

Native American Removal Activity

Station A: Evaluating "The Myth of the Vanishing Race"

Directions:

Part I. Read the following selection from David R.M. Beck's essay "The Myth of the Vanishing Race":

David R.M. Beck, "The Myth of the Vanishing Race" (2001)

Full Text available at: <http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/west/vanishrace.pdf>

Although Indians had been used as display curiosities and non-Indians had "played" at being Indian for a long time before this period, both of these activities flowered in the decades that coincided with the federal policy of forced assimilation as the belief grew stronger that Indians were disappearing forever from American society.

...At the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition held in Chicago, for example, an Indian village set up on the Midway was meant to remind visitors of times past rather than times future. One guidebook to the fair refers to "the aborigines of this country" as an "almost extinct civilization, if civilization it is to be called." There was no question to the writers of this guidebook that Indians were a dying race. The book urged visitors to see the Indian exhibit, warning that "it is more than probable that the World's Columbian exposition will furnish the last opportunity for an acquaintance with the 'noble red-man' before he achieves annihilation, or at least loss of identity." Ironically, this provided employment for Indians who had been forced to abandon the lifestyle being portrayed.

The country's great natural history museums were established or began to flourish during this period as well....Indian displays were placed in "natural" settings in many of these museums, in which Indians were to provide the third leg of a triad--wild plants, wild animals and "wild" people. These displays left observers with the dual perception that Indians were a part of the natural world, that they were somehow "exotic," and that they were becoming extinct....The displays themselves reinforced the notion that Indians were no longer a part of American society. Often housed down the hallway from displays of extinct fauna, such as dinosaurs, a number of these showcases have remained relatively intact in museums across the U.S. even into the 21st century....

...these ideas came to permeate society, from advertising images to the images summer camps and resorts used to attract tourists to those portrayed in popular literature. Many of these images have had an amazingly long life and continue to saturate American culture. Peruse the shelves of your grocery store, read the sports pages of your local newspaper, check out the westerns or the romance novels in your local bookstore--images of Indians that suggest they are a part of American history that is no longer with us are abundant.

Part II. Examine the depictions of Native Americans at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and answer the following questions.

1. Observe the different formats in which Native Americans are depicted (statuary, photos, advertisements, physical exhibits, mannequins, biographical sketches). What story does each format tell? How do the stories differ?
2. What stereotypes are present in the depictions of Native Americans at the Exposition?
3. Some of those stereotypical depictions contradict others. What tensions do you notice in the depiction of Native Americans at the Exposition? What do they tell us about white Americans' views of Native Americans?
4. To what extent do the depictions of Native Americans promote the "myth of the vanishing race"?
5. How do you think Native Americans combatted this myth? What opportunities did the Exposition present for them to exercise agency over their lives and image?