

Bonus Episode 3: A Conversation with Lakota Historian Jeff Means



Thanks for coming along with us for this very special season, as The Modern West explored how the Plains Indian Wars... well, they aren't really over. The attack on Native ways of life continues to reverberate in the disproportionate violence against Indigenous women, in the erasure of Native perspectives in the media and the classroom, and in the high rates of incarceration and health disparities. And the fight for Native sovereignty? That's still happening too, in movements like Land Back and the MMIW movement.

Before I sign off for the season, I want to bring you one final conversation with Lakota historian Dr. Jeff Means, a professor of Native American history at the University of Wyoming. Today, I talk to him about healing the history of the Plains wars ... both what Native communities are doing to heal it and what the United States could do to acknowledge and begin to repair its past.

As you might have noticed from previous episodes, Jeff is a committed skeptic. But still, I decide to start by asking Jeff, does he believe healing this history is even possible?

JEFF MEANS: I do think it's possible simply because anything is possible really in these relationships, as long as there is sincerity on both sides, absolutely. I'm far more pessimistic, though about it actually happening. There's no real history of the United States wanting to acknowledge any wrongdoing in anything. And if anything, culturally, right now, the pendulum has swung the other way, where it's more about pretending that these things never happened than actually acknowledging them and saying, 'I'm sorry.' They're trying to hide history in American textbooks, which are published all in Texas, a very red state. And the efforts to turn slaves into

immigrants or completely gloss over Native American history, or ignore it, are just part of that idea that, 'if we just don't think about it, it didn't happen. And let's pretend that we didn't do this, and therefore we can feel fine about ourselves. Right? This is all good.' It's ridiculous. So is there a chance now? No, me in the future? Absolutely. I, again, Native nations aren't going anywhere. We've been around for the entire existence of this Western Hemisphere in the United States, well before the United States, and we'll be around when the United States finally catches up, culturally, to what Natives have known a long time, which is: you should base your nation on kinship, you should establish friendships with others based on kinship, trust, respect, not capitalism. This is just Western culture, this is the way we have developed. But it can't all be about fear, and money. We have to get past those two things. And a lot of people have and there's a lot of tremendous support, I think, from both sides of the aisle in Washington for reparations and healing. It's just really tough in this political atmosphere to get anything done along those lines.

MELODIE EDWARDS: Yeah, And from within, are you seeing that communities are finding ways of addressing historical trauma, intergenerational trauma? Is there ways in which you're seeing that in your own community, that there's progress there?

JEFF: Yeah, there's always cases of progress being made. But then there's just as much of a chance of taking a step backward as well. It's really hard to overcome the obstacles that have been put in place. As far as this whole settler process to recover from that, I mean, you didn't have any political power or structure or economic base or foundation for the longest time. And now you're trying to establish this, but you're doing it handicapped by the fact that this other culture has infiltrated your own to such a degree, that there's always going to be different ideas about exactly what should we do and how should we do it, and what are we going to be, because you're not that anymore. Okay? You can still be Lakota, I'm still Lakota. But I'm not the Lakota from before the reservation, right? I can never be that none of us can ever be that until we can gain full sovereignty, full freedom from the United States.

MELODIE: Yeah, that's asking a lot.

JEFF: That is. I mean, it is. It can be done. Basically, the United States would have to say, 'You know what,' – and it would be a lot cheaper for them, by the way, they could get rid of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and all these kind of wonderful things. But just say, 'You know what, all the Native reservations are going to now be independent nations. They're going to have their own passports.' It'd be like Canada, right? I mean, where it's the longest undefended border in the world, right? I mean, it doesn't have to be a conflict. It can, again, be mutual respect, friendship, support, and allow the Natives then to eventually come to a decision on who are we? And what do we want to be? And every Native nation would come to something different, right? But it would at least be theirs, and they would be in control of it. But yeah, I don't see that happening. [laughter]

MELODIE: Well, so yeah, that leads me to my next question, which is, what are you seeing in terms of the Indigenous youth? Is there kind of a will especially with Standing Rock, it felt like, there was a kind of a surge of passion and vision from Indigenous youth?

JEFF: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, they're the hope, right? We old farts aren't gonna get it done. And I think we've proven that. Yeah, especially with their ability to organize through social media and they now can respond quickly to any kind of an emergency, like a Standing Rock. And they can do so now from a place of power because they're not ashamed of who they are anymore. Okay? The United States tried for the longest time to keep telling Natives that 'everything about you is wrong, and you suck.' And now after the 1960s took that back and said,

‘No, you know what? It doesn't suck to be a Native American.’ And so, absolutely, oh, such hope for our youth to keep the push for sovereignty and getting the land reparations and everything else. Because they have the energy for it. They have the intelligence for it. Now they have that pride and that energy to really overcome anything.

MELODIE: The other thing I'm hearing a lot about, and that I'm going to be exploring in this episode, is the arts as a place where healing seems like it's happening a little bit as well. Just like a willingness by artists to kind of thumb their nose at expectations of what is traditional Native American art. And to reclaim that and do really amazing stuff with that.

JEFF: Yeah, absolutely. In fact, I was just on a committee in anthropology where the student explored this very issue. Yeah, I think that Native artists have really reclaimed in a lot of ways, what they see as legitimate, and are using mediums and styles that fly in the face of what traditional Native artistry used to be. And I think that's fantastic. Ledger art is my particular favorite, okay, I just love that. But there are so many wonderful Native artists out there who they're just they're doing what they want to do, and what the art tells them to do, just like any artist, and so it's a really fruitful field, I think, for any kind of attempted healing because art kind of transcends culture, right? I mean, what do you think?

MELODIE: I agree, like one of the gals that I interviewed, yeah, she does quill work, she does beadwork, so it's traditional, but she's doing all these new things with it. So she still has those skills that are handed down and that that she's learned, but that she's willing to try all sorts of cool things with it. And it's not just something that's being sold at the Santa Fe art show or whatever. It's transcending.

JEFF: Yeah. And the fantastic thing about it, too, is that when you ask the artist, what's your inspiration, you actually find something out about Native history. Right? And from the Native perspective, oh, this is why I'm doing this. And so it's educational. Yeah, definitely beautiful things being done in the world of art. I'm a big art fan. So if we ever came to my office, I have paintings all over the place.

MELODIE: We should have met there one time. And I should tell you that at the Dairy where they have this Sacred Space that they've created, there was a ledger art show up while I was there,

JEFF: You didn't pick me up some? [laughter]

MELODIE: I am sorry. I just, I spaced it!

JEFF: Oh, well, I'll tell you what, you can go ahead and get me one online. And that'll make up for it. Don't spend too much.

MELODIE: I know. That's the thing, it's worth a lot! And then you know, one other thing that in this kind of is an extension of what we were just saying about art, which is that a lot of the healing methods one, one gal that I talked to is doing all sorts of really amazing healing with incarcerated Native women, and using sort of traditional approaches, sweats, and other sort of traditional healing approaches. Is that something that you are hearing about, seeing? What do you think of that?

JEFF: I hadn't heard about that, I know it has taken place. I didn't know there was a concerted effort to move forward with that. That sounds fantastic. Anything that you can do to heal someone's spirit is fantastic. It doesn't matter who it is. That's the core of your future is, ‘how do you see the world? How do you feel about yourself? How do you feel about the things around you, etc.’ So, when you can get somebody to a place where they're content, they're happy, and they're more thoughtful, maybe a little wiser. That's a win for everybody. You know, I never asked, Are you Native?

MELODIE: No.

JEFF: Okay, just, your middle name is starr.

MELODIE: And that's actually a family name. But supposedly my mom has traced both sides of my family, both my mother and father's side to the family back to the Mayflower. So, yeah, I am as much of a colonialist as they come. I mean, in fact, I went and read the book, *The Mayflower*, and my mom had printed up all of my relatives so that I could see just who, all the bad guys, right? I'm related to all of them. I'm related to all the bad guys.

JEFF: Well, good for you. [laughter]

MELODIE: But it's something I think, as I've done a lot of this reporting, that it was something I felt like I needed to kind of come to terms with was my own sort of family history, just recognizing that I wasn't necessarily on the good guys' side.

JEFF: But first of all, give your relatives a break, Okay, because it's all relative, right? We can't fully understand the security of their belief in Western culture of their superiority to everyone else. I mean, it's unfathomable now, to think how secure they were in that. And so their actions to anyone outside of what they considered civilized people, was completely justified in their minds. So while we look back and say, 'Oh, my gosh, my relatives were horrible,' okay, at the time, they were probably seen as people who got things done, and by gosh, look how wonderful they are. So you can only act on what your culture is telling you. So I would say, you know, none of this is about white guilt. So, yeah, I wouldn't feel bad about that.

MELODIE: Okay, I have thought a lot about this back and forth. And I really appreciate that insight, because it is kind of like this whole business of white guilt. And I think that there's something to just recognizing that, like you say, when you read what my ancestors were saying at the time, that was the mind frame that they came from. It was very Christian, and they were a superior race, and they were doing what they thought they had to do, which was to spread Christianity as far and wide as they possibly could. But it's like, the whole lesson of this whole project that we've been kind of working on together. It's like, looking at that and saying – and I had somebody even tell me, a gal from the Indian Boarding School Healing Coalition, she said, 'the reason you study this history, the reason it's important to not ignore this history, is because you don't want to be committing these kinds of atrocities again, right?'

JEFF: Absolutely. And you know what, I think it would be good for the psyche of the United States to get to the point where we can acknowledge these things, because according to the laws of the United States of America, what they did to Native Americans was a crime. Okay, according to the UN. But what the real point is, by the United States' own standards, they stole the land, they committed some horrible acts of violence, and an acknowledgement of that, a true attempt to say, 'Man, this was a bad part of us,' it would help the United States understand itself better. And I'm talking about the nation as if it's one entity, but it really can be through education. It's simply a matter of education. And that's why it's not about white guilt; it's about white education. Because the more people are educated about the past and the more they know about it, the more they can say, 'you know what, that's okay. My ancestors did this stuff, right? Not me, but I can try and make it better.' And we can live together. And we can actually enjoy one another's company and learn from one another, really move forward to a much better place. But it can't start until you start with the education. We could revel in a group identity, but until then, it's just this fractured feeling.

MELODIE: Have you been following what's been going on in Canada in terms of some of their approach to trying to address, especially the residential schools there. They have an apology day and wear an orange shirt day, and actually like setting aside funding and actually giving money

to people who survived residential schools. And it seems like there's a little bit of an attempt to do some of that.

JEFF: Yeah, And I think that's great that Canada's doing this. I think it has to, in the United States, be something that's very bipartisan. I think it has to be honest, sincere. Obviously, the President and Congress is going to have to lead it, any effort to say, 'You know what? We did these things but it's okay because we acknowledge it. And we are sorry, right?' Because who doesn't feel better when you apologize? After knowing you've done something bad, right? You'll always feel better when you say you're sorry. You don't feel better when you say it never happened, or deny that it happened. That just festers.