the west. Most people saw these western territories as new frontiers that had hardly been seen before. Much has been recorded about the rush of immigrants that poured into the United States during the past 300 years, but little is ever mentioned of the people who were here before the immigrants arrived, the Native American Indians-America's first immigrants.

It is believed that the Native Americans became North America's first inhabitants after they migrated here from Asia by crossing a now-submerged land bridge that once connected Asia to present-day Alaska around ten thousand years ago. These people moved farther south and west, with groups splitting off and forming their own communities. For thousands of years, these people lived a migratory lifestyle, never making permanent homes. Eventually, they learned how to grow their own food and built permanent villages. By the time that the Europeans began exploring the oceans, American Indians had made settlements across most of what is now the United States. When the first Europeans arrived on what is now American soil around the year 1500, it is estimated that there were between two million and eighteen million American Indians already living in North America.



The arrival of European explorers and settlers marked the beginning of the decline of the Native American population. There were diseases in Europe that did not exist in America like smallpox, measles, influenza, and whooping cough. The explorers unknowingly carried these diseases with them on their journey across the Atlantic Ocean. By 1600, more than one-half of the Native American population had died as a result of exposure to these foreign diseases.

As immigrants poured into America from Europe, the plight of the Native Americans continued to worsen. Although some settlers were kind to the American Indians and treated them with respect, many saw them as "savages," an inferior culture that needed to be contained, controlled, and civilized. Native Americans quickly became the minority in their own homeland. They became powerless against a growing population with more advanced tools and weapons and an unending appetite for more and more land.

As early as 1786, the United States government, having only just been born, began asking Native American tribes to give up their land to the United States government. The Indians were then asked to move to a reservation which was generally a small plot of land that the settlers found undesirable for development or farming. For the next one hundred years, Native Americans were pushed farther and farther toward the west as more than thirty million people migrated to America.

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was passed. It gave the president the authority to negotiate treaties between the Indian tribes and the United States government. Under the rules of the treaties, the tribes would give up their land east of the Mississippi River in exchange for land to the west of the Mississippi River. At the time, most people believed that the United States would never grow so large that it would include land west of the Mississippi River. They believed that the Native Americans would be free to live as they wished, far away from the new American settlements. Though the Removal Act stated that the Indians were allowed to remain on their land and become citizens of the state they lived in, individuals who chose to stay were mistreated by their white neighbors until they grew tired of the fighting and moved west. If an entire tribe dared to defy the United States government and remain on their land, the U.S. Army was sent in to force the Indians off their land. This was the fate of the Seminole, Creek, and Cherokee tribes. The Seminoles in Florida fought the government for more than twenty years, resulting in thousands of casualties and a cost of more than forty million dollars. The U.S. government finally convinced them to leave in 1858 after paying the tribe to leave.

The Cherokees were forced to move after a treaty was signed on their behalf. The tribe resisted for five years

Name _____



Date _____

before troops were sent in to remove them from the land. The tribe was given no time to collect their belongings and began marching from Georgia to Oklahoma. The path that they took is now called the "Trail of Tears" because the journey was so long and difficult. The Cherokees were not prepared for such a journey and more than four thousand people died during the trip due to starvation and exposure to the cold, wind, and rain.

As America continued to grow and expand west of the Mississippi River, the conflict between the Indians and the white man grew more intense. Both sides were angry, and the violence increased.

One of the most famous battles that took place during the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century is the Battle of Little Bighorn. The battle took place in the Montana Territory and pitted Colonel George Custer of the U.S. Cavalry against Crazy Horse of the Lakota tribe. The Lakota were members of the Sioux nation and had been pushed farther and farther west for many years. The tribe had moved west from the Great Lakes area, eventually settling the Black Hills of the Dakotas and the plains of Montana and Wyoming. The Lakota were content to settle in this region; the land was excellent hunting ground with plenty of game to feed their families. Within only twenty years, though, gold had been discovered in Montana's Rocky Mountains. White settlers flooded in to try to strike it rich in the gold rush. The Oregon and Bozeman trails led settlers through the Sioux hunting grounds, disturbing the wildlife and scaring it away. This made feeding their families difficult and angered the tribe that the white men were intruding on them so soon after they had been removed from their land in the Great Lakes area. The Sioux led a campaign to discourage people from using the Bozeman trail. It was so successful that the government intervened and arranged a peace meeting that would allow the settlers to use the trail if they would agree to not disturb the buffalo. During the meeting, U.S. Army units showed up to protect settlers using the trail from Indian attacks. The Sioux immediately withdrew from the meeting. The next year, the Sioux agreed to move to a reservation in the Black Hills, so long as the land would not be disturbed by the settlers. The Sioux chief considered this a victory, but only a small part of the tribe agreed to go to the reservation.

In 1874, gold was found in the Black Hills, and the miners once again poured into the area. The government tried to buy the land from the Sioux, but the tribe was unwilling to sell it for less than six hundred million dollars. The Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, began preparing for a war against the U.S. Army. Several other tribes joined them in the fight. More than twelve thousand Native Americans gathered at the Big Horn River, much to the surprise of Colonel Custer's army. The battle was an important victory for the Lakota and resulted in the death of Colonel Custer, although eventually the dwindling Lakota could not hold off the American troops any longer, and the tribe was forced to surrender.

This battle was one of the most successful campaigns by Native Americans in their fight against the U.S. government. Unfortunately, the outcome was almost always the same—the Indians were forced to yield to the will of the United States government. The Indians could never be as powerful and mighty as the white man that was determined to claim their land—they were severely outnumbered.

In a nation that prides itself for its compassion and believes in equal rights for all citizens, it is often forgotten how we built a nation for ourselves at the cost of those who were here before us. For hundreds of years, American Indians were thought of as savages, an inferior race that did not deserve the same rights as the "civilized" American immigrants. Thousands of Native Americans were killed, imprisoned, tortured, or pushed aside because they refused to give up their beliefs, their culture, and their land to the white man. Today, just over four million people are all that is left of the American Indians in a country with a population of almost three hundred million. Their numbers are small, but they have a rich culture and a long history from which we can learn much.

Name _____



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Questions

- _____ 1. What group of people were America's first immigrants?
 - A. English
 - B. Chinese
 - C. Spanish
 - D. American Indians

- _____ 2. How did the first Native Americans come to America?
 - A. by ship from Africa
 - B. on foot from South America
 - C. on foot from Asia
 - D. by ship from Europe

- _____ 3. What European disease contributed to the death of more than one-half of the Native American population in the 1500s?
 - A. smallpox
 - B. measles
 - C. influenza
 - D. all of the above

- _____ 4. Most European settlers believed that the Native Americans were _____.
 - A. intelligent
 - B. citizens
 - C. savages
 - D. civilized

- _____ 5. The Indian Removal Act essentially forced American Indians to move west of _____.
 - A. the Mississippi River
 - B. the Ohio River
 - C. Colorado
 - D. Virginia

- _____ 6. What group was forced to move west to Oklahoma on a journey called the "Trail of Tears?"
 - A. Cherokee
 - B. Seminole
 - C. Lakota
 - D. Creek

- _____ 7. The Lakota tribe began attacking settlers who used the _____ Trail which ran through the middle of their hunting grounds in Wyoming and Montana.
 - A. Bozeman
 - B. Black Hills
 - C. Dakota
 - D. Oregon

