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Wilderness Way
VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1.
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All of the signs in the
photos are shown by Matthew
Campbell,
the author's son.

The Universal Language of the Plains

by Bob Campbell



Indian friend - the original, which points to the famous peace pipe.

The exploration and history of settling North America and the United States is often bloody and violent, but never uninteresting. A universal characteristic of this history is the involvement of aboriginal inhabitants with European settlers. These natives are known to us as Indians, the most popular misnomer of all time, but one which has stuck with us. Notably, Indian names for each other always centered upon a sense of self and permanence, with names for humans and tribes most often meaning "the people" or "we people." Depending upon the reports and literature of today, the Indians were alternately sanctified or demonized. The American Indian was neither dissolute, nor a prince in all examples, but each one was a human being with an infinite capacity for carnage just as his European brothers. Among all of the inhabitants on the Earth, the Indians are among the more fascinating for their diversity. Part of the search in Indian dialect was for my own roots. There are very few Americans of more than three generations who have no Indian blood, and many more who lay claim to a portion; a far cry from the situation a century ago. My own grandmother told me how the young girls from the reservation covered their arms with stockings and powdered their faces, so as not to become so dark while working fields in the summer.

They wished to be assimilated into a White society. Today, young girls pay to have their flesh mercilessly grilled with ultra violet rays as if to imitate the Indian girls!

An example of Indian diversity is the language and dialects. Mountain men, trappers, and scouts enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with the Indians, often learning local languages. But, there was no Rosetta Stone to decipher every Indian language.

Many of the Indians had no written characters. The various tribes

had very different dialects, often with nothing in common. Even tribes which lived fairly close could be linguistically unrelated. This Balkanization of speech left little common ground for communication. A trader or scout could hardly communicate with the Indian tribe that he was visiting if he did not speak the language. Amending dialect was perilous at best. A very few Indian languages were clear and distinct - some were almost lyrical. Others contained many guttural sounds which European tongues had difficulty embracing.

The Indian himself had the same difficulty when traveling. Trade flourished between tribes, and ideas were exchanged. A solution to the language had to be found. By all evidence, it was in use long before the White Man came to America.

The babel of the Indian was conquered by simple sign or hand language. Traders, explorers, and scouts found it useful in their contact with the many tribes. It was not as simple or literal as charades, however, and had to be learned. But, once learned, it was very beneficial.

Everyone has seen the movie depiction of a Indian forming his fingers into the familiar "White Man Speak With Forked Tongue." The double tongued or two fingered symbol denoted all lies, not just those of the White Man. It was vital that the interpreter knew sign language, but he also had to be familiar with the Indian metaphor. The idioms of dialect could be distracting. Figurative is one way to describe this language. Horses, dogs, coyotes, and other common animals observed daily by the Indians had distinct symbols. Not dissimilar is the renowned Sicilian sign or hand language of the Cosa Nostra, a language that by all accounts has few practitioners today.

The Indian language was important not only in trade, but also in survival.

Indian sign language doubtless figured into horseback communication, as it was more common and highly developed among plains Indians. Overall, it is a subject well worth studying. You do not have to be a cultural anthropologist to appreciate the significance of this important part of American history.



Amended version of the original Indian friend, which alludes to the White man's handshake.

The Indian sign for double tongued. There is controversy here, as many believe the sign and dialect meaning forked tongue had nothing to do with the snake, our own symbol of evil and dishonesty, but a deeper double tongued or a speaker with two meanings. A mingling of White and Indian language and more has probably clouded the origin. This is true of the many Creoles or dialects which have grown up in America. (An example is Cajun.)

A more correct double tongue sign, according to some scholars.





A simplistic representation

probably common to many languages representing numerical values. It is probably among the first essential signs - three is signified.



Both hands clenched in front of the chest, then swept outwards means "that is all."



Peace, which shows both literal meaning and the metaphor of two hands representing two tribes.

When we discuss these signs, we say this is "a sign," not "the sign," as there are several signs for common names. "Friend" is one example. Some may have been slang as our own, pal, buddy or paisano. But, they may have had nuances of meaning among the different tribes.



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