Crow Chief Plenty Coups

Dear Students,

Thank you for your interest in learning more about Montana American Indian tribes. In this lesson, you will be learning about the Crow Chief – Plenty Coups.

Photo: Curtis, E. S., photographer. (ca. 1908) *Plenty Coups, Crow Indian, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left, pompadour, temple braids, beaded buckskin shirt, shell beads around neck.* , ca. 1908. [Photograph]

Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/94504755/.

As you learn about Plenty Coups, you will be introduced to the vision quest, a sacred rite of passage from the Apsáalooke (Crow) culture. The vision quest involved spending several days alone outdoors without food or water, observing the natural world, thinking about your place in it, and looking for clues about your identity and your future. Plenty Coups' vision allowed him to see himself as a future leader of his people during a time of drastic changes. You will read about the influential role of his vision on the tribes' actions and understand how the skills of listening and observation are key traits of an effective leader. To help strengthen your understanding about the vision quest, you will also have an opportunity to practice your own listening and observation skills, outside in nature if possible.

The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. **(Essential Understanding 3)** Essential Understandings Key Concepts

Suggested Assignments: Your teacher may offer various types of assessments to gauge your understanding of this topic. This lesson provides several examples of possible assignments.

Assignment 1 – Learning about Plenty Coups

Read from several different sources that tell about Plenty Coups and his life. Read about Plenty Coup's vision.

Write a short summary highlighting key points using a 3 -2 -1 prompt; three things you learned about Chief Plenty Coups, two things you learned about regarding his vision, one thing you learned about Crow Cultural traditions.

Assignment 2 - Practicing your listening and observation skills

Assignment 1 - Learning about Plenty Coups.

As an important American Indian leader whose strategies of diplomacy, trust, and genuine humanitarian concern affected the lives of Native and non-Native people in Montana, Plenty Coups is among the American Indian individuals who deserve greater study. During his lifetime, 1848-1932, Plenty Coups witnessed more than eight decades of change to his homeland, his tribe, and his culture. In his interactions with white settlers, the U.S. government and its officials, Crow tribal members, and Montana state officials, as well as with individuals from other tribes, Plenty Coups advocated for the well-being of all peoples, despite the federal government's oppressive policies and retraction of agreements. Plenty Coups provides an example of how American Indian leaders have helped their tribes adjust to rapid changes and severe adversity brought about by American colonialist expansion.

He was a traditional chief of the Crow Tribe, who was told in a vision at age nine that he would be a leader and that their lives and world were changing. Traditional tribal values and cultural practices assisted and informed indigenous peoples in the early reservation years as they advocated for their tribes and navigated their new relationship to the United States and to the changing political structures within their own tribes. These values and practices, including the vision quest, are still integral to the cultural identity of many tribal individuals as well as to tribes.

In order to provide some context please read this short essay from Molly Holz.

"Chief Plenty Coups State Park" Montana - The Magazine of Western History, Spring 2000, by Molly Holz

> When Plenty Coups, the last traditional chief of the Crow Indians, recounted his life story to the writer Frank Bird Linderman in 1928, he told of a vision. Conferring with Linderman at his home on the Crow Indian Reservation thirty-five miles south of Billings, Plenty Coups explained how the vision had set the course of his life. Though Plenty Coups was then eighty years old, his memory of it had not dimmed. When he [was] about twenty, he said, he had visited a traditional Crow site in the Crazy Mountains and seen himself as an old man. "I saw the spring down by those trees,"

> he told Linderman, "this very house just as it is, these trees which comfort us today, and a very old man sitting in the shade, alone." And so it had come to pass, along with the profound changes the vision implied and with which his people would have to contend.
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> Plenty Coups was revered in his lifetime for his wisdom and diplomatic skill in helping his people make the transition from traditional life ways to reservation life as settled agriculturalists. Remembered for those qualities today, he is also commemorated with Chief Plenty Coups State Park, a park that includes the homestead where he sat beneath cottonwood trees and related the story of his vision to Linderman in 1928. That same year, on August 8, Plenty Coups presented his homestead for use as a park. "This park is not a memorial to me," he declared during the dedication ceremony, "but to the Crow nation. It is a token of my friendship for all people, red and white."

For more background information and historical context, visit these two websites.

The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains has a good short summary of the life of Plenty Coups.
http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.na.087

This National Park Service website has additional information about Plenty Coups and his life.
https://www.nps.gov/bica/learn/historyculture/chief-plenty-coups.htm

Now you will read a few quotes from Medicine man and Sun Dance chief, Thomas Yellowtail who is a pivotal figure in Crow tribal life. In this excerpt from *Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief, An autobiography as told to Michael Oren Fitzgerald* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1991), Yellowtail shares his thoughts about the vision quest.

> "It is a period set for solitary prayer at a remote place. A person will usually spend three or four days of fasting on the vision quest, saying his prayers during all that time. He goes away up in the hills, gets away from people, and goes off by himself, and there fast and prays for either the three- or four-day period he selected before he began his quest. …a man also must pray for virtue and the correct understanding with which to face life."

Each tribe has their own distinct set of long-standing cultural protocols for their vision quest ceremony. With over 500 different tribal nations, it is important to not overgeneralize belief systems since not all tribes have this exact type of ceremonial tradition. This is not something to be undertaken lightly and these ceremonies are just as important as religious beliefs and traditions from other belief systems such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

> Yellowtail continues, "Before a man would go on a vision quest, he would first consult with a medicine man. It was the duty of the people who asked for instruction to bring a pipe or a smoke to the instructor. If the medicine man accepted the responsibility to instruct the younger man, then they would first offer the smoke with a prayer. Then the medicine man would tell the young man

> what to do to prepare… In those days when people wanted to go fasting, they first prepared themselves by taking a sweat bath to purify themselves. This is still my practice because it is very important to undergo a purification before and after every major undertaking. “

Crow people today still use the vision quest ceremony conducted in the same manner as their ancestors, carrying on cultural traditions that are thousands of years old.

Next, you will read a few quotes from a book about Chief Plenty Coups as he related his experiences to the author Frank B. Linderman. Plenty Coups and Frank Linderman had a long-standing friendship, Plenty Coups wanted to share his experiences and his vision, and he felt his friend could do that in an authentic and respectful manner. During one of Plenty Coups many vision quests, he saw a great storm overtake the earth and swallow up the buffalo and wipe out everything in its path except one solitary tree with a small bird in it and this is what he was told.

> “In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes or failures, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words. But in all his listening he tends to his own business. He never intrudes, never speaks in strange company, and yet never misses a chance to learn from others. He gains success and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed, and without great trouble to himself. Develop your body, but do not neglect your mind Plenty Coups. It is the mind that leads a man to power, not strength of the body”

Plenty Coups Chief of the Crows by Frank B. Linderman (1930)

Photo shows Crow chiefs at the groundbreaking ceremony for the National American Indian Memorial (which was never built), Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, New York. (left to right) White Man Runs Him (ca. 1855-1925), Plenty Coups (1848-1932), and Medicine Crow.

Bain News Service, P. (1913) *Indians at Dedication*. , 1913. date created or published later by Bain. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2014691040/.

Assignment # 2 – Your chance to listen and observe

Go find a comfortable (and hopefully quiet) place to sit outside. If you cannot go outside, just find a quiet spot in your house with a view outside if possible. Your task is to just listen and observe. No phones, television, or other electronic devices. Try to do this for at least 30 minutes – an hour would even be better. Before you begin, take a moment to reflect upon the life of Plenty Coups and his vision and the message he received regarding the chickadee. Keep in mind that Plenty Coups spent months and years in preparation for his vision quests, which often lasted for four days without any food or water. Think of the math with this exercise – what percent is one hour in relation to four days? Imagine what your connection, relationship, and perspective with the environment would be if over 200 years ago you could have the opportunity to sit outside, fast, and pray for four days as part of very old and sacred ceremony.

So, now take time to get comfortable and focus on just sitting and listening. Try this for at least 30 minutes to an hour. After you have reflected on your observations, write a summary of what you heard, saw, and felt. You might also use a poem or picture to express what you observed.

Extension Activity

Take a field trip to Plenty Coups State Park