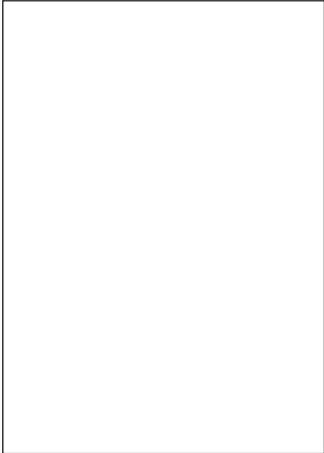


History Through **Red Eyes:**

A Conversation with **JAMES LOEWEN**



James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was a challenge to our preconceived notions of who we are as a people and of our national history. Mike Jetty recently sat with Loewen to get his thoughts on the potential for Montana’s Indian Education for All Act to bring about significant change.

BY MIKE JETTY

JAMES Loewen is an author, historian, and professor. Through *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, he has helped to reconstruct the way history is viewed and taught in public schools all across America. During a recent conversation, he shared his views on how American Indian topics and events are traditionally taught and offered his insights into what we can do to accommodate multiple perspectives in our examination of history. Below, I present his comments and insights as he told them to me.

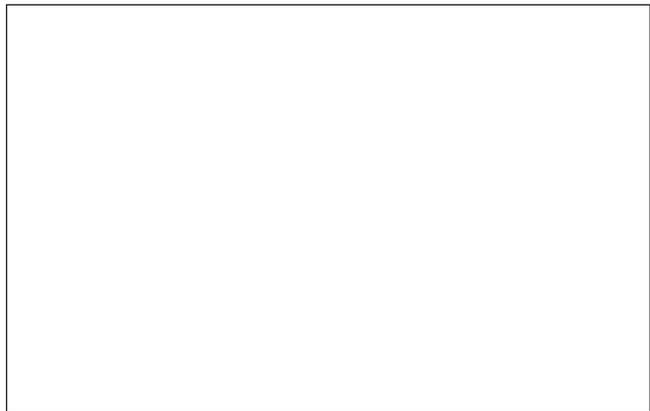
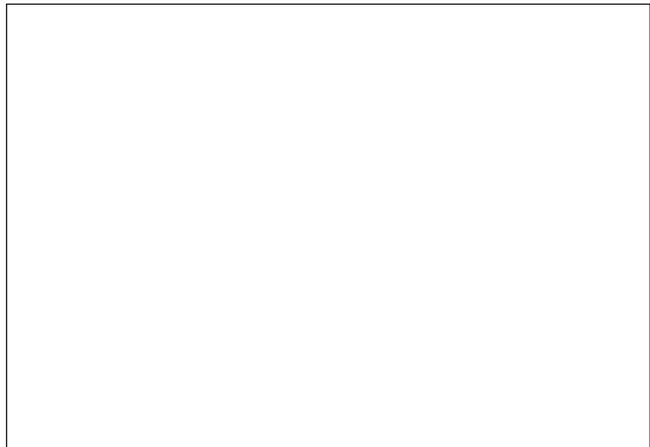
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My first teaching assignment was at Tougaloo College, a historically black institution in Tougaloo, Mississippi. In my first year, I taught a course developed by the history department that was titled “The Freshman Social Science Seminar.” In it we introduced students to sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and psychology in the context of African American history. This made sense because 99% of our students were African American.

The second semester of the course began with events immediately following the Civil War. I had a new group of students in the second semester, and I didn’t want to do all the talking on the first day of class, so I asked them, “We’re starting with Reconstruction. What is that period?”

What followed was an “Aha!” experience for me. Or it might be better called an “Oh no!” experience. Sixteen out of 17 students said, “Reconstruction was that period

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right after the Civil War when blacks took over the government of the Southern states. But they were too soon out of slavery, so they screwed up, and white folks had to take control again.”

Now, there are at least three complete misstatements — lies I would call them — in that sentence, and I was just floored by it. Blacks never took over the government of the Southern states; the Reconstruction governments did *not*, on the whole, screw up; and whites didn’t resume control at the end of Reconstruction. However, a certain group of “whites” did take control, using terrorist tactics. It was, in fact, the original Ku Klux Klan.

So I thought, “What must your teachers have done to you to make you believe that the one time your group was center stage in American history, they screwed up, and whites had to take control back again?”

If it were true, that would be fine. But it is *not* true. What these students had learned we might call BS — that would be Bad Sociology — in the black public schools. What they had learned was being taught by black teachers in all-black schools. But it was white supremacist history because their teachers were just blindly teaching what was in the textbooks. Seeing the outcome made me aware that history can be a weapon and that it can be used against you, just as it had been against my black students.

When I put together a team of students and faculty members at Tougaloo and Millsaps College (a nearby all-white college), we confronted the lies and myths in Mississippi history by writing a new history textbook for the Mississippi history course that was required in public schools. But our book just wasn’t racist enough, so the state refused to adopt it. Because Mississippi is a textbook-adoption state, we actually had to sue to get it adopted. The case was *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.*

After eight years in Mississippi, I moved to the University of Vermont, where I continued to teach first-year students in huge introductory sociology classes. There I learned that distorted history was not a phenomenon peculiar to Mississippi. Although in the early 1970s Mississippi exhibited it in a more exaggerated form — as Mississippi exhibited many national maladies in a more exaggerated form back then — this was a national problem.

As I had done in Mississippi, I went to nearby high schools to learn where my students were getting the bizarre ideas they brought to college. Many of these ideas had to do with “savage” Indians. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is based on my intensive reading of 12 high school American history textbooks. I claim to be the only American ever to attempt such a feat. It was a desperate career move that no one should try at home.

I have to say that the task of puncturing myths was much harder for me in Vermont than in Mississippi. It’s fairly easy for someone coming into Mississippi from outside to see what the white supremacists have gotten wrong about the state’s past. But myths about Indians are national myths — or lies. They are harder to detect, because almost all of us

JAMES LOEWEN’S TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Examine terminology. Have students look at words like “discover,” “settlers,” “savage,” and so on. Introduce older students to terms like “syncretism” and “historiography.”
- Get students to research the terms used in textbooks. If they find biased statements, have them write the publisher to see about getting changes made. Get students involved in social action.
- Take students on field trips. Before going, have students research the site they are to visit and have them rewrite the story told by the site from a variety of perspectives. Have them research the historiography of the site. When did the interpretation of events get set? Who wrote it? Who or what was left out?
- Conduct role-plays with students about a historical event involving American Indians. This is an excellent activity for looking at history from multiple perspectives.
- Get students involved in doing research. Have them research family and local histories. Teach history in a way that gets them interested in learning about the past, rather than turned off by *memorizing* the past.
- Set aside a week or a day for students to present the history of their particular cultural group.
- An easy way for teachers to get up to speed about Thanksgiving is to read the Thanksgiving chapter in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Plymouth Plantation, a living history museum in Massachusetts, might be of particular interest. Every year, Native Americans protest Thanksgiving at Plymouth. As a result, the Plymouth celebration has changed. There are two new historical markers that tell of these events from an Indian perspective, and it’s now a much more open celebration than it was just a decade or two ago. Consider getting students involved in seeing what is going on this year at Plymouth Plantation, as well as exploring the history of the protests and changes there. — MJ

“know” things about Native Americans that are wrong. So it’s harder for us, especially for non-Indians, to step outside our education and culture and realize when we are making the same kinds of mistakes.

This is particularly true because we have a national myth that we might even call an archetype — the archetype of progress. It tells us that the U.S. started out great and that we’ve been getting better in every way ever since. I really do believe that is the underlying myth that provides the basic story line of American history as it is taught in most K-12 schools — and certainly as taught in the textbooks that are presented K-12.

As to myths about American Indians, we started out quite harshly some decades ago. We once taught about the “savage” Indians. We — that is, everybody non-Indian, but particularly whites — learned that we settled a mostly virgin continent. There were very few Indians, we learned, so we didn’t really displace that many people. And the “savage” Indians were just backward and in the way, so they had no choice but to acquiesce to the progressive new civilization that was being formed here on American soil. So we didn’t really do anything wrong. That is, of course, a myth.

In the last 30 years, that myth has become much softer, much nicer, if you will. The word “savage” is rarely applied to Indian people. And sometimes they’re not even called primitive, although I think it’s sometimes implied. The most common notion today is that Indians had their own culture and it was just fine, but they had a tragic unwillingness or inability to adopt or adapt to European culture. As a result, they fell by the wayside.

This is a much nicer story, but it, too, is a myth. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me* this point is illustrated by the story of Joseph Vann, a Cherokee Indian from Georgia. He and many other Cherokee had taken on the cotton culture and managed to adapt quite successfully. Vann lived in a plantation house straight out of *Gone with the Wind* and owned many slaves. Yet he was not allowed to acculturate, and his beautiful house made him a target. So Chief Vann was forced to leave Georgia for Oklahoma because the white sheriff wanted his house. Later, the entire Cherokee nation, which was literate and agricultural and generally prosperous, was driven out of Georgia. They were forced on the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma. This did not happen because they couldn’t or refused to acculturate. It happened simply because they

Indian Education for All: **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES**

The Gift of IEFA

BY SHIRLEY INGRAM

HAVE taught elementary and middle school at Rocky Boy’s Reservation in north-central Montana for more than 20 years. And for all of those years, I’ve driven the 30 miles that separate my community from my students’ community. But my community and theirs are separated by more than miles. They are separated by generations of misunderstandings, deep mistrust, and harsh stereotypes. I’m excited about Indian Education for All because of the promise it has for the people of these two communities to gain new understandings of one another. I’m anxious for my neighbors to learn what my years of teaching have taught me about the strength and richness of the Chippewa-Cree, their culture, and their resiliency. And I’m hopeful that such awareness will help us to close the gap that separates our communities.

As hopeful as I am for all of Montana’s children, I’m

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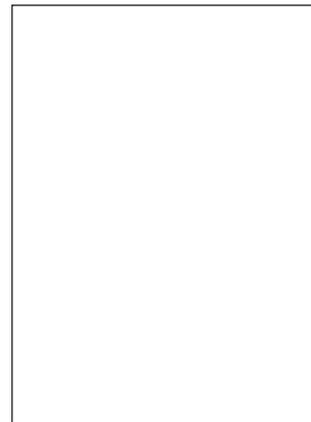
even more excited about the impact I think IEFA will have on my Chippewa-Cree students. My students face serious challenges. Test scores tend to be low, and dropout rates are high. But I know my kids, and I know they are capable, so for years I have asked myself why they score lower and leave school earlier than their non-Native counterparts. I never found a satisfying answer to that question until I began to focus my instruction on meeting the requirements of the IEFA Act.

For most of my years at Rocky Boy, I taught in a conventional manner, using the same materials and textbooks that are used in schools throughout Montana and across the nation. Two years ago, though, things began to change when another teacher asked me to try out some reading, writing, and social studies materials she had developed to teach Montana standards using culturally based content. I admit I was surprised by the results. Right away I noticed that my students *wanted* to do work that they had previously found boring. I also realized that, when we used

were different, and part of that difference was racial.

Clearly, Native Americans were never really allowed to acculturate. And that's one of the specific things we get wrong. Right from the start, you can see it's tied to the myth of progress: *we* — the non-Indians — are the progressive ones. Most American Indians were in fact agriculturalist when the white folks and black folks first arrived. The myth tells us that they were nomadic, that they were hunters and gatherers. But most were not. Most grew crops. And if we think about the myth, we realize that the Pilgrims' pumpkin pie and squash and corn were all Indian foods. So obviously the Pilgrims had to have learned something about farming from the Native Americans. Yet we have the myth that Native peoples were not agriculturalist and did not live in settled villages. We have the myth that we civilized them.

One of the things we do with these stereotypes and myths is put them on the landscape. For example, one of my favorite hated places on the landscape — if you can have a favorite hated place — is near Ground Zero in Manhattan. There stands a statue meant to celebrate the Dutch purchase of Manhattan from Native Americans. The Dutchman is wearing a coat. The Native American is almost naked,



wearing just a breechcloth and a wonderful feather head-dress. The Dutchman is handing \$24 worth of beads to the Native American. This statue is located at the exact spot where this purchase *never took place!*

The statue is particularly embarrassing because the purchase that never took place is *supposed* to have happened in about 1630. And the Indian represented in the statue is, of course, the stereotypical Plains Indian. However, the Plains Indian culture did not even emerge until about a hun-

these materials, there were virtually no disruptions or discipline problems. And I was surprised to see that, when I used culturally based content to teach the same skills I had taught before, my students did much better on the unit tests. I was sold on IEFA.

As I learned more about IEFA and began to use the Essential Understandings (page 189) to guide my instruction, I became more aware of the absence of my students' voices and stories from almost every corner of my classroom. I knew I had to do better. My first step seemed like a small one, but in the eyes of my students and their families it was huge. I assessed my classroom environment, and as I looked around the room I saw a classroom full of generic posters, maps, and inspirational sayings. I began to ask myself what in the room reflected my students and their community and realized that my classroom could be located in almost any school in America. There was nothing that celebrated this place and these people. We began to fill our walls with student-made posters, photographs of past tribal leaders, photographs of the community, maps of the reservation, and words of wisdom from Native leaders. As we did, I noticed a change in how the children responded. I was pleased, and somewhat surprised, when community elders and family members began to thank me.

I also began to look at textbooks differently. For exam-

ple, as I prepared to teach Montana history for the first time, I was surprised to find that there was almost nothing in the book that my students could relate to. Worse yet, it was almost as though Native people had no history in the state or in the nation. That's when I knew that I had to take more control over the materials I used in my classroom. IEFA and the Essential Understandings have given me direction in these efforts.

Now, more than ever before, I'm focused on teaching standards, but teaching them in ways that reap the highest rewards for my students. To me, that means making them relevant to my students' daily lives and making sure that my students see themselves and their people in their classroom — and in America's history, its present, and its future.

I know that there is a lot of research that says Indian kids learn more when their instruction is based in their culture. But I don't trust research. What I trust is what I've seen with my own eyes. My Chippewa-Cree students do better when they see themselves in the content and materials I use. They do better when the classroom reflects them and their cultures and communities. I believe that graduation rates and test scores will improve when we begin to give Indian kids more and more reason to come to school every day. I think that is the gift Indian Education for All will give to my students. **K**



dred years later, when Native peoples were being forced westward onto the plains by the French and British and when horses escaped from the Spanish and made their way northward from Mexico. These two events combined to create the wonderful Plains Indian horse culture, a culture that lasted only about a century, from about 1790 to about 1890, when Plains Indians were forced onto reservations.

Not only had the culture not yet emerged, but any Indian who wore the headdress depicted in the statue in the eastern woodlands would be crazy. Such a headdress works great if you are riding around on the prairies of South Dakota or Montana, but it wouldn't work at all in what were then the woodlands of Manhattan Island. Within five minutes, a branch would knock the headdress off. And, of course, no two people at the same time and place would be dressed as differently as the people depicted by this statue. I've been in New York City in February, and if this purchase (that never took place) had taken place in February, that would be one cold Indian. I've also been there in August, and if this purchase (that never took place) had occurred in August, that would be a very hot Dutchman.

What the statue really depicts is a primitive person and a civilized person. When we look at it, that registers at some level. Yet we don't notice it because it already fits with our stereotype that Indians were primitive and white folks were civilized. Looking further into the legend, it turns out, of course, that the Dutch purchased the island from the wrong Indians. They bought it from the Canarsee Indians, who lived in Brooklyn. And beads were not involved at all.

We should also examine our terminology. As we often use them, our words becomes counterfactual. For example, we use the word "discover" to mean the first white person to see something. And we don't just say this about Columbus discovering America, but about the settlers *discovering* the Mississippi River and so on. We use the term "settler" for whites moving westward and the terms "savage" or "renegade" for Native people who were already living

there and had lived there for centuries.

Although part of our problem is terminology, it isn't enough for teachers just to clean up their language. That would be a good start, but it would be even better if they get students to think about these terms and if they find misuse of terms in a textbook or some other source, that they then write the textbook author or publisher and see if they

can get the language changed. Even if the publishers don't do anything, it will engage the students and make everybody smarter. And it could even get the textbooks improved.

And fall, with Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, is a terrible time for learning about Native Americans — to learn *non-true* facts, that is. Historically, many well-intentioned teachers have perpetuated lies and myths regarding these two events as they have been traditionally taught in schools throughout the U.S.

Today, kids as young as second- and third-graders are still told these stories. They are the distortions of the conquerors, and they make the Indians look stupid. And that means that our crimes against Indians are continuing as long as we teach such nonsense. This kind of education has a terrible effect on Native children. I have spoken at American Indian reservations from Maine to Washington State, and I've learned that many Native Americans hated history as it was taught to them in school. How history was taught affected them deeply. It affected their self-confidence; it affected their ability to function in our world. It also has a terrible impact on non-Indian people: it makes us ethnocentric and stupid about other cultures.

The easy mythologies we lulled ourselves with over the decades don't make us more patriotic or better citizens. They serve only to make us stupider. But what's happening in Montana with Indian Education for All really can change how we view history and how we project ourselves into the future. The law is similar to one just passed in Mississippi requiring K-12 education to include teaching about the struggle for civil rights in that state. These laws will help Indian children in Montana and black children in Mississippi, but I believe they will have even more transforming impact on non-Natives and non-blacks. If educators and textbook producers and other folks make use of these laws, we really can make some significant changes in what we teach our children. That will be an important change. **■**

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