

Textbooks perpetuate inaccuracies

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Chukchi News and Information Service

RAMPART — When I was a little girl, my mother taught me that our Athapascan tribe contains many sub-tribes, dialects and customs, each having its own chief and set of elders.

OPINION

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks

Imagine my surprise to read the following words in a history textbook called *America, America* and written for 10th graders in American schools:

A tribe is a group that is united by a common history, follows the same customs, and is ruled by the same chief or group of elders. The people of each tribe speak the same language and have the same religion.

This inaccuracy is mild compared to some of the other things I discovered while reviewing how Native Americans are portrayed in the history textbooks used in our schools and how they have been regarded by society.

It's no wonder some of the general public, and to some extent, even a former president of the United States, continue to think of Natives as "savages."

One textbook, for example, a lower elementary social studies text called *Family and Friends*, depicts a Native family of four dressed in Western clothing and lighting the daughter's birthday cake amid modern napkins, china dishes, silverware and ornate furniture.

This is not to say some Indians are not Westernized, but this is not the image most Native Americans want to give children just learning about American Indians. Instead of middle America, why not show an Indian family in a natural setting surrounded by extended family members in a village or reservation?

When American children reach the seventh grade, they may read the history text, *People, Places and Change*, which devotes but one page to American Indians, and an illustration of a Pueblo takes up half that page.

This text's introduction refers to American Indians as "the first Americans," yet there is no mention of the term "Indian." Considering that Native Americans were the first people on this continent, it should stand to reason that American Indian history, art, folk tales, literature, religion and language would be accorded the proper coverage, respect and accuracy in textbooks. No such luck.

On the college level, a freshman history class uses a textbook called *The American Nation*. Just four of 972 pages are dedicated to the history of Indians during the late 1800s. Students learn only that Indians went to war over losing land.

I do not believe it goes far enough. It does not tell who American Indians are. How did they live? What was an Indian community like? What was it like to be born into an Indian family? What was their relationship to other tribes? How did they determine boundaries? What was their means of transportation before the influx of White settlers? How was the chief selected? What were the various roles of family members?

Interestingly, a chart in *The American Nation* depicting historical events is listed for this period, but not

one single Indian name or event is recognized.

Unfortunately, few history texts being published, even today, reflect a positive change. For example, *From Columbus to Aquarius* was termed "controversial" by an instructor because it revealed "too much" of the Indians' history, dilemma and treatment. The first chapter of this text gives history of Indian culture, not wars. A listing of chronological dates and events of Indian cultural cycles is indeed refreshing.

Next, the author writes a mock story headed *THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN IS A DEAD INDIAN!* depicting a cowboy/Indian covered wagon scene, with Indians scalping the white man and the white man shooting the Indians, and with the cavalry — of course — driving the Indians back to their little piece of the earth. This satire, I believe, points out the unfair treatment of Native Americans in American textbooks.

Moreover, the author states: *Unknown or forgotten are the many accomplishments and contributions of the Indians before, during and after the arrival of the white man. . . the American Indian was really the first explorer, colonist, and conqueror of the North American continent — the first American.*

This is really the crux of the matter. If all history books were to give credit to the American Indians for all their accomplishments, American society would not be so ignorant on the subject. But we are. Consequently, what we are taught and what we teach our children, which is the negative stereotyping of Indians,

perpetuates itself from one generation to the next.

Indeed, many people continue to think of Indians as "savages" with no feelings. *National Geographic* highlights the problem in its March 1989 issue. The magazine reported on a historical Indian burial ground desecrated by grave robbers searching for Indian artifacts buried with the dead. In fact, *National Geographic* reported that even whole skulls still are sold at non-Indian swap meets.

Incredibly, some sources quoted in this article see grave diggers as collectors of history, not destroyers of it. Where might this mentality come from? I suggest, to a large extent from school textbooks.

National Geographic did not let archaeologists off the hook, either. With bones scattered over a wide burial area that had been disturbed, archaeologists collected them for study, the magazine reported, then returned them to the Indians for reburial.

"What if this were a white cemetery that had been desecrated, would the archaeologists be bagging the disturbed bones and grave goods to take them for study at museums and universities?" asked an American Indian interviewed in the story.

Is this a result of an ignorance or insensitivity of Indian history by those who may have read the school texts previously mentioned?

Former President Reagan, in response to a question from Moscow State University students last year, said that it might have been better to have forced Native Americans to enter Western culture instead of living in a "primitive lifestyle" on reservations.

Again, Reagan was perpetuating the

cowboy and Indian image: the cowboy to the rescue and the Indian doing the scalping. If America's highest government official does not know the difference, what more can we expect from the students in the classrooms? What textbooks did Ronald Reagan read in school?

American history textbooks must give a fair, historical perspective of American Indians, not a vision of half-naked savages scalping people and burning wagons. They must portray the Indian as the first explorer, the first colonist, the first conqueror of the North American continent — THE FIRST AMERICAN!

Henry S. Commager, the famous historian, wrote: "A people without a history is like a man without a memory; each generation would have to learn everything anew — make the same discoveries, invent the same tools and techniques, wrestle with the same problems, commit the same errors."

American Indians ask for no less. American Indians do not want their children growing up with an image of the first Americans as brutal savages.

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