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## STUDY GUIDE

### ***NATIVE VISION* STORY SYNOPSIS**

Native Vision focuses on the story of Alice Benally, a young Navajo girl who is taken from her home and placed in a government-run boarding school during the 1930s, as part of a government effort to "civilize" Native American children into mainstream society.

Growing up, Alice and her cousin Carl learn the stories of previous generations and these schools. Their grandmother was sent to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the first of the off-reservation boarding schools. These children were isolated from their families, forced to speak only English and to break all ties with traditional life. Alice and Carl are sent to a boarding school located on the Navajo reservation, allowing them to return home to their family in the summers.

Healing traditions have been passed down to Alice through her family. Her grandfather, father and uncle are all hataali, medicine men. Her mother and grandmother also teach Alice about traditional healing plants and remedies. At boarding school, Alice is put to work in the infirmary, and later encouraged to pursue a career as a nurse. After high school, she attends the Sage Memorial Hospital School of Nursing, established exclusively for training Native American women as nurses. Alice strives to find a balance between Western medicine and the Navajo traditions of healing.

When World War II breaks out, Carl is eager to serve, and enlists in a special program with the Marines, who are recruiting Navajo men from the reservation. When Alice graduates from nursing school, she decides to join the Navy and is ultimately stationed at the Naval hospital in San Diego, where she is able to see Carl during his training. Before shipping out to the South Pacific, Carl reveals to Alice his work as a Code Talker, but swears her to secrecy.

When the war ends, Alice returns to the reservation with Carl, who tells her that the work of the Code Talkers is still classified information. Alice reflects on all the different kinds of healing she and her community need from their connections to the outside world, and what she can do to help as a healer from both worlds.

Through Alice's experiences of fighting to retain her culture and traditions within unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environments, we also hear the stories of her family, ancestors and tribe. These stories demonstrate the internal and external conflicts faced by generations of young Native Americans and parallel the broader history of Native American life.

## THE NAVAJO

Sources:

<http://users.aol.com/Donh523/navapage/navajo.htm>;

<http://www.uwec.edu/geography/lvogeler/w188/i14.htm>;

<http://www.ihs.gov/FacilitiesServices/AreaOffices/Navajo/naihs-navajo-nation.asp>

Anthropologists believe the Navajos probably arrived in the Southwest between 800 and 1,000 years ago. The Navajo people call themselves Diné, literally meaning "The People." They occupy a vast area of the southwest spreading across parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. The lands of the Navajo encompass an area larger than the states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Jersey combined, the largest Indian reservation in the United States.

After the US defeated Mexico in 1846 and gained control of the territory known today as the Southwest and California, Colonel Kit Carson instituted a scorched earth policy, burning Navajo fields and homes, and stealing or killing their livestock. After starving the Navajos into submission, Carson rounded up and took prisoner every Navajo he could find. In the spring of 1864, he forced 8,000 Navajo men, women and children to march 300 miles to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Navajos call this "The Long Walk." Many died along the way or during their four long years of imprisonment. In 1868, after signing a treaty with the US government, remaining Navajos were allowed to return to designated areas of their homeland designated lands, where the Navajo Reservation exists today.

Generally speaking, Navajos do not live in villages. Their traditions did not dictate this necessity, as is common with other Native American societies. They have always banded together in small groups, often near a source of water. Their wide dispersion across the reservation is due in part to the limited amount of grazing land, and the limited availability of water.

The traditional Navajo dwelling, the hogan, is a conical or circular structure constructed of logs or stone. The more modern version is usually six-sided with a smoke hole in the center of the roof constructed of wood or cement. The doorway typically faces the East.

Traditionally, the Navajos are a matriarchal society, with descent and inheritance determined through one's mother. Navajo women have traditionally owned the bulk of resources and property, such as livestock. Traditional Navajo have a strong sense of family allegiance and obligation. Today, "acculturation" to a more nuclear family structure is increasingly present. As a culture in transition, the Navajo people and their traditional lifestyle are under the substantial stress brought about by rapid change in their society.

The Navajo are the largest tribe in the United States: one in 8 American Indians is a Navajo. They account for almost fifteen percent of the Native American population in the 1990 census and number in excess of 250,000 members.

Current conditions on the Navajo Reservation:

- More than 50% of the Navajo live below the poverty line
- Unemployment rate is 35% in the larger towns on the reservation, and as high as 50% in the rural areas
- Income per person averages \$4,100 per year: about the same as Brazil; the US average is \$30,000
- 75 % live on the reservation of the 30,000 existing homes occupied by Navajo members, 80 % lack plumbing, telephones, or electricity
- Suicide rate is 30% higher than the U.S. average

## **NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS**

Source: <http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/marr.html>

The goal of Indian education from the 1880s through the 1920s was to assimilate Indian people into the melting pot of America by placing them in institutions where traditional ways could be replaced by those sanctioned by the government. Federal Indian policy called for the removal of children from their families and enrollment in a government-run boarding school. In this way, the policy makers believed, young people would be immersed in the values and practical knowledge of the dominant American society while also being kept away from any influences imparted by their traditionally-minded relatives.

The Indian boarding school movement began in the post Civil War era. Whereas before many Americans regarded the native people with either fear or loathing, the reformers believed that with the proper education and treatment Indians could become just like other citizens. They convinced the leaders of Congress that education could change at least some of the Indian population into patriotic and productive members of society. One of the first efforts to accomplish this goal was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt in 1879. Pratt was a leading proponent of the assimilation through education policy. Believing that Indian ways were inferior to those of whites, he subscribed to the principle, "kill the Indian and save the man." At Carlisle, young Indian boys and girls were subjected to a complete transformation. Photographs taken at the school illustrate how they looked "before" and "after." The dramatic contrast between traditional clothing and hairstyles and Victorian styles of dress helped convince the public that through boarding school education Indians could become completely "civilized." Following the model of Carlisle, additional off reservation boarding schools were established in other parts of the country,

Seeking to educate increasing numbers of Indian children at lower cost, the federal government established two other types of schools: the reservation boarding school and day schools. Reservation boarding schools had the advantage of being closer to Indian communities and as a result had lower transportation costs. Contact between students and their families was restricted as students remained at the school for eight to nine months of the year. Relatives could visit briefly at prescribed times. School administrators worked constantly to keep the students at school and eradicate all vestiges of their tribal cultures. Day schools, which were the most economical, usually provided only a minimal education. They worked with the boarding schools by transferring students for more advanced studies.

On many reservations, missionaries operated schools that combined religious with academic training. At these missionary run schools, traditional religious and cultural practices were strongly discouraged while instruction in the Christian doctrines took place. Some missionary schools received federal support, particularly at times when Congress felt less inclined to provide the large sums of money needed to establish government schools.

The national system of Indian education continued to expand at the turn of the century. All federal boarding schools, whether on or off reservation, shared certain characteristics. The Bureau of Indian Affairs issued directives that were followed by superintendents throughout the nation. Even the architecture and landscaping appeared similar from one institution to the next. Common features included a military style regimen, a strict adherence to English language only. A standardized curriculum for Indian schools emphasized vocational training and gave primary importance to learning manual skills.

A typical daily schedule at a boarding school began with an early wake-up call followed by a series of tasks punctuated by the ringing of bells. Students were required to march from one activity to the next. Conformity to rules and regulations was strongly encouraged. The foremost requirement for assimilation into American society, authorities felt, was mastery of the English language. Students were prohibited from speaking their native languages and those caught doing so were severely punished. Later, many former students regretted that they lost the ability to speak their native language fluently because of the years they spent in boarding school.

The boarding schools had what came to be called the “half and half” system where students spent half of the day in the classroom and half at a work assignment on the school grounds. The academic curriculum included courses in US history, geography, language, arithmetic, reading, writing and spelling. Young women spent either the morning or the afternoon doing laundry, sewing, cooking, cleaning and other household tasks. Older girls might study nursing or office work. The young men acquired skills in carpentry, blacksmithing, animal husbandry, baking and shop. They chopped firewood to keep the steam boilers operating. The work performed by students was essential to the operation of the institution. The meat, vegetables and milk served in the dining room came from livestock and gardens kept by the students. The girls made and repaired uniforms, sheets, and curtains and helped to prepare the meals.

Mandatory education for Indian children became law in 1893 and thereafter agents on the reservations received instructions on how to enforce the federal regulation. If parents refused to send their children to school the authorities could withhold annuities or rations or send them to jail. Some parents were uncomfortable having their children sent far away from home. The educators had quotas to fill, however, and considerable pressure was exerted on Indian families to send their youngsters to boarding schools beginning when the child was six years old. Fear and loneliness caused by this early separation from family is a common experience shared by all former students. Once their children were enrolled in a distant school, parents lost control over decisions that affected them. For example, requests for holiday leave could be denied by the superintendent for almost any reason.

For some students, the desire for freedom and the pull of their family combined with strong discontent caused them to run away. Punishment of runaways was usually harsh, as the offenders became examples held up before their fellow students. Illness was another serious problem at the boarding schools. Crowded conditions and only the basic medical care contributed to the spread of diseases such as measles, influenza and tuberculosis. Death was not uncommon.

The Merriam Report on Indian education was issued in 1928, revealing glaring deficiencies in the boarding schools, including poor diet, overcrowding, below-standard medical service, excessive labor by the students and substandard teaching. In 1933, President Roosevelt appointed John Collier as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The 1930s and 1940s began to witness changes in federal Indian policy, among which was a shift in educational philosophy. Classroom lessons could now reflect the diversity of Indian cultures. States assumed more control over Indian education as more children enrolled in public schools. There was a general consensus that the imposition of white cultural values upon the Indian societies was at the root of the problem.

## NAVAJO CODE TALKERS OF WORLD WAR II

Sources: <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-2.htm>; <http://www.lapahie.com/NavajoCodeTalker.cfm>

When World War I broke out in 1914, thousands of Navajo men and women volunteered their services to the war efforts. They fought overseas in France, Germany, and Italy and received numerous awards and decorations for outstanding duty; many were cited for bravery under fire. A large number of Navajo women on the Navajo Reservation were active in Red Cross.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the Navajos again played a crucial role. It is estimated that more than 3,600 young Navajo men and women joined the armed forces and over 10,000 Navajos went to work in the military factories during World War II. Proportionately, that figure represents one of the highest percentages of total population in the armed service of any ethnic group in the United States—even though Navajos were not given the right to vote in Arizona until 1948, in New Mexico until 1953, and in Utah until 1957.

A special group of Navajos were formed during World War II called the Code Talkers. The Navajo code talkers took part in every assault the US Marines conducted in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945. They transmitted messages by telephone and radio in their native language: a code that the Japanese never broke.

The idea to use Navajo for secure communications came from Philip Johnston, the son of a missionary to the Navajos and one of the few non-Navajos who spoke their language fluently. Johnston was a World War I veteran who knew of the military's search for an unbreakable code and believed that Navajo answered their requirements. Its complex syntax, complicated tonal qualities and dialects make it unintelligible to anyone without extensive exposure and training. Navajo is an unwritten language with no alphabet or symbols. One estimate indicates that less than 30 non-Navajos, none of them Japanese, could understand the language at the outbreak of World War II.

Early in 1942, Johnston staged tests under simulated combat conditions, demonstrating that Navajos could encode, transmit, and decode a three-line English message in 20 seconds. Machines of the time required 30 minutes to perform the same job. In May 1942, the first 29 Navajo recruits attended boot camp and created the Navajo code. They developed a dictionary and numerous words for military terms. The dictionary and all code words had to be memorized during training. The code talkers' primary job was to talk, transmitting information on tactics and troop movements, orders and other vital battlefield communications. They also acted as messengers, and performed general Marine duties.

Praise for their skill, speed and accuracy accrued throughout the war. At Iwo Jima, Major Howard Connor declared, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima." Connor had six Navajo code talkers working nonstop during the first two days of the battle. Those six sent and received over 800 messages, all without error.

In 1942, there were about 50,000 Navajo tribe members. As of 1945, about 540 Navajos served as Marines. From 375 to 420 of those trained as code talkers. Nearly every Navajo has some connection to a Navajo code talker.

Navajo remained potentially valuable as code even after the war. For that reason, the code talkers earned no public recognition until 2001. 56 years after the end of World War II, the original 29 code talkers who developed and initiated the Navajo code were given the Gold Congressional Medal of Honor in Washington, DC. Only 5 were alive and only 4 were able to attend. Later that year, the other approximately 400 code talkers were given the Silver Congressional Medal of Honor in Window Rock, AZ. Few Navajo code talkers were alive to attend. Instead, many family members of deceased code talkers accepted their medals.

Other American Indians, including the Sioux, Choctaw, and Comanche, also used their native languages as a code during World Wars I and II, and yet have not so far been honored with any type of medal recognition.

## NATIVE AMERICANS TODAY

Source: <http://www.ericdigests.org/1992-2/current.htm>

Any description of Native Americans must begin with a reminder of a historical condition that continues to shape Native American societies even today. Native Americans, originally, were the entire American population. As such, they developed an amazing variety of linguistic and cultural traditions. Today, they represent half of the nation's languages and cultures, although they make up less than 1% of the U.S. total. This diversity within a small population must be kept in mind, always.

Although many tribal traditions are at risk of dying out, Indians as a group are a growing population. Some 1,959,000 people claimed American Indian status on the 1990 Census form, representing about 500 tribes in the U.S.; of these tribes, 308 are recognized by the federal government. Along with the 1.9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives, over 5 million Americans indicated on their Census forms that they were of Indian descent.

Of the 1.9 million, about 637,000 are living on reservations or Trust Lands. A minimum of 252,000 Native Americans lived in cities in 1990. More than half of the Native American population in 1990 lived in the following six states: Oklahoma (252,000), California (242,000), Arizona (204,000), New Mexico (134,000), Alaska (86,000), and Washington state (81,000). Of the 500 tribes and bands in the nation, 10 made up half of the Indian population in 1980.

From 1980 to 1990, Native Americans increased their numbers by 54 percent. The Indian Health Service has played a role in reducing infant mortality, from 60 deaths per 1,000 births from 1955 to 10 in 1985. Unfortunately, despite some reduction in alcoholism rates, the death rate from alcohol-related causes is still 3 times higher among Indians than the general population. This rate includes deaths due to fetal alcohol syndrome and drug- and alcohol-related accidents, suicides, and criminal offenses. Of all treatment services provided by the Indian Health Service in 1988, 70 percent were alcohol-related.

The notorious boarding schools, which took Indian children from their families and tribes and attempted to make Anglos out of them, are now mainly gone. More Indian youth are enrolled in schools that are either run by tribal leadership or in which tribal views are important to decision-making. Many public schools on or near reservations are becoming increasingly responsive to the special needs of the 391,000 Indians in elementary and secondary education. In some cases, the local tribal language and culture are taught at school, which is a major reversal of the previous attempts to eliminate Indian language and culture.

There has been a major increase in college attendance, indicated by the increase in the numbers of Natives taking the SAT: from 2,662 in 1976 to 18,000 in 1989. Of the 103,000 Natives who were in college in 1990, about half were in two-year colleges and half in four-year. The 24 Tribal Colleges, most of which offer two-year programs, have rapidly increasing enrollments. Many Native students do not take the courses required for college admission, particularly in math and science. Several associations currently encourage Indian youth to aspire to higher education, such as the American Indian Science and Engineering Society and the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering.

Many of the problems faced by Native Americans can be traced back to the conflicts between their desire to perpetuate their cultural heritage and the pressure to assimilate into the larger society. A complicating factor for Native Americans is that there is an incredible diversity of cultures that falls into the category of Native American: rather than preserving one language and way of life, they must preserve hundreds of complete cultures. This is a period of great possibilities for Native Americans. After centuries of misinformation, the average American has now gained a limited knowledge about the historical mistreatment of Natives, the importance of treaty rights, and the differences in world views between Americans of European descent and Native Americans.

## **NATIVE VISION INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES**

Students may address the following topics and questions through any of the suggested mediums or a combination of them:

*Writing:* write a story, a poem, a report, an article, a scene, a play, a song, a caption

*Art:* draw or paint a picture; create a collage, a sculpture, a comic strip; take a photograph; make a video

*Drama:* create a still image, a dance or movement activity, a series of images, an improvisation, a scene, a play

*Discussion:* partner or small group talk, oral report or presentation

1. Supplement a specific scene in the script with work in another medium.
2. Supplement a specific image from the video with work in another medium.
3. Interview a character from the piece.
4. Research historical documents to find a real person's description of an experience from Alice's story (i.e. being taken/going to boarding school, enlisting or serving in the military as a code talker or a nurse during World War II). Share what you learn.
5. Read and explore selections from other fictional or first person perspectives (see bibliography for suggestions).
6. Read and respond to a piece of art or writing by a Native American.
7. Re-create a scene from the piece from another character's point of view (i.e. Carl's perspective on being a code talker, the perspective of a student who tried to run away on being at boarding school).
8. Research another event in history and how it is related to this one.
9. Explore how the experiences of Navajos or another Native American tribe are/were similar to or different from other ethnic groups or American immigrants from other countries.
10. Choose a part of Alice's story that you'd like to know more about and research it. Share what you learn.
11. Explore a typical day in the life of a student at a Native American boarding school. Compare it to a day in your life at school or to another student from that time period.
12. Research the current activities and issues of a local tribe.
13. Imagine you could get in touch with Alice. What would you want to tell her or show her about the future?
14. How did watching *Native Vision* make you feel?

## **NATIVE VISION SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY (Full Bibliography available upon request)**

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### **WEBSITES:**

- [http://www.lapahie.com/Timeline\\_USA\\_1848\\_1868.cfm](http://www.lapahie.com/Timeline_USA_1848_1868.cfm)  
(Navajo Timeline)
- [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/erdrich/boarding/](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/boarding/)  
(Indian Boarding Schools)
- <http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/americanindian/index.html>  
(American Indians and the Military)
- [http://www.odedodea.edu/k-12/D-Day/GVPT\\_stuff/Nurse/Nurse.html](http://www.odedodea.edu/k-12/D-Day/GVPT_stuff/Nurse/Nurse.html)  
(The Army Nurse Corps in World War II)