

# The Colonization Era – An Interview with Dr. James Loewen and Textbook Analysis

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: High School  
Suggested Duration: Three - four 50-minute class periods

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

9 – 12 Montana History Standards

- (g) analyze how historical, cultural, social, political, ideological, and economic contexts shape people's perspectives;
- (h) analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history they produced;
- (j) analyze perspectives of American Indians in US history;
- (k) evaluate the limitations, biases, and credibility of various sources, especially regarding misinformation and stereotypes.

### Understandings

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised.
- History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell. (EU 6)

### Essential Questions

- Why is it important to examine historical events from multiple perspectives?
- Why would author James Loewen title his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*?
- To what extent do myths or lies about American Indians get perpetuated in history textbooks?

### Students will be able to...

- Identify and analyze key concepts regarding early colonization and falsehoods about American Indians.
- Evaluate information about American Indians from history textbooks.

### Students will know...

- about the multiple viewpoints regarding events and issues associated with colonization and historically inaccurate information put forth about American Indians.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Participate in class discussion and read and react to an article describing how American Indians have been portrayed in textbooks.
2. Review Key Concepts from the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*.
3. Evaluate and analyze their own textbook for information put forth about American Indians.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities

Briefly introduce students to the topic of colonization. Define the term and facilitate a class discussion/brainstorming session to see what they already know. List out topics/issues on the board and discuss. Emphasize the point that colonization has had (and still does) a huge impact on how American Indians have been written about and portrayed in history textbooks. In most cases tribal histories were filtered through a European American (usually male) cultural lens.

Tell students they will be reading an article from the Phi Delta Kappan, the second largest educational journal in the United States. The interview is with author Dr. James Loewen, who is well known for his national bestseller *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.

Ask students why would author James Loewen title his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*?

Has anyone ever read it or heard about the book? Can anyone think of specific examples in our country's history where American Indians have been lied about? Was it intentional or were people just working with limited knowledge?

Brainstorm a list of potential American Indian topics/events that may be interpreted from multiple viewpoints. Examples include: Columbus and "discovery," the roles of American Indians in the early colonial times, Pocahontas, influence Indians had on early colonial thinking, westward movement, Lewis and Clark.

Discuss the list with the class and then share the following guidelines and Key Concepts with them before handing out the article.

Things to keep in mind as you study about a particular event in history:

- With regard to events such as Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery, Montana tribal histories offer differing points of view from those expressed in your American history textbook.
- Your history textbook and a specific tribal history each represents "point of view;" the point of view changes depending on whose story is being told.

- Identifying and respecting another culture’s viewpoints of historical events is basic to our understanding of how histories can influence our ideas and points of view.
- Events from the past, and how they are interpreted by tribes and by the U.S. government, still cause issues of concern today.
- The “discovery” of an area is not necessarily a discovery. Indigenous people had been in the area explored for hundreds, and more likely thousands of years.

KEY CONCEPTS from the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller.
- Much of America’s history has been told from the Euro-American perspective. Only recently have American Indians begun to write about and retell history from an indigenous perspective.
- A huge amount of political capital is involved in the telling of history.
- History is a primary vehicle through which power is distributed and used; thus, the whole notion of political identity and ideology and who the United States is as a nation plays into how the story is told, and who has been privileged to tell the story.
- It is critical that history curricula include the stories and experiences of individual men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups.
- Providing students with textbooks, primary source documents, and surviving oral traditions allows them to gain a more objective view of history and provides them with a historical context in which to situate and understand the experiences and perspectives of these groups in American society today.
- By giving students the opportunity to view our past through the eyes of many, they can begin to create their own view of our collective history, understand the present, and become better prepared to engage the problems of the future.

Facilitate a class discussion about the information shared from your lecture and ask students to complete a 3 - 2 - 1 prompt to summarize their understandings: Write down three things that caught your attention, two questions you have about information, and one thing you learned about American Indian perspectives.

Next, distribute copies of the article to all students and have them read in class or as a homework assignment.

Ask students to write up a one-page reaction paper to the article. Did they learn anything new? Did this conflict with what they have been previously taught? Do these perspectives differ from what is in their history textbook? What other cultural group and their representation in US history provide Dr. Loewen with his “oh no” moment?

Lead a class discussion on the major issues covered in the article.

List on the board new information gained as a result of reading this article.

After the whole class discusses the article, allow students time to add to or revise their one-page reaction papers.

## Evaluation Activity

Have students work in small groups to look at all the references regarding American Indians contained in their history textbook. Ask them to pay particular attention to issues of bias. Have them examine the terminology in the textbook. Groups could report their research results to the rest of the class. If examples of bias or misinformation are found, have them write the textbook publisher asking them to consider rewriting the section.

Ask students to utilize [How To Tell the Difference – Resource guide from Oyate](#) as criteria for conducting their evaluation and analysis.

Provide them with time to conduct their research. Suggested assignments for checking understanding include short research paper, poster presentation, participation in an on-line discussion forum, and multimedia presentation formats such as a video or podcast.

## Resources Needed

[\*Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians.\*](#) Helena, MT: Office of Public Instruction, 2019.

[\*Essential Understandings Key Concepts.\*](#) Helena, MT: Office of Public Instruction, 2019.

[\*Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom.\*](#) Helena, MT: Office of Public Instruction, 2015.

Jetty, Mike. “**History Through Red Eyes: A Conversation with James Loewen.**” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 88, No. 03 (November 2006): 218-222.

Loewen, James W. ***Lies My Teachers Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.*** New York, NY: The New Press, 1995.

## History Through Red Eyes: A Conversation with James Loewen

Article appeared in the November 2006 issue of the Phi Delta Kappan – Reprinted with permission.

***James Loewen's Lies My Teacher Told Me was a challenge to our preconceived notions of who we are as a people and of our national history. Mike Jetty recently sat with Loewen to get his thoughts on the potential for Montana's Indian Education for All Act to bring about significant change.***

By [Mike Jetty](#)

JAMES Loewen is an author, historian, and professor. Through *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, he has helped to reconstruct the way history is viewed and taught in public schools all across America. During a recent conversation, he shared his views on how American Indian topics and events are traditionally taught and offered his insights into what we can do to accommodate multiple perspectives in our examination of history. Below, I present his comments and insights as he told them to me.

\* \* \*

My first teaching assignment was at Tougaloo College, a historically black institution in Tougaloo, Mississippi. In my first year, I taught a course developed by the history department that was titled "The Freshman Social Science Seminar." In it we introduced students to sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and psychology in the context of African American history. This made sense because 99% of our students were African American.

The second semester of the course began with events immediately following the Civil War. I had a new group of students in the second semester, and I didn't want to do all the talking on the first day of class, so I asked them, "We're starting with Reconstruction. What is that period?"

What followed was an "Aha!" experience for me. Or it might be better called an "Oh no!" experience. Sixteen out of 17 students said, "Reconstruction was that period right after the Civil War when blacks took over the government of the Southern states. But they were too soon out of slavery, so they screwed up, and white folks had to take control again."

Now, there are at least three complete misstatements -- lies I would call them -- in that sentence, and I was just floored by it. Blacks never took over the government of the Southern states; the Reconstruction governments did not, on the whole, screw up; and whites didn't resume control at the end of Reconstruction. However, a certain group of "whites" did take control, using terrorist tactics. It was, in fact, the original Ku Klux Klan.

So I thought, "What must your teachers have done to you to make you believe that the one time your group was center stage in American history, they screwed up, and whites had to take control back again?"

If it were true, that would be fine. But it is *not* true. What these students had learned we might call BS -- that would be Bad Sociology -- in the black public schools. What they had learned was being taught by black teachers in all-black schools. But it was white supremacist history because their teachers were just blindly teaching what was in the textbooks. Seeing the outcome made me aware that history can be a weapon and that it can be used against you, just as it had been against my black students.

When I put together a team of students and faculty members at Tougaloo and Millsaps College (a nearby all-white college), we confronted the lies and myths in Mississippi history by writing a new history textbook for the

Mississippi history course that was required in public schools. But our book just wasn't racist enough, so the state refused to adopt it. Because Mississippi is a textbook-adoption state, we actually had to sue to get it adopted. The case was *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.*

After eight years in Mississippi, I moved to the University of Vermont, where I continued to teach first-year students in huge introductory sociology classes. There I learned that distorted history was not a phenomenon peculiar to Mississippi. Although in the early 1970s Mississippi exhibited it in a more exaggerated form -- as Mississippi exhibited many national maladies in a more exaggerated form back then -- this was a national problem.

As I had done in Mississippi, I went to nearby high schools to learn where my students were getting the bizarre ideas they brought to college. Many of these ideas had to do with "savage" Indians. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is based on my intensive reading of 12 high school American history textbooks. I claim to be the only American ever to attempt such a feat. It was a desperate career move that no one should try at home.

I have to say that the task of puncturing myths was much harder for me in Vermont than in Mississippi. It's fairly easy for someone coming into Mississippi from outside to see what the white supremacists have gotten wrong about the state's past. But myths about Indians are national myths -- or lies. They are harder to detect, because almost all of us "know" things about Native Americans that are wrong. So it's harder for us, especially for non-Indians, to step outside our education and culture and realize when we are making the same kinds of mistakes.

This is particularly true because we have a national myth that we might even call an archetype -- the archetype of progress. It tells us that the U.S. started out great and that we've been getting better in every way ever since. I really do believe that is the underlying myth that provides the basic story line of American history as it is taught in most K-12 schools -- and certainly as taught in the textbooks that are presented K-12.

As to myths about American Indians, we started out quite harshly some decades ago. We once taught about the "savage" Indians. We -- that is, everybody non-Indian, but particularly whites -- learned that we settled a mostly virgin continent. There were very few Indians, we learned, so we didn't really displace that many people. And the "savage" Indians were just backward and in the way, so they had no choice but to acquiesce to the progressive new civilization that was being formed here on American soil. So we didn't really do anything wrong. That is, of course, a myth.

In the last 30 years, that myth has become much softer, much nicer, if you will. The word "savage" is rarely applied to Indian people. And sometimes they're not even called primitive, although I think it's sometimes implied. The most common notion today is that Indians had their own culture and it was just fine, but they had a tragic unwillingness or inability to adopt or adapt to European culture. As a result, they fell by the wayside.

This is a much nicer story, but it, too, is a myth. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me* this point is illustrated by the story of Joseph Vann, a Cherokee Indian from Georgia. He and many other Cherokee had taken on the cotton culture and managed to adapt quite successfully. Vann lived in a plantation house straight out of *Gone with the Wind* and owned many slaves. Yet he was not allowed to acculturate, and his beautiful house made him a target. So Chief Vann was forced to leave Georgia for Oklahoma because the white sheriff wanted his house. Later, the entire Cherokee nation, which was literate and agricultural and generally prosperous, was driven out of Georgia. They were forced on the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma. This did not happen because they couldn't or refused to acculturate. It happened simply because they were different, and part of that difference was racial.

Clearly, Native Americans were never really allowed to acculturate. And that's one of the specific things we get wrong. Right from the start, you can see it's tied to the myth of progress: we -- the non-Indians -- are the progressive ones. Most American Indians were in fact agriculturalist when the white folks and black folks first arrived. The myth tells us that they were nomadic, that they were hunters and gatherers. But most were not. Most grew crops. And if we think about the myth, we realize that the Pilgrims' pumpkin pie and squash and corn were all Indian foods. So obviously the Pilgrims had to have learned something about farming from the Native Americans. Yet we have the myth that Native peoples were not agriculturalist and did not live in settled villages. We have the myth that we civilized them.

One of the things we do with these stereotypes and myths is put them on the landscape. For example, one of my favorite hated places on the landscape -- if you can have a favorite hated place -- is near Ground Zero in Manhattan. There stands a statue meant to celebrate the Dutch purchase of Manhattan from Native Americans. The Dutchman is wearing a coat. The Native American is almost naked, wearing just a breechcloth and a wonderful feather headdress. The Dutchman is handing \$24 worth of beads to the Native American. This statue is located at the exact spot where this purchase *never took place!*

The statue is particularly embarrassing because the purchase that never took place is *supposed* to have happened in about 1630. And the Indian represented in the statue is, of course, the stereotypical Plains Indian. However, the Plains Indian culture did not even emerge until about a hundred years later, when Native peoples were being forced westward onto the plains by the French and British and when horses escaped from the Spanish and made their way northward from Mexico. These two events combined to create the wonderful Plains Indian horse culture, a culture that lasted only about a century, from about 1790 to about 1890, when Plains Indians were forced onto reservations.

Not only had the culture not yet emerged, but any Indian who wore the headdress depicted in the statue in the eastern woodlands would be crazy. Such a headdress works great if you are riding around on the prairies of South Dakota or Montana, but it wouldn't work at all in what were then the woodlands of Manhattan Island. Within five minutes, a branch would knock the headdress off. And, of course, no two people at the same time and place would be dressed as differently as the people depicted by this statue. I've been in New York City in February, and if this purchase (that never took place) had taken place in February, that would be one cold Indian. I've also been there in August, and if this purchase (that never took place) had occurred in August, that would be a very hot Dutchman.

What the statue really depicts is a primitive person and a civilized person. When we look at it, that registers at some level. Yet we don't notice it because it already fits with our stereotype that Indians were primitive and white folks were civilized. Looking further into the legend, it turns out, of course, that the Dutch purchased the island from the wrong Indians. They bought it from the Canarsee Indians, who lived in Brooklyn. And beads were not involved at all.

We should also examine our terminology. As we often use them, our words becomes counterfactual. For example, we use the word "discover" to mean the first white person to see something. And we don't just say this about Columbus discovering America, but about the settlers discovering the Mississippi River and so on. We use the term "settler" for whites moving westward and the terms "savage" or "renegade" for Native people who were already living there and had lived there for centuries.

Although part of our problem is terminology, it isn't enough for teachers just to clean up their language. That would be a good start, but it would be even better if they get students to think about these terms and if they

find misuse of terms in a textbook or some other source, that they then write the textbook author or publisher and see if they can get the language changed. Even if the publishers don't do anything, it will engage the students and make everybody smarter. And it could even get the textbooks improved.

And fall, with Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, is a terrible time for learning about Native Americans -- to learn *non-true* facts, that is. Historically, many well-intentioned teachers have perpetuated lies and myths regarding these two events as they have been traditionally taught in schools throughout the U.S.

Today, kids as young as second- and third-graders are still told these stories. They are the distortions of the conquerors, and they make the Indians look stupid. And that means that our crimes against Indians are continuing as long as we teach such nonsense. This kind of education has a terrible effect on Native children. I have spoken at American Indian reservations from Maine to Washington State, and I've learned that many Native Americans hated history as it was taught to them in school. How history was taught affected them deeply. It affected their self-confidence; it affected their ability to function in our world. It also has a terrible impact on non-Indian people: it makes us ethnocentric and stupid about other cultures.

The easy mythologies we lulled ourselves with over the decades don't make us more patriotic or better citizens. They serve only to make us stupider. But what's happening in Montana with Indian Education for All really can change how we view history and how we project ourselves into the future. The law is similar to one just passed in Mississippi requiring K-12 education to include teaching about the struggle for civil rights in that state. These laws will help Indian children in Montana and black children in Mississippi, but I believe they will have even more transforming impact on non-Natives and non-blacks. If educators and textbook producers and other folks make use of these laws, we really can make some significant changes in what we teach our children. That will be an important change.

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