

# Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience

## VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



From left to right, clockwise: 1) Drummers at pow wow. Photo courtesy of Hunter Genia. 2) Hunter Genia (LMSW, CAADC), a behavioral health administrator for the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe, and his sons at a pow wow. Photo courtesy of Hunter Genia. 3) Bunky Echo-Hawk, artist & design consultant, with an original painting. Photo courtesy of Bunky Echo-Hawk.

## Program Synopsis

This exciting and compelling one hour documentary invites viewers into the lives of contemporary Native American role models. It dispels the myth that American Indians have disappeared from the American horizon, and reveals how they continue to persist, heal from the past, confront the challenges of today, keep their culture alive, and make significant contributions to society. Their personal stories will deeply touch both Natives and non-Natives and help build bridges of understanding, respect, and communication.

## In Their Words

***"When the people came from Europe there were 100 million Native Americans and today, there is a handful. I mean, it was an American holocaust."***

— Scott Badenoch (Hochunk)

### Producer's Notes



#### Audrey Geyer

Sometimes a high school class can have a profound and lasting affect on a student's outlook on life. I had one such exceptionally formative course in eleventh grade called, *The American Dream*. It depicted the reality of the Native American Experience.

In this class, I realized how very little I truly knew about American Indians, their history, and contemporary lives. I came to understand how poorly formed my images were of their heritage and culture, and how Hollywood movies, in particular, had shaped the stereotypes I held in my mind.

It turned out that this high school class planted a deep seed within me, which decades later, germinated and inspired me to produce/direct the documentary, *Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience*.

*Our Fires Still Burn* depicts the personal stories of Native American role models from all walks of life, including a successful businessman, journalist, artist, and youth advocate, as well as, tribal and spiritual leaders. The interviewees share how they have learned to walk between two worlds, utilize ancestral teachings in their daily lives, and begin to heal from a long history of traumatic experiences, such as the boarding school era.

What I have learned about American Indians from creating this documentary is immense. What comes to mind foremost is that American history is fraught, even more deeply than I previously understood, with the systematic destruction of a people—that the tragic history of Native Americans is our “American Holocaust.”

On the other hand, I have been deeply inspired by the fact that amidst the debris of suffering and trauma, American Indians are expressing their incredible resilience, commitment to culture, and preservation of traditions. The emotional and physical healing that can be seen taking place in Indian communities today will benefit the next Seven Generations of Natives and non-Natives.

### By the Numbers

1. The names Ojibway, Chippewa, and Anishinabe are all names for the same Woodland Tribe. Anishinabe is the name the people call themselves. **It means “first” or “original” people.** The names “Chippewa” and “Ojibwa” were given to them by French fur traders and both are thought to be a derivation of the word “puckered” which refers to the puckered stitching style on their moccasins. There are variations on the spelling of both: Ojibwa, Ojibwe, Ojibway, Chippewa, and Chippeway.
2. The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of central Michigan is made up of **three bands of Ojibwa**.
3. As a result of the **treaties signed with the United States Government in 1855 and 1864**, the Isabella Indian Reservation was formed and **over 130,000 acres** were divided into privately owned allotments. Many of these allotments were eventually lost through bad land deals and exploitation by timber barons.
4. The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe has used gaming revenue from its **two casinos** to fuel economic development for the Tribe. They are currently the **largest employer** in Isabella County in Michigan.
5. The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe created the Migizi Economic Development Company to insure financial security for **the next seven generations** of its people. Migizi currently operates **eleven diverse enterprises** on the reservation.
6. In **2004**, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe built the **34,349 square-foot cultural center** named The Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways. Ziibiwing means “by the river” in Anishinabe.
7. The Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the **first of the Indian Boarding Schools**, was founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt in **1879**.
8. The Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School operated from **1893 to 1934**. The school was built on **320 acres** and eventually had **37 buildings** and an **annual enrollment of 300 American Indian students** in Kindergarten through 8th grade.
9. The U.S. Government operated approximately **100 boarding schools** for Indian children both on and off the reservations. During this period, public education was closed to Indian children due to racism in some communities.



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## Discussion Questions

1. The boarding school years took a devastating toll on Native families as well as Native culture. In the film, Hunter Genia says that one of the common things people reported was that they didn't "learn how to love." As a class or a group, explore and discuss what he meant by this. Then, explore the many ways this has influenced Native people and culture for many generations.
2. In what ways do you think the loss of Native American culture has directly or indirectly contributed to the current health issues in Native Nations (ex. diabetes, heart disease, suicide rates, and addiction)? Review the many actions shown in the film that Native people are taking today to reverse the effects of this cultural loss?
3. Several people in the film comment about the disconnect and disparity between the population of Mt. Pleasant and the Isabella Indian Reservation. As a class or a group explore and discuss why this gap exists and what needs to happen between the two communities in order to close this gap.
4. Louanne Bruner explains how the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe took back the Mt. Pleasant Indian Boarding School and how it has had a healing effect on the community. Why do you think it was important to the people of the Isabella Reservation to reclaim the boarding school grounds and buildings? How are the people using it as a "tool" for education and healing?
5. A short section of the film talks about the economic changes that were brought to the Isabella Indian Reservation by introducing casinos and Indian Gaming. The pros and cons of this subject are debated across Native Nations. As a class or a group explore and discuss what you think the pros and cons are.
6. Judy Pamp talks about the deep meanings in the Ojibway language that cannot be captured in the English translation of those words. Do you feel that language takes us more deeply into our human experience? And, what is the result when that link is lost?



Possibly taken during Chapel Service depicting Native American students at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Student body assembled on the Carlisle Indian Industrial School grounds in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Photo courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society.



Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort, in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

Photo courtesy of Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort Publicity Department.

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George Martin, head veteran dancer, opening ceremony at the Ann Arbor, Michigan, pow wow.

Photo courtesy of Visions.



Lee Ruffino, youth advocate, and women's drumming group performing at community event.

Photo courtesy of Visions.



Duanne Kinnart, firekeeper, performing part of Sacred Fire Ceremony.

Photo courtesy of Visions.

## Suggested Activities

1. As a class or a group, conduct research into the boarding school era. What were the main boarding schools in the United States besides Carlisle Indian School? Who ran these schools? What were some of the common practices? How many Native American children were taken to these schools? In what circumstances do people report that being a part of the boarding schools had a good effect on them?
2. Scott Badenoch speaks about the trail that connects Lake Superior and Lake Michigan and how the name "Michigan" actually means "great trees from sea to sea." He speaks about his ancestors seeing life as an organic whole. The loss of the lands and great forests may have had as large an impact on the people as the boarding schools. As a group or class, explore and write about what your relationship is to the land on which you live and how it affects you.
3. Levi Rickert says it is important for Native Americans to tell their own stories since their history and stories are important to all individuals. As a class or a group conduct your own oral history project. Have each member of your group use their phone recorder or computer to interview a family member and gather a story. Then have each person write a short response paper on what he or she learned and how it may have changed his or her own understanding or perspective.
4. The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe on the Isabella Indian Reservation have used gaming revenue to spur economic development for the Reservation. Conduct research into both the history and the new economic era to understand the before and after picture of life on the Isabella Indian Reservation.
5. *Our Fires Still Burn* helps us to see the Native People of the Isabella Indian Reservation as strong and vibrant in this modern world. From the past we create a future. Firekeeper Duane Kinnart of the Dale Thomas Center speaks about how he came to the fire wanting to be a better man so he could be a better father. Bruce Hardwick says the sacred fire is for all people. As a class or a group, do research on the sacred fire and the seven teachings spoken about in the film and how these teachings relate to all human beings.

## Resources



Map of twelve federally recognized Michigan Tribes.

Photo courtesy of Visions. Graphic designed by Kirk Moreland.

### About the Film

- [www.ourfiresstillburn.com](http://www.ourfiresstillburn.com)

### About the Tribes

- [www.sagchip.org](http://www.sagchip.org)

### History & Education

- Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways  
6650 E. Broadway Road  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858  
Ph: (989)775-4750

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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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Educational resources for this film are available at [www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/our-fires-still-burn](http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/our-fires-still-burn).

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