

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth Here's Your Sign, Native American Sign Language By Katherine Bone

Caveman did it. The Pilgrims did, too. John Smith did it with Pocahontas. Lewis and Clark practiced it along the trail. The Army, missionaries, traders and trappers used it throughout North America to converse with Native American tribes. Sign language has existed since the dawn of time and has revolutionized the world.

Humans have long communicated through gesticulation. Confronted with war and privation, mankind learned to ally neighboring nations and to conquer cultural and linguistic boundaries. In this regard, the Native American Indian was unmatched in using signs for trade, peace and sustainment. Iron Hawk, a Sioux Chief, once said, "The whites have had the power given them by the Great Spirit to read and write, and convey information in this way. He gave us the power to talk with our hands and arms, and send information with the mirror, blanket, and pony far away, and when we meet with Indians who have a different spoken language from ours, we can talk to them in signs."

In the book, *The Indian Sign Language*, by W.P. Clark, a Professor Whitney is quoted as saying, "the art of talking by gesture is too natural to man ever to be lost, though put down by, on the whole, greater availability of utterance as proved by experience, and if two men, who have not learned each other's tongue, meet and desire to exchange thoughts at all, they will resort to gesture and arrive at a mutual understanding on many points, whether they have a common origin and certain traces of hereditary (rather traditional) habits, or whether they have merely the accordant endowments of a common humanity."

Not only were Indians masters of sign language, they also used blanket signals to alert that a herd or danger was in sight, mirrors (frequent flashes warned and gained attention), smoke signals (a last resort relaying news of success or failure), and the drum.

The Oneidas cut saplings two feet from the ground, peeled the bark and placed a stone on the stump to alert others they were near, sometimes setting the stump afire. Painting a feathered tomahawk red and hurling it into a tree severing wampum upon a war post was a message of war. Trees were engraved with numbers of captives, those killed or destinations of the living. Bodies of the enemy were marked with recognizable signs and the Sioux 'blazed trails' by creating arrows with rocks aligning them in the direction they wanted others to follow.

Here are a few signs identifying friend and foe.

Blackfeet. Make sign for Moccasins. Pass thumbs and index fingers over feet and toes to ankles (right hand over right foot, left over left foot), palms close to feet. Make sign for Black by pointing to something black.

Brule (band of Sioux, Si-Chun-goo or Burnt Thighs). Carry the palm of extended right hand near right hip and move the hand in small circle parallel to surface.

Cheyenne (Refer to themselves as Sa-Sis-e-tas which may mean to cut or slash arms or are simply known as the *people*). Slash wrists or arms.

Comanche (Snake). Hold right hand, backside up, in front of body opposite right shoulder and at level to waistline, point index finger toward front, thumb and rest of fingers curled under then move index finger in a sinuous motion.

Crow. Bring extended hands, backside up, in front, a little higher and slightly wider than shoulders. Move hands downward to indicate the flapping motion of wings.

Enemy. Make sign for Friend (see below) and No. Use sign for friend then hold extended right hand, backside up in front of body, fingers pointing left and front, move hand right and front, at same time turn hand, give a thumbs up and then arch hand downward to thumbs down position.

Friend. Most common in north is to hold right hand in front of and back towards neck, index and second fingers extended, touching, point them toward front, thumb and other fingers curled tight, raising hands at same time to top of head. In south, link index fingers together in front of breast, other fingers curled tight and grip hard.

Kiowa (Crazy knife people or Prairie people). Hold right hand, backside nearly down in front of right breast at shoulder height then with fingers touching and slightly curved, lower edge of hand pointing left then front, and by wrist action give a rotary motion of hand, palm up, finger-tips forming an ellipse. Or hold hand near right cheek.

Mandan. Partially compress right hand bringing tip of thumb near tips of fingers, tap chin several times to symbolize tattooing chin and lower sides of face.

Navajo. Make sign for Work and for Blanket. Bring hands in front of body, finger pointing front, backside of right hand to right, left to left, inches apart, right hand a little higher and slightly rear to left so tips of right fingers are about opposite left wrist, lower hands by wrist action so that fingers point downward and to front then raise them in same way reversing position of hands, repeat. Then to make sign for blanket put right palm on left shoulder, left palm on right shoulder as if wrapping shoulders in blanket.

Nez Perce. Hold the backside of right hand in front of right cheek and curl fingers closed except keep index finger extended, point it to left just under tip of nose and move hand to left, back of index finger passing under and close to nose.

Pawnee. Hold right hand, palm out, in front of and slightly higher than right shoulder, first and second fingers extended and separated, and pointing upwards with other fingers and thumb curled tight, carry hand up and to front then bend hand down slightly so that fingers point to front.

Sac. Make sign for shaved head. Bring the back of extended hands, fingers pointing toward rear alongside head, move hands downward as though cutting hair.

Shoshone. Hold right hand, back to right, in front of shoulder, waist level, first and second fingers extended, touching, pointing to front with fingers and thumb curled tight, move hand several inches to front. With wrist action give a wavy motion to extended fingers to copy a snake's slithering movement.

Sioux (Cutting off heads or Cut throats). Move the right hand, finger pointed and backside of hand up, sideways across the throat in a back and forth motion.

Ute. Make sign for Black then rub face as in Red to symbolize rubbing on paint with first joints of fingers of right hand.

Never doubt the importance of body language. Native American Indians knew that better than anyone because one wrong move meant the difference between life and death, a complete misunderstanding and oftentimes ridicule.

How do people see you? What are you saying with your hands? Are you communicating the message you wish to convey or are you saying something else entirely?