

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, Stirling 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 Stirling 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 Stirling 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, Stirling 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 Stirling 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*.

