

## **Native Americans: How can we be neighbors in 'Indian Country'?**

In January of 2013 David E. Ortman, Seattle WA sent information from Don and Eleanor Kaufman, Newton, KS, for group discussion. Don wrote "What Belongs to Caesar." Ortman writes, "Unlike the Penn Old Mennonites who have a long history with Native Americans, the Swiss-Volhynians came in 1874 and soon after when most of the Native Americans had already been swept from the land now occupied by Schweitzers in SD/NB/KS." Kaufman lists questions and a few answers for small group discussion.

### **Native Americans: How can we be neighbors in 'Indian Country'?**

#### **Memories and Questions for Mennonite Immigrants:**

Introduction: As Eric Massanari pointed out recently in an appeal for mutual aid, we are called to "Making Space for our Neighbors." (12-7-'12) Unfortunately our history suggests that too often we find ourselves taking harmony and space away from others.

Europe's discovery of the American continent in 1492 led to numerous expeditions to find gold and wealth for Portugal. Later Spain's greed resulted in the exploitation and destruction of the Central American people.

Fast forward to 1585, before there was any permanent English settlement in Virginia, Howard Zinn notes that Richard Grenville landed there with seven ships. "The Indians he met were hospitable, but when one of them stole a small silver cup, Grenville sacked and burned the whole Indian village." The arrival of European immigrants along the Atlantic Coast came as early as 1607-1620. "Jamestown itself was set up inside the territory of an Indian confederacy, led by the chief, Powhatan." He watched the English settle on his people's land, but did not attack, maintaining a posture of coolness. Later during the winter of 1610, some of the English were starving. They received food from the Indians. Despite this hospitality, the governor of the colony later took revenge and killed Indians, burned the houses, and took children. "Twelve years later, the Indians, alarmed as the English settlements kept growing in numbers, apparently decided to try to wipe them out for good. They went on a rampage and massacred 347 men, women, and children. From then on it was total war." -- *A People's History of the United State, 1492 to Present*, (1999), p. 12.

It is interesting to note that John Oyer was so conscious of the inhabitant's sense of territorial loss in Europe among the Anabaptists that John D. Roth used remarks by Dionysius Dreytwein (1548-1564) for the title of Oyer's writings, namely, *"They Harry the Good People Out of the Land,"* p. 191. (The essays concern the "persecution, survival, and flourishing of Anabaptists and Mennonites.")

As I reflect on the cruel and tragic Indian experience in N.A. I can't help but believe that the quotation is just as true for them.

Memories and Questions

- 1) When did you first become aware of or meet American 'Indians'? What did you learn? Was this authentic information? What was missing?
- 2) What attitudes, values, and behaviors were you taught about Indians? When did you experience Indians as "people like us"?
- 3) Is it healthy or legitimate for us to reflect on "painful truths" about our communal history? Where do we fit on the continuum "between violence and benevolence"? Do we need to know? Does knowledge of our past, or lack of it, create unnecessary guilt or regret?
- 4) When did your formal education include Native American history?

(David Ortman admits that his elementary and high school education did not review much Indian history).

- 5) What are your comments after having read "The Dakota Conflict Trials" article by Douglas O. Linder? (7 page document plus several "Links" by Henry B. Whipple and Isaac Heard).

I invite your discussion of that raw incident in Minnesota history taking place in 1862. (Just 12 years before European Mennonites arrived on the Great Plains of the Midwest).

- 6) In your estimation, what motivated Mennonite to risk migrating to N.A.?

Was it: Freedom from military domination?

Opportunity to own land?

Religious and political freedom?

Other:

- 7) Was the Great Plains region "a world in flux" in the 1870s?

What about the Civil War disruption and settler expansion of the 1860s?

- 8) Did the Indian and white massacres, however prevalent, fail to get the attention of the population? If so, what prevented people from responding to the urgent needs of people living in their area prior to the outbreak of violence? Were people too isolated to know, or were they too preoccupied with the details of their own relocation? What are your thoughts?

- 9) Is Everett J. Thomas' novel, *Johann*, instructive about the problems and challenges of getting established in a new environment? How can people build or maintain relationships with indigenous people? (*Caleb's Crossing*).

John A. Lapp, reviewer, observed that the French and Indian War (1760s) created a crisis for Mennonite settlers who supported the Quaker policies of treating natives respectfully. (MWR, Dec. 10, 2012, page 7).

- 10) What constitutes "Indian Country"? Was it to be "forever" like the recent postage stamps declare?

William E. Unrau explains that it was never clear exactly what the term "Indian Country" meant due to various interpretations. He "chronicles the development and failure of the plan to set aside lands for the exclusive use of Indians. In the end, when whites wanted Indian land, they usually got it . . . The region



designated as Indian Country was never safe from white penetration, . . . The promises made to the tribes were not kept, and the concept of "Indian Country" turned out to be an illusion that failed because of 'voracious non-Indian demand for land promised to Indians.'"

"This book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the history . . . It is not a pleasant story but one we need to know."

Leo E. Oliva's review of William E. Unrau's book, *The Rise and Fall of Indian Country, 1825-1855* (Lawrence, KS.: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2007).

11) Did Mennonites in N.A. do enough to care for the first immigrants? Or were we duped by national or family issues and goals?

12) How does one account for the relatively rapid defeat of the Plains Indians by the U.S. Government? Was it only due to George Armstrong Custer's determination to kill Indians?

13) What is your assessment of the Indian-Settler conflict in America? What was possible in view of the circumstances that prevailed after 1492?

14) How many treaties were made by the U.S. Government? A: 370 +

Bear Heart, author of *The Wind Is My Mother* (New York: Berkley Books, 1996, 1998, p. 223) wrote that "the U.S. Government broke every one of them." Another person said the Government broke all promises except one. "They promised to take our land and they did."

If the U.S. Government would honor their treaty of 1868 with the Sioux Nation half of South Dakota would need to be returned to the Sioux.

15) What are the ethics of accepting stolen land?

Levi Miller of Scottdale, PA noted "the tragic irony that landless and persecuted Mennonite and Amish people gratefully settled on land in America which was being taken from persecuted native peoples." (MWR, 11-7-1991, page 1).

More recently Annie Wenger-Nabigon urged Mennonites to get to "the heart of what wounds us all." "Mennonites really have nothing to say to anyone anywhere about anything until stolen land is given back, treaties are recognized, recompense is made. It was all about genocide from the beginning, and Mennonite settlers were used by the colonial powers to see that genocide was carried forward.

"We are all complicit because we all benefit from the results of that genocide. We have to look at that if we ever expect to be in right relationship. We have to name it for what it is and find a way together to heal the past. Our ancestors need us to do that." (*The Mennonite*, January, 2011, page 4).

Jacob J. Enz, former professor of biblical languages and Old Testament studies at Mennonite Biblical Seminary, also confronted those who like Colonel Chivington believed that it was right to kill Indians. In "John's Message: Book of Exodus Revisited" (*Mennonite Life*, September, 1980, pages 24-25) he wondered how our forebears could "be so oblivious to the situation they were helping to create in their country." Did they see "the destruction of their enemies and the taking of the lands from the pagan Indians as an act of God in their behalf as in the Old Testament?"

16) "Why do we always assume the Indian was the aggressor?"

We were in his country, we were taking it over for ourselves, and we likewise refused even to share any with him. We were the people of God, always in the right, following a manifest destiny. The Indian could only be a devil. But once we allow ourselves to see all sides of the question, the familiar perspectives of American history undergo a change. The 'savages' suddenly become human and the 'whites,' the 'civilized,' can seem barbarians. . . . But we are left with a deep sense of guilt and shame. The record is there. The Mill Creek Indians, who were once seen as bloodthirsty devils, were peaceful, innocent and deeply wronged human beings. In their use of violence they were, so it seems, generally very fair. It is we who were the wanton murderers, and they who were the innocent victims. . . . "

(Thomas Merton, *ISHI Means Man*. p. 27). In the foreward, Dorothy Day confesses: "One feels a great sense of guilt at knowing so little about the Indians of the Americas. As children, when we played the game of Indians and cowboys, it was always the Indians who were the aggressors , the villains. And then in my late teens I read an account of the Jesuits among the Indians in upper New York state and in Canada, and remembered only the tortures undergone by the missionaries. In our history books the French and Indian wars only confirmed our idea that the Indians were enemies. We quite forgot the story of our earliest colonists and the aid the Indians had given them, teaching them how to survive in what was, to them, a harsh and barren land, during those first winters." (Merton, p. 1)

See also the back book cover of Stan Hoig's book, *The Battle of the Washita*. Comparison of Black Kettle and Custer.

See Edgar S. Cahn (editor) *Our Brother's Keeper: The Indian in White America*. New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1969,

Part Four on "Civilizing the White Man---A Tribute to Indian Culture, pp. 174-185).

17) Why do we tend to think of Indians as a vanishing people? Is there currently a recovery? How are we to understand Indian continuity and resilience?

In the preface to his book, editor Steven Mintz declares: "The view of Native Americans as passive victims is a distortion of history. Far from being passive, Native Americans were active agents who responded to threats to their culture through physical resistance and cultural adaptation. And far from disappearing, today they are a growing population that retains strong cultural traditions." (*Native American Voices: A History and Anthology*: St. James, NY: Brandywine Press, 1995, page viii).

18) How can we expand our definition of family to be more inclusive?

How can we maintain the practice of mutual care and hospitality in the face of fortunate privilege combined with individual and group self-interest?

Ruth Yellowhawk passed away on Aug. 7, 2010, at age 50 in S. Dakota. She represented a community of builders who are in respectful relationship, connected with the core values of humility, honesty, patience, respect, courage, fortitude and wisdom. That was the beginning of their extensive use of the circle facilitation, a process that allows each participant a chance to speak and be heard. She was dedicated to being in authentic relationships.