

Bonus Episode 2: A (Second!) Conservation with Lakota Historian Jeff Means



Before we release the final two episodes of Mending the Hoop, I wanted to bring you another behind-the-scenes conversation from the season. You might remember my friend Dr. Jeff Means from our last bonus episode. Jeff is a Lakota historian at the University of Wyoming, and he's been an immense source of guidance for me through the nuanced and often heavy topics this season has broached. Jeff and I pick up the conversation today where our last one left off.

As the 19th century came to a close, the United States may have stopped direct battle with the Plains nations, but the war was far from over. As Native communities were forced onto reservations, the U.S. now use new techniques to attempt cultural genocide, alienating children from their communities at boarding schools, and exterminating the bison. Throughout this

conversation, Jeff points out the ways that Indigenous communities continue to demonstrate a pride in their identities that the U.S. government tried to erase. I start off by bringing up something Yufna Soldier Wolf told me a few episodes back that at Indian boarding schools, children became hostages of the Plains Indian Wars.

JEFF MEANS: The real troubling and factionalism part of it is that oftentimes they were taken hostage by the Indian police because these are people hired by the Indian agent. And so they get these factions working against one another, which provided them greater control. Of course, they knew everybody, right? So they know how many children you had, you couldn't lie to him.

MELODIE EDWARDS: You couldn't say, 'Oh, we don't have any kids.' They would actually be like, 'Hey, where's so?'

JEFF: Yeah, 'Where are your three kids between these ages we're looking for.' I mean, you can try and squirrel them away somewhere. But then you're facing fines of either you're not going to get your allotment that month, or other kinds of problems that will arise for you as a result of your efforts to do this. Now, some other Native Americans were very eager to send their children to the schools, such as Chief Washakie; they wanted their children to be educated so that they could come back and help the Native nations, then work within the U.S. political structure. And that can be quite effective.

ME: But did that work out for him?

JEFF: To some degree, but really, for most, this was a very negative experience. I mean, you're in this strange place. You're not supposed to speak your language. They burnt all your clothes when you got there. And it's like, oh, what's the message there? It's just everything about you is wrong. Everything. And this message of unworthiness is quickly internalized by Native Americans. And it can be really problematic then, for the next generations and so on. Yeah.

MELODIE: Because I saw the number was like 60,000 children went to the schools, that's going to have a huge influence on people.

JEFF: Yeah, absolutely. Most of them against their will, there's going to be a lot of runaway attempts, they're going to be as, as you've seen in the news recently, a lot of deaths, There's cemeteries next to every one of these schools, just filled with these children who aren't going to make it. And a lot of Native American parents then are going to be far more willing to accept day schools on the reservation as a result of this. So they can at least have access to the children in the evening, or summertime, or where they can maintain this connection. Because some of the biggest problems that emerge is literally the alienation of a generation of Natives from their own culture. And supposedly, so that you can assimilate them into American culture, except American culture has a big, 'Don't apply here' sign out, you know, 'We don't want you. We don't want you as neighbors, we don't want anything but cheap labor.; And so, there's no assimilation, you go back to your reservation, and many of these kids, they can't even speak their own language anymore. They can't communicate with their parents. Could you imagine that? Right?

MELODIE: You're feeling alienated at school, and that everything's wrong with you at school and then you come home, and you can't communicate.

JEFF: You're not even embraced by the community and you don't look the same, you don't speak the same, you don't understand the culture as well. All of these are goals of the United States obviously. I mean, 'to kill the Indian, save the man.'

MELODIE: I think that we talked last time about how there were actual policies, in this case, especially with Indian boarding schools where they were required to go. Families wouldn't get rations and things like that. So this seems like where we're getting into that territory of cultural

genocide, where those policies are in place to enforce this method. Would you have to kind of talk a little bit?

JEFF: Yeah, because assimilation had always been the goal of Europeans. And the United States simply picked this up in the 1770s. But the process of assimilation, at first was always assumed that it would be voluntary, that Native Americans eventually understood the benefits of being civilized, and they would voluntarily do so. But as time goes by and it's evident that Native Americans identity is dear to them, their religion is and everything else, and they're not voluntarily transforming into Americans, they thought, 'okay, well, then how do we go about doing this in a more effective way?' And this really doesn't become too big of an issue in the United States until the California gold rush and the massive expansion out to the West, and you've got all these Native American reservations and these populations of Indigenous people, and the United States is now in control of them. And once they have that power to dictate how they're going to live on the reservation, they will begin to create policies to completely eliminate Native American culture. And it's really a testament to Native American resiliency, that, despite these massive efforts for assimilation, they're going to take place over 150 years, they managed to hold on to their identity.

MELODIE: It seems like it's been kind of a shock to people to realize that these kids were taken hostage, or they were a way to kind of transition out of the formal military era of the war. But I know lots of people who went to these boarding schools, that's something that lasted into the modern era, that it only technically ended in the 1970s. And so it seems like that we're seeing that if this was something that was implemented as a technique for war, that that's a war technique that lasted into the modern era.

JEFF: Instead of war, I would say conquest, simply because it's a process of that settler colonial manifestation around the globe, where the whole point is to eliminate the Native, the Indigenous, to replace it with not only your culture, but also the narrative that you want to choose for your nation in the United States. 'We want to eliminate the Native voice so that the way they see things aren't important. And in fact, we want to change them to the point that they adopt the narrative that the United States puts forward, that Manifest Destiny was good that, this is all for the betterment of you, really, the entire process is a part of just that dominant culture, trying to make itself more at home within the borders that it controls. And it's so much more comfortable to do when the Indigenous people are on board with that.

MELODIE: Yeah, like it's getting their stamp of approval.

JEFF: Yeah, it justifies your conquest, right? It says, 'Oh, see, the good things we've done? Look at this – now they all speak English, and they're Christian, and they wear the right clothes, and they have these jobs and so on.

MELODIE: A lot of these schools were industrial schools. Carlisle was called an industrial school. They were learning, reading, writing and arithmetic, but they were also learning a trade so that they could even pick up jobs afterward. There was another form of integration.

JEFF: Yeah, and this was all designed to create that labor supply, right? Except the irony is, these jobs are nonexistent on the reservation. I mean, you're not going to get a job as a carpenter or an engineer or anything else. So when you're training people so that they can take part in your culture, but at the same time denying them access to the culture in any equal way, you set up a situation where you get what you get today, which is Native American reservations, basically, as economically and politically destitute.

One of the most ironic and angering parts for me is that when people say ‘Oh, look at that reservation and all the things wrong with it,’ right? ‘Oh, there's poverty and alcoholism and crime and so on.’ And it's like, yes, because you made it like this! You set it up! You took people that were completely self-sufficient and independent, and you stuck them on this land that can't support them, and you set up a system in which there's nothing but failure for them in the future. And you take away everything that makes them a man or a woman in their culture and then you're shocked when there's this negative response. And you end up with a community that is in the situation it's in.

MELODIE: One of the people that I interviewed was a representative from the [Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#), and they apparently are working on [a bill](#) that would create a commission to study and investigate this history, kind of put the United States on a path sort of the way that Canada has been going, where there's actual direct payments to survivors. Okay, I want to hear your thoughts. You're somewhat dubious!

JEFF: [laughing] Yeah, that's because I am unbelievably cynical when it comes to these kinds of efforts in the United States simply because when Congress apologized to Native Americans for everything that happened, they did so it like one o'clock in the morning in this little resolution that was attached to another completely unrelated bill. Okay, that is not how you apologize. I'm sorry, it's like writing ‘I'm sorry’ on a piece of paper and throwing it in your neighbor's yard and assuming they're going to actually get that. And so the effort would be great. You always welcome any kind of effort by the United States to try and say, ‘Hey, let's take a look at this, right?’ But it has to be a serious look, and it has to have an end goal. One of the biggest problems with all of these efforts is that they really don't have a finish line in mind. There's no, ‘Okay, this is what we want and this is how we're going to go about doing it, etc.’ And that could be Native

American sovereignty. How do we create an infrastructure in these Native nations where they can be self-sufficient? Again, right, all of these things are options out there. But usually, it's just kind of, 'Well, let's see what we can do.' And there's real no forethought into it. And that's what I'd kind of liked to see.

MELODIE: But I want to kind of also talk about what happened with bison. That was also happening around the same time as the boarding schools were being implemented, that bison were just being annihilated in a concerted effort to really damage the tribes and make it impossible for them to keep going forward in the same way that they had lived before. I wonder, as a historian, if you can kind of talk about that strategy? Was that something that was just unique to the way the U.S. government was fighting tribes? Or is that something that happened around the world?

JEFF: No, that would be something that any invading power is going to be able to do. They look at, 'Okay, well, how you feed yourself? If I destroy that, I have control of you now because you're going to starve to death, or you're going to have to come to us and ask for food.' So this has happened all over the world. And the United States has been very effective at it since the beginning of this country. The Iroquois called George Washington the Burner of Towns because his strategy, the American military strategy, was to go after the economic foundations of tribes back East, and that was almost inevitably corn. Well, this simply is translated out onto the plains with the buffalo; if we kill them, then we can gain control of them.

MELODIE: I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the Plains Indian tribes and their relationship to nature. And this is treacherous territory as a journalist, because there's just such stereotypes about Native Americans and their relationship to nature. So I wonder if you can help just give people a little more realistic view of this issue.

JEFF: That's just human nature to be familiar with the ecosystem you live in. Okay, everybody does that. The major difference between Native Americans and Western cultures is the fact that Native Americans saw themselves as an equal part of that ecosystem instead of the controlling agent. Western culture, from the very beginning, saw themselves as set apart from because it's says so in the Bible, right? I mean, 'We are sanctified, we are set apart from.' Adam was given dominion over these things, right? And he was going to name them and he was going to be a steward of all of the world, right? But that clearly really gives mankind that powerful position of 'Okay, we are the only species that really matters.' And that flies in the face of what Native Americans thought. So there's the major difference right there. And that's why in many cases, Native Americans were unwilling to participate in mass extinction events. But not universally, though. I mean, Native Americans hunted the beaver almost to extinction in the East. But they did so because they became so dependent upon trade, that without that trade, they simply couldn't carry on as a culture.

MELODIE: So it was yet another sort of symptom of of contact with Europeans.

JEFF: Yeah, exactly, in that wonderful tapestry where everything connects. So it's really fascinating. When you think about Native Americans and their relationship to nature, there's that idea that 'Oh, Native Americans, they never left a footprint and they never get lost. 'And, you know, all this, it's all bunk, okay? Native Americans changed ecosystems to fit their needs. Iroquois burned down entire forests so they could plant corn. Okay, Hohokam built canals all throughout the Phoenix area, right? And Native Americans would start prairie fires to drive buffalo herds off cliffs, sometimes, right? You do what you have to do to survive. It's important to note that fundamental difference really is just, do you have dominion over nature? Or are you a partner within this relationship? I think that's kind of the major distinction.

MELODIE: It's like, especially in the American West, we have these sort of John Muir ideas about wilderness. The wilderness is just completely untouched, and that Native Americans, that for thousands of years, that they weren't here, interacting with this natural world. And managing it in many ways, as you just were talking about some of the ways in which they were very much interacting with forests, and prairies and so forth. And so that seems like part of what we're having to overcome in the way that we think about the natural world is recognizing a different sort of relationship that Native Americans had with nature than we had been envisioning.

JEFF: Yeah, and I think that's a far more effective relationship actually because this whole idea of stewardship, especially in a capitalist society where profit is really the overriding factor that you look at, if you're going to develop something or do something. Being a steward means simply, you're in charge, right? But being a partner means you've got a little bit more responsibility.

MELODIE: So the story I'm interested in exploring with this is how a lot of tribes are really getting involved in a lot of this wildlife management, water management, And so I'm interested to hear your thoughts in terms of the arc of history, where this might be headed, in terms of tribes getting involved, and what this might look like to involve them?

JEFF: It's complicated. Obviously, there's no simple answer for this because so many Native nations have very different policies on all these kinds of issues. But Native nations will almost inevitably think about the world they live in differently. And that means that the more sovereignty that they can obtain, the more control over the land in which they live on the reservation is given to them. And they can actually use it the way they want to. You're going to find a much more conservation minded and preservation minded way – not talking about resource extraction, but just way of life. I mean, the reintroduction of Indigenous plants, the

reintroduction of bison, all of these kinds of things can be very important, not just economically, and environmentally, but also psychologically for Native Americans. The return of bison, is... Boy, it's hard to explain. It means so much to so many of these nations who depended on the bison. So to have them back is to have a part of your family back. All of a sudden, 'Oh my gosh, I haven't seen you in years. It's so good to have you back. And you mean so much to us, and we love you. And we're really glad to have you back.' That's the kind of psychological and social affects this can have. And environmentally, bison do a lot for the environment as well because they use the environment the way it's supposed to be used, whereas cattle, sheep, do not – at least the original ecosystem. And so there's a lot of benefits to this. And I think it's going to be able to go as far as Native American sovereignty goes. Okay, now, that has always been a pendulum swing, depending on which policies are in power, and who's in charge of the White House and so on. You know, more freedom or less freedom. And so, until we get to a point where Native American control of their environments is absolute, then we're going to continue to have these kinds of clashes, like Dakota Access Pipeline and everything else.

MELODIE: I wonder if you can just kind of talk about, as a historian, how this whole story that we've been discussing over all of these times that we've met up this the story of the Plains Indian Wars, the story of of Indian boarding schools and bison removal, how that has affected Indigenous communities today.

JEFF: The historical trauma has been devastating, obviously. Because, again, once you're told by this dominant group that is fundamentally different to you in every way – language, religion, economy, politics, everything – that everything about us is wrong, and you're bad, inherently, just everything about you. 'But we can fix you, if you make these changes.' They're still in the belief that Native Americans should be quiet because they're supposed to buy into the narrative

that we've given them. So every time they raise their voice, against the Dakota Access Pipeline or something else, everybody freaks out about it because, 'Shhh, be quiet,' right? But when you raise your voice, what you're doing is you're kind of overcoming that trauma. And it all started in the '60s, American Indian Movement and others are saying, 'It's a good thing to be a Native American. Red pride, all these kinds of ideas that were really a flower blossoming in Native American communities. Where, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm a young Native person, and I can be proud of being a young Native person.' And that's transformative. And so that kind of effort has been ongoing within Native communities, to a large degree, but again, it's working against the tide of poverty and political impotency and everything else. So those efforts are there and Native Americans do generally have a different idea about who they are and their place in the world. The problem is just a lack of sovereignty, a lack of control of your own life. Opportunities are limited. So I'm hopeful that the trauma can be healed at some point, but it's almost impossible. I mean, we as individuals, we go to counselors and we talk about this trauma and how this has really affected us. And we try to overcome it, but that's really difficult for a *nation* to do right. I mean, there's no *national* counselor.