• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

Columbus Day Legacy

Columbus Day Parade participants continue their procession behind a wall of police security through the streets of Denver.

A Native American family displays ethnic pride as they wait for the Denver Columbus Day Parade procession.
Photos By Paul Abdoo. Images Courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC.

"If any person really examines their conscience and examines this history, they have got to say that what has happened is wrong."

— Alistair Bane, artist

Columbus Day Legacy explores the quintessential American issues of free speech and ethnic pride against the backdrop of the ongoing Columbus Day parade controversy in Denver, Colorado. Navajo filmmaker Bennie Klain takes viewers into this very personal yet very public conflict, asking tough questions about identity and history in America.

Since 1992, the Denver Italian-American community has proudly and publicly celebrated Columbus Day with a revived parade—long a part of the city's history—much to the dismay of the local American Indian Movement chapter who are equally determined to vilify the man credited with "discovering" America. The history of this annual parade is peppered with both verbal and physical violence, challenging ideas of political correctness and freedom of assembly. Both the Italian- and Native Americans are strong, vibrant, tight-knit communities—a point conveyed by the film as it uncovers conflicting notions of the freedom of speech, the interpretation of history and what it means to be an "American."

This Viewer Discussion Guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film and explore issues surrounding history, prejudice and cultural heritage.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Bennie Klain, Director

Bennie Klain, Director,
Columbus Day Legacy
Image Courtesy of TricksterFilms LLC.

I had never heard about the Denver Columbus Day parade until September of 2006, when my producer Leighton C. Peterson was a visiting professor at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. After talking with several people about the conflicting politics involved, he approached me with the idea of shooting during the parade in October. We knew there was a unique human story here, and we were onto something significant when both the Italian and Native American communities passionately emphasized that the 2007 parade—signifying the 100th anniversary of the holiday in Colorado—was the one to capture. We returned the following year with two film crews to simultaneously capture this passionate energy on both sides.

I decided that Columbus Day Legacy needed to begin by representing both sides of this conflict somewhat equally, a difficult undertaking as a Navajo filmmaker. What emerged as a result of this persistent vision is a contemporary digital portrait of two strong and proud ethnic communities, both fighting to preserve the memory of their prejudiced experiences as representatives of the original inhabitants and immigrant Americans. Both groups were historically far removed from any political elite or aristocracy. During editing, this formed the central conflict in Columbus Day Legacy as the United States grapples with everyday questions about rights, immigration, and identity in the 21st Century.

BY THE NUMBERS

The first celebrations of Columbus were held in New York City and other locations in **1792** to commemorate the **300th** anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the "New World." In **1866**, a group of Italian Americans in New York observed a Columbus Day as a day of cultural heritage. In **1907** the state of Colorado signed the bill into law to make Columbus Day the first state holiday.

Columbus Day was proclaimed a federal holiday set for the second Monday of each October by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in **1937**.

On **November 29, 1864,** Colonel John Chivington and the 3rd Colorado Cavalry, made up of mostly short term volunteers, mercilessly attacked Black Kettle and a group of Natives Americans who had camped out seeking peace. As many as **200** people, at least half of them old men, women, and children, died. This event has become known as The Sand Creek Massacre and is an essential piece of American history. The Columbus Day protestors objected to having a color guard dressed in the uniform of the 3rd Colorado Cavalry lead 2006 Columbus Day parade.

The Ludlow Massacre, one of the most brutal attacks on organized labor in North American history, took place on **April 20, 1914**, when the U.S. fired on **1200** striking miners who protested working conditions at the Rockefeller family-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation. Miners were paid **$1.68 a day** and were forced to work in extremely harsh conditions. The majority of those killed during the massacre were Italian immigrants.

Hawaii and South Dakota are the **two** states that do not recognize Columbus Day at all. In Hawaii a day of observation called Discoverer's Day honors the Polynesian discovery of Hawaii. In South Dakota it is called Native American Day. Other states and cities have stopped celebrating it as a paid holiday, including Berkeley and Santa Cruz, California, which celebrate "Indigenous Peoples Day."

Indigenous people of North America were called "Indians" because of the mistaken belief that Christopher Columbus had discovered the "Indies." Activist Russell Means interprets the term as deriving not from a confusion with India but from a Spanish expression En Dios, meaning "in God." Although the word is still commonly used, most indigenous people prefer to use their original tribal names.

The Catholic Organization, The Knights of Columbus, was formed to fight racism against Italian Americans and was named after Christopher Columbus. The Knights lobbied Washington to have Columbus Day made into a national holiday. The Knights of Columbus in Denver have not been participating in recent parades.

In **1977**, a United Nations conference proposed the idea to replace Columbus Day with a day to celebrate Indigenous People's Day. In **1989** the South Dakota Legislature unanimously passed legislation proposed by Gov. George Mickelson to proclaim **1990** as the "Year of Reconciliation" and to change the name of Columbus Day to Native American Day on the second Monday of October.

In 1880 the first waves of Italian Immigrants arrived in Colorado seeking a new life. Many became miners, and by 1910 **14%** of the population of Colorado was of Italian descent.

DELVE DEEPER

1. In the film the Native American protesters are objecting to the Italian American people using the name "Columbus" in their parade to celebrate Italian heritage. What main reasons for this protest did you glean from the film? Do you agree or disagree with those reasons? Explain your answer.

2. Troy Lynn Yellow Wood says, "It's not an Italian-Indian difference. It's about the truth." What does she mean by this? How would your answer be different if this quote was from an Italian-American parade participant?

3. Humankind has had a long history of making war, taking lands, and killing in the name of God and Country. The European colonization of North America directly or indirectly caused the deaths of an estimated 40,000,000 indigenous peoples. In your understanding, what is the difference between genocide and war?

4. Both the Italian and Native American communities have a long history in Denver, Colorado. Denver was one of the magnet cities for the U.S. Indian Relocation policy enacted in the 60s when Native people were shipped off the reservation to metropolitan cities for work. Colorado was also where many Italian immigrants went to work in the mines and on ranches. What do these two experiences have in common, and how do they differ? How do you think this contributes to the conflicts brought up by the parade between the two?

5. Americans have the First Amendment constitutional right to free speech and to gather together in protest of injustice. This basic right has been the root of many controversies throughout our brief history. How do you personally feel about freedom of speech? Are there any circumstances under which you feel this right should be denied? If so, what circumstances?

6. In the film, Troy Lynn Yellow Wood says that "Colonialism and understanding it is the only way we're going to recover from discovery." She likens the All Nations Four Directions March as a source strength and solidarity to counter the Columbus Day Parade. What other methods of healing can both sides undertake?

7. Glenn Morris says, "This community, this state, and this country is better than this. We can do better than this. And we can come together on common ground and mutual respect with one another. Not only can we, we must." How is this statement relevant today in the broader U.S. perspective?

8. In the film, Russell Means says, "It all started when my daughter came home one day and she asked me, 'Daddy, where were the Indians before Columbus came?' And I saw that already she was questioning who she is in a negative sense." Do you think the protest of the Columbus Day Parade brought about a useful change? If not, what other possible things do you think the protesters could have done to advance their cause and to have the Columbus Day holiday revoked or renamed to Native American Day?

9. In the film, Micki Lava Cayton says, "When Columbus Day was made a holiday, I remember my father saying to me, 'Maybe now they'll like Italians.' I never forgot that, because he had a hard life in America. He never found the American dream." What does it mean to find the American Dream? Why do you think that the Italian American groups who plan and support the Columbus Day Parade will not compromise or refuses to change the name of the parade?

Members of the Transform Columbus Day Alliance participate in the All Nations Four Directions March.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. The American Indian Movement celebrated its 42nd anniversary in 2010. Do research in a library or on the Internet to learn about who were the founding members of AIM, what was their mission, and what goals did they put forward in their mission. What inroads have they made toward fulfilling that mission or accomplishing their goals? What do you think still needs to be done?

2. In the United States Native Americans suffer from extremely high rates of alcoholism, addiction, heart disease, diabetes and suicide. Explore the relationship between these alarming statistics and the early trauma suffered by the people. Do not just express opinion but learn what the research is saying.

3. Do some research on the Italian American experience and create a timeline specific to the state of Colorado. When did they arrive? When did the Ludlow Massacre happen and when did Columbus Day become a state and national holiday? Are there connections between these?

4. Obtain 3-5 American History books from a variety of elementary and high school classes. Compare the number of pages (or columns) dedicated to early Native life versus, for instance, the fur trading industry, Columbus discovering America, the Mayflower, or other signs of early colonial activity. You may further your research and comparison by looking in the AAA travel books in states that have a high NA population. Do you think that Native American history and prehistory has been adequately covered?

5. Do research in literature or on the Internet and find out how many tribes lived in NA prior to Columbus? And then 100 years later. And then another 100 years later. And today.

6. Pretend that you could be an all-powerful leader in determining US policy toward Native Americans today. What, if anything, would you do to help Native tribal people regain strength and health again?

A young Transform Columbus Day supporter displays his sentiment.
Photos By Paul Abdoo. Images Courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC.

A Columbus Day Parade participant rides on through the sea of protesters.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Colorado AIM leader Glenn Morris talks to a television reporter in front of the Colorado State Capitol Building.
Photo by Paul Abdoo. Image Courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC.

About the Sand Creek Massacre
http://www.lastoftheindependents.com/sandcreek.htm

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
http://www.nps.gov/sand/index.htm

American Indian Movement
http://www.aimovement.org/

Denver's Columbus Day Parade
http://www.columbusdayparade.org/

Christopher Columbus: The Untold Story
http://www.understandingprejudice.org/nativeiq/columbus.htm

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (1991)

United Mine Workers: The Ludlow Massacre
http://www.umwa.org/?q=content/ludlow-massacre

Colorado Coal Field War Project
http://www.du.edu/ludlow/index.html

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To find out more, please visit:

www.nativetelecom.org/columbus_day_legacy

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