



History Lesson 1
The First Americans (Grade 5)

Instruction 1-2
Cultures, Traditions, Economies and Governments

Our last Instruction told you a little about The First Americans. By 1492, there were more than 10 million of them. They spoke over 2,000 different languages. They had a rich history. They lived in different cultures. A *culture* is a group of people who share the same language, food, clothing and beliefs.

A thousand years before Christ, the Zuni and Hopi lived in terraced villages. They used irrigation canals. They did ceramics, wove baskets and made cloth from cotton.

By the time of Christ, the *Mound Builders* had built thousands of huge earth sculptures. Many were shaped like birds or serpents. One was over 3-1/2 miles long.

The Iroquois organized other tribes into an alliance. It included Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas. Land was owned and worked in common. Private property was unknown.

Women were honored and respected. They gathered and farmed and they also took care of village affairs. Men hunted and fished. When a man married, he joined his wife's family. To get a divorce, a woman put her husband's possessions outside the door.

Tradition

The First Americans had no written language. But they had their own laws, poetry and history. They passed information, beliefs and customs down from generation to generation. How? By word of mouth or example. That's called *tradition*. They told stories to teach their children values, culture and spirituality.

Many groups had complex oral vocabularies. Plus their own songs, dances and dramas.

They held *Pow Wows* to get together with family and friends.

Some parts of America were as full of people as Europe. Relationships among men, women, children and nature were carefully defined.

Here are a few examples.

Southwestern Pueblo Culture

Corn, beans and squash were the "three sisters" of the Pueblos. So the people organized their lives around agriculture. This included elaborate rituals to bring rain.

There were no temples. But people built kivas (circular underground rooms) for ceremonial purposes. Non-Indians were not allowed inside.

Religious rites included curing ceremonies. Most involved elaborate costumes, body paint and dancing. Many of these ceremonies are still performed today.



Pottery is the best-known Pueblo art form. Today, pots can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The Northwest Coast Area

This economy was based on salmon fishing. And on whaling, sea fishing and hunting. Ceremonies accompanied all these activities.

Unlike most other Natives, North Coast Indians owned private property. And made class distinctions. With chiefs and nobles at the top. These chiefs competed at Potlatches (ceremonial feasts) to see who could give the most elaborate gifts. Gifts like robes, furs, baskets, masks, wooden armor and helmets.

Northwest Coast art was highly symbolic. You've probably seen pictures of the totem poles that guard the entrance to many villages. They represent the histories of the families who live there.

On the Plains

Plains Indians were both farmers and nomads. There were so many tribes that they came into conflict from time to time. They spoke different languages. So they developed sign language to help them communicate. This prevented some bloodshed but not all.

Many Plains groups had a warrior culture. Bravery was highly prized. One example was the system of *coup*. A warrior would try to get close to an enemy. Close enough to touch him with a stick. The stick was called a coup. The object was to not to draw blood but to prove bravery. The shorter the coup stick, the braver the warrior. The style and pattern of each coup came from the visions and dreams of the warrior who owned it.

Many Plains Natives fasted to induce visions. They also played games. There are a couple of these games at the end of this Instruction.

Plains art included elaborate feather work and beadwork. As well as decorated hides. These objects are highly prized today.

Eastern Woodlands

We've already told you about the Iroquois alliance. But there were other tribes in the area too. In some, men painted their faces and bodies. They shaved their hair on both sides of their heads. You've probably seen pictures of a Mohawk haircut. Or had one yourself.



The myth of the *Manitou* was central to many societies. It tells of a hero who remade the world from mud after a deluge. A deluge is a long, heavy rain storm.

There were also temples for sun worship. These temples had altars with perpetual fires. The fires were extinguished and rekindled each year. This ritual was called the *New Fire Ceremony*.

Iroquois society treated all people as equal. But some southern Woodland groups made class distinctions.



History Lesson 1
The First Americans (Grade 5)

Instruction 1-2
Cultures, Traditions, Economies and Governments

The Museum of the American Indian

Many modern tribes have museums which document their histories. And display the art of their ancestors. These museums are fun to visit.

The most important national museum is the Smithsonian *Museum of the American Indian*. Run by Natives, it showcases both art and artifacts. It is currently located in lower Manhattan. But an entirely new Indian Museum will open on the Mall in Washington DC in September 2004.