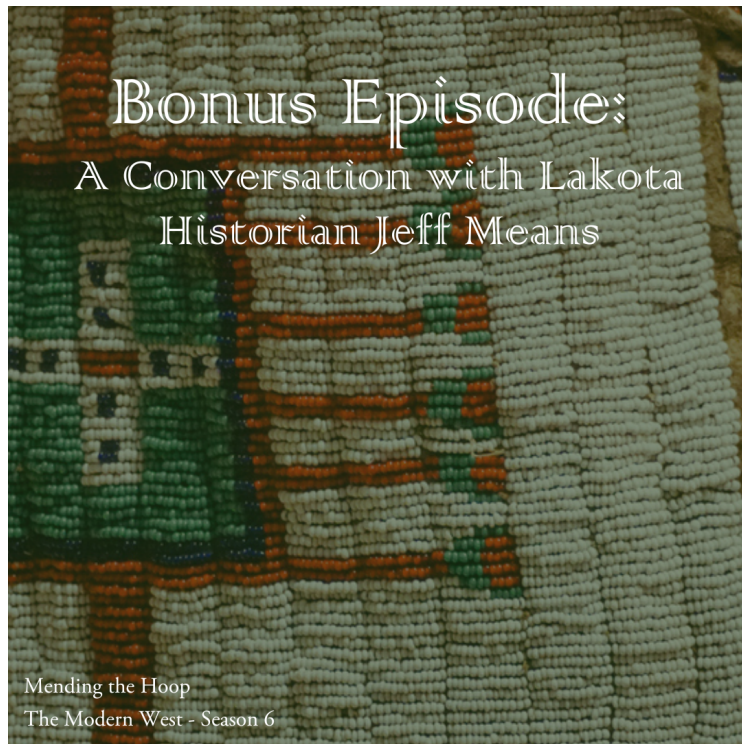


A Conversation with Lakota Historian Jeff Means



We're working away on future episodes of Mending the Hoop. But we felt like it was important to share some of the conversations we've been having behind the scenes. As a white woman reporting on Indian Country, I always knew I would need extra guidance putting this season together. Like I said at the top of the season, I fully recognize I have innate biases when it comes to the history of the American West...we all do. Nothing wrong with that but it did mean some extra leg work if I was going to do this right. My hope was to find someone willing to call me out, if necessary, and point me in the right direction as a reporter.

So I reached out to a really great guy I know, Dr. Jeff Means, a Native American history professor at the University of Wyoming. As I've been producing this podcast, I've been meeting with Jeff in person to get his feedback on some of the hard topics that have come up along the

way. He's a busy person... and a dad. But he still makes time to come into the Wyoming Public Radio studios and think big picture with me about this history and how best to tell this story. He's funny, often irreverent, just the right person to grab a dark and problematic history by the horns. It seemed like a good time to share with you some of the behind-the-scenes conversations I've been having now that we've heard the tale of the Plains Indian Wars. First off, a little back story – Jeff grew up in Rock Springs and Phoenix with his white mom. But he always knew he was Lakota. In fact, he's related to the renowned American Indian Movement leader Russell Means. But his mom wasn't super supportive of him exploring that side of himself. His dad even had to sneak him away to visit his family on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He starts off telling me that's how he began recognizing a giant discrepancy between the history he was learning in school and the history he learned from his family.

JEFF: You know, when I was a kid, I got the same kind of Manifest Destiny is great, Native Americans, inevitably, are going to lose, but they helped us steel ourselves. And in that forge, in that fire that made us great, right? The Native American narrative of history is muted. And there's an attempt to completely eradicate it, and replace it with a narrative that comes from the dominant conquering culture. But that's when you find out that the Native voice has been purposefully muted. Then you start to realize, okay, that's why people get so upset in this country, when, like with the Dakota Access Pipeline stuff, anytime Native Americans raise their hand, raise their voice, and say, we're still here and we don't like what's going on over here, America throws a conniption fit. Because it's a threat to that identity that has been cultivated within American classrooms and culture that America's perfect. The greatest nation ever.

MELODIE: Just to sort of bring us up to the Plains Indian Wars, that [kind of thing] had been going on for hundreds of years.

JEFF: Hundreds, yeah.

MELODIE: Over and over again, there was this sort of resistance by the Indigenous peoples, and a willingness to find a peaceful solution, which would be then just kind of snubbed out violently, usually. And so then it reaches to the middle of the country. It was kind of happening from the East Coast and the West Coast, and then we just kind of closed into the Plains in the Rocky Mountain region. Is that a fair?

JEFF: Yeah, I mean, it's kind of a strange history that the United States had with Indigenous cultures. Originally, the idea of assimilation was seen as, okay, they'll eventually just join our American republic and be happy citizens of it, just like other immigrants and so on and so forth. But they didn't understand that Native Americans already had their own national identity, they already have their own religion and so on. Then efforts became more and more stringent in forcing assimilation. Either that or simply moving them out of the way. This is classic ethnic cleansing, which is, you know, "We don't necessarily want to kill you all, but you have to leave because we want your land." And so West they go. This is 1848. It's taken 200 years to go from the East Coast to the Mississippi and it literally takes hardly any years at all to go all the way to California. All of a sudden, we're in a war with Mexico, the United States expands, settlers are all the way to the West Coast by [1849-1850], etc. And now what do you do? And this is when the nations on the Plains are in a different situation than the other nations. You can't relocate them West. Right? So what do you do with them, and this is where the treaty system and reservations begins to become part of American policy. And would that'll allow for American expansion westward.

MELODIE: [I interviewed a historian on Red Cloud](#), he had written a book about Red Cloud, and we got into a conversation about the idea of genocide. He wanted to be pretty picky about that term. And he did not feel that what the United States did, what their relationship with tribes was was not technically genocide, because there was never a US policy that said, let's exterminate all of these people. And I can see this whole effort to use these kinds of settler militias to do that work; you can see that the US government was sort of hiding behind that in a way. And that that was a way in which they could commit this ethnic cleansing, as you called it, without ever actually passing a policy, although it does sound like there was some policies.

JEFF: Yes, policies that tried to culturally end Native American culture. Yeah, I mean, you're going to outlaw their religion, you're going to outlaw the fact that they have dances or medicine men, things like that, those become illegal, right?

MELODIE: A cultural genocide.

JEFF: Yeah, it'S absolutely cultural genocide. I don't think anybody would question because that's the entire goal. But again, it's simply because they believe that what they're doing is for the benefit of the people they're doing it to, which is fundamentally ironic. But it's the white man's burden – classic white man's burden – “we're going to raise you up whether you need to be or not, and whether you want to or not, and you'll be better off for it. We wish you would just voluntarily become like us, but you can't.”

Genocide has kind of been a term that is defined by one episode of it, and that is the Nazi holocaust of the Jews and others in Europe. Now, when people think of genocide, that's almost universally what they think of is this industrial policy and effort of an of an industrial nation to exterminate a specific group. Where you can see that this is the prescribed policy of the nation.

And what they don't understand is that is the unicorn of genocide. Okay? Most genocide doesn't happen that way. Most genocide is not a public policy of any nation. It's just simply what they do and what everybody knows.

MELODIE: And then, I think the brutality, especially of the Sand Creek Massacre. I mean, that kind of mutilation was something that had been used previously. It seems like that was the first time it was really used in that way, in this region. That seemed like that was one of the reasons that the rest of the Plains Indian Wars kind of rolled out the way it did.

JEFF: Yeah, and this is one of the greatest ironies of the spread of civilization against the savage is the savage brutality that civilization carries out on these people? I mean, it was horrific, the things that they did to the Native bodies. And they did so because again, they're just Indians.

MELODIE: Maybe you can guide me here. This is one of the reasons I wanted to invite you to do this with me is, this part of the story of Sand Creek? What is your advice to me in terms of telling that story? Is it useful to go ahead and let people hear that part of the story or is it gratuitous?

JEFF: I suppose it would depend on your audience. Obviously, it's far too gratuitous for children. But no, I think that it's okay to tell those kinds of stories and details, because they're important to understand why the Natives have the perspective that they do, historically, about the United States, which is completely different than what most Americans would think. Most Americans have no idea that there is even a Native American perspective, let alone understand it. They don't think of that context because they don't think about Native Americans anymore. They're not taught about them at school and unless you happen to live near them, they're not a part of your life. So yeah, I would say, tell the stories. And the gory details,

MELODIE: Okay. You watch the old westerns and stuff And it's always the Indians are the bad guys, And, like, after Sand Creek, there's a lot of pillaging that happens. But when you look at it, from the point of view of the Cheyenne and Arapaho who had just gone through Sand Creek, they had nothing. They had no tepees for shelter in the middle of winter. They had no food, they had nothing. So that pillaging was just almost a survival strategy.

JEFF: Partly, yeah, I mean, a lot of it – Don't get me wrong – I mean, they're mad. Because, again, these were peace chiefs and so the idea of peace is gone. So therefore, if it's going to be war, and clearly the United States has declared war. “We're going to take it out on you while we gain some supplies and move north and try to find shelter with our friends.” Whereas, you know, I mean, from the US perspective, again, these are all unprovoked, horrible attacks on civilians. It's laughable now, to me, but I mean, back then, this is what you would carry reported in the newspapers.

MELODIE: It was sort of spin, like reframing the story, so that you get to be the good guy. And if you isolate each incident and say, this was unprovoked and you don't connect the dots back to Sand Creek, then you can turn the tribes into the bad guy.

JEFF: They need to be gone. This is ethnic cleansing at its finest. “We want this land, and you can either leave, or we can kill you, or you can assimilate, one way or the other.” And it's that process that prevents Native Americans from really getting any kind of sympathy regionally, and so on. Whereas back East, there are some instances where people in the United States are very sympathetic to the Native cause, because they've had enough time and distance away from what they experienced, to say, “Oh, this was horrible.”

MELODIE: So you're saying some of the folks out east are watching what's going on with the Plains Indian Wars and they started to have sympathy?

JEFF: Yeah, they were sympathetic toward the Native nations, to a certain degree. All of them want them assimilated; I mean, there's nobody out there going, "let them live as they always have," right? But the violence is what they abhor. They want, a peaceful Western expansion. And they want the Native Americans to be educated and Christianized and, basically, welcomed into the warm embrace of the United States at a time when racism is reaching its highest point. So it's kind of counterintuitive.

MELODIE: When I went and visited with Donovan, one thing he talked about was that atrocities and mutilations and stuff were not something that was traditional in any way in warfare, pre-European contact, and that it really was still, even after Sand Creek, it was still pretty rare. And it was, if it was anything, it was usually spiritual, something sort of symbolic.

JEFF: And again, Native nations are so vastly different when it comes to these kinds of practices so that you can't kind of say one's like the other at all. But almost universally, the kinds of things that were done, were done for very specific spiritual reasons, even you know, the mutilation of bodies, is because, there was a belief in many Native nations that you didn't just fight in this life; that when you died, you become a warrior on the other side. And so in a way to prevent that person from becoming a great warrior on the other side would be to take his eyes out, because then he would be blind or to cut his hands off. Now, all of these things would be seen from an American perspective as barbaric mutilations that there's no reason for them except pure savagery. Right? And that's just because they fail to understand the spiritual essence of the Native perspective on the afterlife, and this life and everything else. So it's really fascinating.

MELODIE: Yeah, one of the ones that I'm really finding to be problematic in terms of how I'm going to be able to tell this story is the issue of scalping. Because we have this yet again, a sort of a stereotype that that's something that Native Americans did. And we don't think of the fact that

actually white people were doing a heck of a lot of scalping. There's a possibility that it actually was a practice that came over from Europe.

JEFF: Oh, yeah, they had bounties on Native scalps as far back as the 1630s in Colonial New England, I mean, he literally can get paid.

MELODIE: White people were getting paid for scalps. That was not necessarily true for Native Americans.

JEFF: Taking a scalp is obviously personal power and prestige; you're diminishing your enemy, at the same time that you're gaining power for yourself.

MELODIE: Am I going to end up reinforcing some of those stereotypes about scalping? If I'm not balancing it out right?

JEFF: With a more comprehensive understanding of what this meant for Native Americans, right? I mean, because you could scalp somebody that you hadn't killed, that somebody else had killed, and you'd still gained power. Because, again, even a dead enemy is somebody to be feared. Right? I mean, because they're very dangerous in the next life, and so on. So counting coup on a dead person was, again, something that was considered courageous.

MELODIE: You mentioned counting coup. Can you tell me a little bit more about it? Because it's an interesting counter example to scalping because it's like this brave act, but no one's injured.

JEFF: Right, because it's considered far more courageous to count coup than it is to kill somebody. Basically, what counting coup is, is you're riding up to an armed enemy who's trying to kill you and touching them with your coup stick or your bow or something like this, and then riding away. And everybody within the battle knows the significance of that. You have just gained tremendous prestige and power, and you have diminished your enemy. To get counted coup on was humiliating. So to do this with an armed enemy is considered braver, because you're

oftentimes hand-to-hand anyway, right? But I mean, to go up and do this with no intention of killing them? When you think about, it would be far more easy to just run your spear through them, or pull your bow back and put an arrow right in the middle of them, okay? I mean, if you're ten feet away, do that, right? I'm gonna go up to two or three feet, smack the guy with this stick, and then ride away. The Native belief in warfare, especially before contact, had never been about killing as many people as you can; it was simply demonstrating your power over them.

MELODIE: One of the things that I thought I really would want to talk to you about is the spiritual aspects of this history, how to incorporate those into the storytelling, it seems sometimes it's very integral. Like, for instance, Sitting Bull's vision.

JEFF: There were all kinds of visions that really shaped and defined Native nations strategies about how they were going to deal with the United States. I mean, Plenty Horses, the Crow chief, had his vision of becoming peaceful with the United States.

MELODIE: Can you tell me a little bit more about that one? Because I haven't come across one.

JEFF: The Crow were kind of between a hammer and an anvil at the time, they were between the Blackfeet and the Lakota. And they were really struggling. They had been very powerful, they created these large horse herds that were very attractive. So it made them a target, unfortunately, and so when Plenty Horses had this vision was right when white people were starting to really come out on the Oregon Trail, and migrate in this direction. And he had a vision in which he saw his nation transformed by an alliance with white people. And the Crow became very much one of the best groups of scouts and allies that the United States government had during the Plains Wars. And they benefited from it, the Crow Reservation is still in Montana, they weren't forced to leave to go to Oklahoma, that kind of thing.

So there's all these anecdotal stories of these kinds of spiritual events taking place in Native America, across the centuries. And for the most part, historians have noted them, but they really don't place them in a central kind of role within the context of the story. It's more of an interesting anecdote kind of thing, because quite frankly, they don't believe that Sitting Bull had this vision and predicted this great defeat for the United States and so on. And so, you're removing the Native narrative and diminishing it and and minimizing it because you want to replace it with the dominant cultural narrative.

MELODIE: It seems like, especially since that's sort of the project that we've undertaken here with this podcast: to retell this history that has often been chopped up into bits and pieces, with this battle here, this battle there without connective tissue, I can't just minimize those pieces of the story, that spiritual part of the story. But it seems like I could also get myself in trouble, if I take on those stories in maybe insensitive ways.

JEFF: Oh, yeah. I mean, yeah, you do have to approach them very much from a position of either scholarship or connection and permission and with Native nations or something in a way in which you're openly and honestly seeking the story and the truth and so on. As opposed to, sound bites and clicks, by saying things that just sound cool, but can be offensive, and so on and so forth. But I think any honest search for the truth is going to be welcomed as opposed to condemned,

MELODIE: You brought up something else that I wanted to talk to you about, which was the role of the Crow and Shoshone in this story. The Shoshone also ended up kind of taking on the role of scouts and helping [the U.S.] out.

JEFF: Well, I mean, very wisely, their leaders chose an alliance with the United States as the lesser of two evils here. And they did what they had to do, because according to the Treaty of 1868, yes, that area in Montana was technically Crow territory.

MELODIE: Anything else that I didn't think of to talk about?

JEFF: I think your listeners would be interested to know that the Pawnee, the Crow, and the Shoshone are all evil! [laughter] And that's a very academic and very objective viewpoint as a scholar, my neutral viewpoint on these nations. And plus, my grandma told me that you can't trust the Crow or the Pawnee.

MELODIE: [laughing] Okay, all right, so your grandma told you?

JEFF: Oh, yes. I can't remember, we were having a discussion about something and she just offhandedly said, "You can't trust either one of those." It was very much just a matter of fact. So obviously, this won't make your podcast but

MELODIE: You never know.

JEFF: Don't do that to me. I have some very good friends who are Pawnee and Crow and they're actually great people. Well, and that's what we like to tease each other.

MELODIE: Well, I do wonder just because I noticed this, that Donovin, he's also Lakota. And he had some choice words about the Crow. And the fact that, like the buses that were offering tours around the Battle of Little Bighorn site, they were getting to tell the story. Even though it he felt that it was like his ancestor's story, not the Crow's story. And so he was teasing in a very similar sort of way. But nowadays that this is a joke?

JEFF: Yeah, not universally all the time. They're still hard feelings that can exist that run deep. And so it depends on the person, depends on the group, etc. Sometimes you got to have eyes in the back of your head and so on at powwows because you never know who's going to decide

that, “you know what? I got a bone to pick with you. That's something that happened 150 years ago.” But again, that speaks to the Natives perspective on time. I mean, just because your people killed a bunch of my people and yes, it was in 1820, I'm still kind of harsh about it. Okay? I'm salty about that. So you know, I'm gonna give you what for. Yeah, it gets personal.

MELODIE: And I think that's exactly what we're trying to do with this podcast, right? Is show how this history is very fresh still. It's not distant history. Whereas I think that when we learn it in elementary school history class or something, it feels like it's so distant, right? But in Indian Country, that's not the case.

JEFF: Right, and it's very real. I mean, the [Fort Laramie] Treaty of 1868 – that's a living, breathing document for us. So the United States can keep saying, “that was 150 years ago! Get over it!” No, I don't think I will. I think that I'm going to keep pointing this out to you, no matter how many years are between it and now.