

# 1 Native American Cultures in Crisis

**LEARN ABOUT** the Native Americans' and settlers' ways of life  
**TO UNDERSTAND** the conflicts that occurred during settlement of the Western frontier.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Great Plains
- Homestead Act
- exoduster
- Sand Creek Massacre
- Sitting Bull
- George A. Custer
- assimilation
- Dawes Act
- Ghost Dance
- Battle of Wounded Knee

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

Zitkala-Ša was born into a Sioux tribe in 1876. As she grew up on the Great Plains, she learned the ways of her people and explored the world around her, which seemed alive with spirits. "I grew sober with awe and was alert to hear a long-drawn-out whistle rise from the roots of [the plum tree] . . . this strange whistle of departed spirits." When she was eight years old, she had a chance to go to a Quaker missionary school in Indiana. Though her mother warned her of the "white men's lies," Zitkala-Ša was eager to see "the wonderful Eastern land." She was not prepared, however, for the loss of dignity and identity she experienced, which was symbolized by the cutting of her hair.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. . . . And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. . . . Now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

ZITKALA-ŠA, quoted in *The School Days of an Indian Girl*

Zitkala-Ša experienced firsthand the clash of two very different cultures that occurred as ever-growing numbers of white settlers moved onto the Great Plains, where Native Americans had lived for thousands of years. In the resulting struggle, the Native American way of life was changed forever.

**VIDEO** A WALK IN TWO WORLDS  
*The Education of Zitkala-Ša, a Sioux*



Zitkala-Ša

## The Culture of the Plains Indians

Like most Native Americans in the West, Zitkala-Ša knew very little about the world east of the Mississippi River. Most Easterners knew equally little about the West, picturing a vast desert occupied by savage tribes. That view was quite inaccurate. In fact, two distinct and highly developed Native American ways of life existed on the **Great Plains**, the grassland extending through the west-central portion of the United States (see map on page 383).

On the eastern side, near the lower Missouri River, tribes such as the Osage and Iowa planted crops and lived in small villages. Farther west, in what is now Nebraska and South Dakota, nomadic tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne gathered wild foods and hunted buffalo.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HORSE AND THE BUFFALO** After the Spanish brought horses to New Mexico in 1598, the Native American way of life began to change. As the native peoples acquired horses—and then guns—they were able to travel farther and hunt more efficiently. By the 1700s, almost all the tribes on the Great Plains had abandoned their farming villages to roam the plains and hunt buffalo.

This Yankton Sioux coup stick was intricately carved.



A Sioux encampment near the South Dakota-Nebraska border presents a peaceful scene, but a portrait of a Sioux man and woman shows their defiance.

This increased mobility often led to war when hunters in one tribe trespassed on other tribes' hunting grounds. For the young men of a tribe, taking part in war parties and raids was a way to win prestige. But a Plains warrior gained more honor by "counting coup," or touching a live enemy and escaping unharmed, than by killing. Moreover, it was not unusual for warring tribes to call a truce so they could trade goods, share news, or enjoy harvest festivals.

While the horse gave Native Americans increased mobility, the buffalo provided many of their basic needs. Native Americans made tipis from buffalo hides and also used the skins for clothing, shoes, and blankets. Buffalo meat was dried into jerky or mixed with berries and fat to make a staple food called pemmican. Buffalo sinews were used to make thread and bowstrings; buffalo bones and horns, to make tools and toys. The buffalo, like the horse, had become central to life on the plains.

**FAMILY LIFE** Native Americans on the plains usually lived in small extended family groups with ties to other bands that spoke the same language. The men went on hunting or raiding parties to obtain food and supplies and shared what they had obtained with the group. The women helped butcher the game and prepared the hides that the men brought back to the camp.

Despite their communal way of life, however, the people of the plains valued individualism. Young men trained to become hunters and warriors; young women sometimes chose their own husbands. The Plains tribes believed that powerful spirits controlled the events in the natural world, and men or women who demonstrated particular sensitivity to the spirits became medicine men, or shamans.

Children learned proper behavior and the culture of the tribe through stories and myths, games, and good examples. No individual was allowed to dominate the group; the leaders of a tribe ruled by counsel rather than by force. Land was held in common for the use of the whole tribe.

## Settlers Push Westward

The culture of the white settlers differed in many ways from that of the Native Americans on the plains. Unlike Native Americans, who believed that land could not be owned, the settlers defined a better life and prosperity in terms of personal property. Owning land and a house, making a mining claim, or starting a business would give them a stake in the country. Prospectors, settlers, and ranchers alike argued that the Native Americans had forfeited their rights to the land because they hadn't settled down to "improve" it. Concluding that the plains were "unsettled," settlers streamed westward to claim the land.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**A. Summarizing**  
 How did the horse and the buffalo influence Native American life on the Great Plains?

**THE LURE OF SILVER AND GOLD** The prospect of striking it rich was one powerful attraction of the West. The gold fever that had flared in California in 1849 never really died out, and the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858 drew tens of thousands of miners to the region.

The glitter of gold must have blinded prospective miners to other concerns because most mining camps and tiny frontier towns had filthy, ramshackle living quarters. Rows of tents and shacks with dirt “streets” and wooden sidewalks had replaced unspoiled streams and picturesque landscapes. Fortune seekers of every description—including Irish, German, Swedish, Polish, Chinese, and African-American men—crowded the camps and boomtowns. A few hardy, business-minded women tried their luck, too, working as laundresses, freight haulers, or even miners. Cities such as Virginia City, Nevada, and Helena, Montana, originated as mining camps on Native American land.

**FARMING THE GREAT PLAINS** Another powerful attraction of the West was the land itself. In 1862, Congress passed the **Homestead Act**, offering 160 acres of land free to anyone who would live on and cultivate it for five years. From 1862 to 1900, between 400,000 and 600,000 families took advantage of the government’s offer. They came from the South and from New England, eager to exchange their worn-out fields for more fertile land farther west. Some

German and Scandinavian farmers unable to earn a living in their native lands were lured to America by public relations campaigns sponsored by the railroad companies. Several thousand settlers were **exodusters**—African Americans who moved from the post-Reconstruction South to Kansas in a great exodus. Free land alone was not enough to lure farmers onto the Great Plains, however. They also needed a reliable way to get there and a way to ship their crops to growing urban markets.

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act, which granted huge government loans and land to the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads. The Central Pacific began laying track at Sacramento in 1863. The Union Pacific began near Omaha in 1865. Both companies hired thousands of immigrants, many Chinese among them, to build bridges, dig tunnels, and lay track.

Before the railroads came west, hardy travelers rode west on horseback or in wagon trains that were cold in winter, hot in summer, and vulnerable to attack by Native Americans and outlaws. Until completion of a transcontinental route in 1869, long-distance travel was dangerous, uncomfortable, and slow. After 1869, however, people could ride from coast to coast in ten days or less. Still, the railroads were not for everyone. A “bargain” fare from Omaha to Sacramento cost about \$40—more than a month’s pay for the average person. Yet the trains were relatively luxurious. All of them had indoor toilets, and most of the cars were heated. For \$75, travelers could ride on padded seats. For another \$4 per night, they could reserve a place in a Pullman Palace Car, complete with beds. Instead of heading west at the rate of 15 miles a day in a covered wagon, aspiring settlers could speed along at 50 miles an hour.

## The Government Restricts Native Americans

While allowing more settlers to move westward, the railroads also influenced the government’s policy toward the Native Americans who lived on the plains. In 1834, the federal government had passed an act that designated the entire Great Plains as one enormous reservation, or land set aside for Native American tribes. In response to the increasing stream of settlers in the 1850s, however, the government changed its policy. In order to open up more land for white settlers, it began signing treaties that created definite boundaries for each tribe.



Many settlers traveled west in prairie schooners, sturdy descendants of the Conestoga wagon. The white canvas tops made the wagons look like ships sailing across the open plains.

## Shrinking Native American Lands, 1894, and Battle Sites, 1860s–1890s



**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
C. Clarifying  
What was the government’s policy toward Native American land?

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
B. Analyzing  
Causes Why did white settlers suddenly flood the Great Plains?

Most Native Americans did not agree to sign treaties with the government, though, and many of the “chiefs” who did sign did not represent their tribes. Many tribes, including the Cheyenne and the Sioux, continued to hunt on their traditional lands, clashing with settlers and miners—with tragic results.

**MASSACRE AT SAND CREEK** One of the most tragic events occurred in 1864. The Cheyenne, who had been forced into a barren area of the Colorado Territory known as the Sand Creek Reserve, began raiding nearby trails and settlements for food and supplies. Colorado governor John Evans ordered the militia to attack the raiders but urged the Cheyenne who did not want to fight to report to Fort Lyon, near the reserve, where they would be safe from harm. Most of the Cheyenne moved back to Sand Creek for the winter, flying both the American flag and a white flag as a sign of their peaceful intentions.

General S. R. Curtis, U.S. army commander in the West, sent a telegram to militia colonel John Chivington that read, “I want no peace till the Indians suffer more.” In response, Chivington and his troops descended on the 500 Cheyenne camped at Sand Creek at dawn on November 29, 1864. Chivington had his own reasons to want revenge on Native Americans, because they had killed his family. Without warning, Chivington and his men attacked the sleeping village. The exhausted warriors and terrified women and children never had a chance to defend themselves. Chivington’s soldiers killed about 200 inhabitants, mostly women and children, and mutilated the bodies. After the **Sand Creek Massacre**, as this battle came to be called, Chivington was treated as a hero in his hometown, Denver.

**DEATH ON THE BOZEMAN TRAIL** Another tribe, the Sioux, was angered by white settlement along the Bozeman Trail, which the government had opened

### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

#### LOCATION

Which battles took place on Native American land?

#### MOVEMENT

About what percentage of Native American lands had the government taken over by 1894? About what percentage had Native Americans recovered by 1996?

## KEY PLAYER



**SITTING BULL**  
1831–1890

As a child, Sitting Bull was known as Hunkesni, or Slow; he earned the name Tatanka Yotanka (Sitting Bull) after a fight with the Crow Indians, a traditional enemy of the Sioux.

Sitting Bull led his people by the strength of his character and purpose. He was a warrior, counselor, and medicine man, and he was determined that the whites leave Sioux territory. His most famous fight was at the Little Bighorn River. About his opponent, George Armstrong Custer, he said, "They tell me I murdered Custer. It is a lie. . . . He was a fool and rode to his death."

After Sitting Bull's surrender to the federal government in 1881, his dislike of whites did not change, although he loved to shake hands, learned to sign his name, and took drawing lessons from a German artist. He was killed by Native American police at Standing Rock Reservation on December 15, 1890.

during the Civil War. This major transportation route ran directly through the favorite hunting grounds of the Sioux, in the Bighorn Mountains. Their chief, Red Cloud (Mahpiua Luta), appealed to the government to stop settlers from using the trail, but soldiers continued to build forts along it. When talking proved futile, Sioux, Arapaho, and Cheyenne warriors began a guerrilla war, sending small bands on surprise raids to harass the troops. On December 21, 1866, Crazy Horse and several other warriors lured Captain William J. Fetterman and his company of soldiers into an ambush at Lodge Trail Ridge. The warriors surrounded the soldiers and killed them all. Native Americans called this fight the Battle of the Hundred Slain. Whites called it the Fetterman Massacre.

Skirmishes followed for about a year, until the government agreed to close the Bozeman Trail. In return, the Sioux signed the historic Treaty of 1868, in which they agreed to live on a reservation along the Missouri River. The terms of this treaty resembled those of treaties concluded the previous year. In these treaties, the southern Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapaho promised to live on large reservations in return for protection and supplies from the U.S. government.

Conflicts between the whites and Native Americans continued despite these treaties. Several factors contributed to the ongoing hostilities. Promised supplies often arrived late and were of poor quality and insufficient quantity. In addition, the Treaty of 1868 had been forced on the Sioux. **Sitting Bull** (Tatanka Yotanka), a medicine man and leader of the Hunkpapa Sioux, had never signed it. Although the Oglala and Brulé Sioux had signed the treaty, they expected to be able to continue using their traditional hunting grounds and to come and go on the reservation as they pleased.

### Bloody Battles Continue

The Treaty of 1868 provided only a temporary halt to warfare. The conflict between the two cultures continued as settlers moved westward across the plains and Native American tribes resisted the restrictions of the reservations. A Sioux warrior explained why.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

[We] have been taught to hunt and live on the game. You tell us that we must learn to farm, live in one house, and take on your ways. Suppose the people living beyond the great sea should come and tell you that you must stop farming, and kill your cattle, and take your houses and lands, what would you do? Would you not fight them?

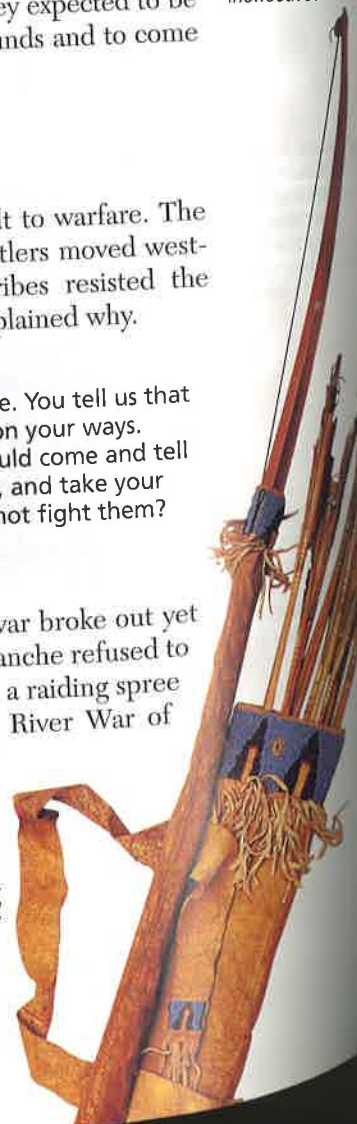
GALL, a Hunkpapa Sioux, quoted in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

**RAIDS BY THE KIOWA AND COMANCHE** In late 1868, war broke out yet again, this time on the southern plains, as Kiowa and Comanche refused to move to a reservation in the Texas panhandle. They began a raiding spree that continued for six years and finally led to the Red River War of 1874–75. The U.S. Army responded to the Native Americans' guerrilla warfare by herding the friendly tribespeople onto reservations and opening fire on all others. General Philip Sheridan, a Union Army veteran, gave orders to "destroy their villages and ponies, to kill and hang all warriors, and to bring back all women and children."

The Sioux war bow, right, was accurate up to 100 yards and could shoot arrows more rapidly than a single-shot rifle could fire bullets.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
D. Analyzing Causes Why was the Treaty of 1868 ineffective?

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
E. Recognizing Effects What were the results of Custer's last stand?



With these tactics, the army crushed the resistance on the southern plains.

**GOLD RUSH** Within four years of the Treaty of 1868, while battles raged, miners began flooding into the Black Hills to search for gold. The Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho protested—to no avail. By 1874, the rumor of gold had grown so strong that the army sent **George Armstrong Custer**, Civil War hero and colonel in the Seventh Cavalry, to investigate and send back a report.

When Custer reported that the Black Hills had gold "from the grass roots down," a gold rush was on. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, another Sioux chief, appealed again to government officials in Washington, who responded with an offer to purchase the land. When the Sioux refused to sell their sacred ground, the stage was set for the last battles of the plains wars.

**CUSTER'S LAST STAND** In early June 1876, the Sioux and Cheyenne held a sun dance, during which Sitting Bull had a vision of soldiers and some Native Americans falling from their horses. He interpreted the vision as a sign that victory would come for his people. Soon after, the Sioux were victorious in a battle against the military at Rosebud Creek in south central Montana. This victory prepared the tribes for the military's next move. When Lieutenant Colonel Custer and his troops reached the Little Bighorn River, the Native Americans were ready for them.

On June 25, Custer rode out in search of glory. He expected to pit his disciplined regiment against 1,500 warriors. Custer's plan had several flaws, however. First, despite warnings from Indian scouts, he underestimated the number of Native American warriors. Between 2,000 and 3,000 awaited his attack. Second, his men and horses were exhausted. Third, he split up his regiment and attacked with barely 200 men. Led by Crazy Horse, the warriors—in warpaint and bonnets and with raised spears or rifles—outflanked and overpowered Custer's troops. Within 20 minutes, Custer and all of his men were dead.

The American people were shocked and angered at Custer's defeat. Many criticized him for his bad judgment, but the nation as a whole demanded revenge. The army continued to raid Native American camps and to slaughter the buffalo. By late 1876, the Sioux were beaten. Sitting Bull and a few followers took refuge in Canada, where they remained until 1881.

Eventually, to prevent his people's starvation, even the proud Sitting Bull was forced to surrender. Later, in 1885, he became an attraction in William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Show.

### The Government Supports Assimilation

The Native Americans still had supporters in the United States, and debate over the treatment of Native Americans continued. Well-known writer Helen Hunt Jackson, for example, exposed the government's many broken promises in her 1881 book *A Century of Dishonor*: "It makes little difference . . . where one opens the record of the history of the Indians; every page and every year has its dark stain."

Sometimes, the "friends" of the Native Americans were not much more helpful than their enemies. Many sympathizers were supporters of **assimilation**, in which Native Americans were expected to give up their beliefs and way of life and become part of the white culture. Although the Native Americans had lost much land and their means of independent living, they did not want to lose their culture as well.

**FAILURE OF THE DAWES ACT** In 1887, in an effort to make assimilation the official government policy, Congress passed the **Dawes Act**. The aim was to "Americanize" the Native Americans by cultivating in them the desire to own property and to farm. The Dawes Act broke up the reservations and distributed some of the reservation land—160 acres for farming or 320 acres for grazing—



The Winchester '76 rifle, which was widely used by government troops, had a large loading slot and could fire 16 bullets without reloading.

*"Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelop him . . . the Indian forfeits his claim to the [name] 'noble red man.' "*



GEORGE A. CUSTER

HOMECOMING

"I never thought I'd see the day," said Earl (Taz) Conner, a direct descendant of the best known of the Nez Perce, Chief Joseph. Forced off their tribal lands in Wallowa County, Oregon, in 1877, the Nez Perce in the United States, now numbering 4,000, are returning almost 120 years later.

When hard times hit during the 1990s, Wallowa community leaders saw a chance to bring money to the area by taking advantage of people's growing interest in Native Americans. They obtained a grant and asked for contributions to develop a Nez Perce cultural center, which they hope will be a big tourist draw. In the words of Soy Redthunder, another tribe member, "The whites may look at it as an economic plus, but we look at it as homecoming."

The Battle of Wounded Knee

Although some people tried to improve the lives of Native Americans, the Sioux continued to suffer reduced rations, increased restrictions, and the loss of their cattle to disease. In desperation, they turned to Wovoka, a Paiute prophet who had had a vision in which Native American lands were restored, the buffalo returned, and the whites disappeared. Wovoka promised that if the Sioux performed a ritual called the **Ghost Dance**, this vision would be realized.

The Ghost Dance movement spread rapidly among the 25,000 Sioux on the Dakota reservation. Its popularity alarmed military leaders and the local reservation agent, who decided to arrest Sitting Bull. On a drizzly December morning in 1890, about 40 Indian policemen were sent to arrest him. As two of the policemen pulled Sitting Bull out of his cabin, Sitting Bull's bodyguard, Catch-the-Bear, shot one of them. The policemen returned fire, killing Sitting Bull. A free-for-all resulted.

As the shots rang out, Sitting Bull's horse abruptly sat down and began performing the tricks it had learned in the Wild West Show with Buffalo Bill. For a moment, at least, it seemed to observers that the horse was performing the outlawed Ghost Dance.

The army wasn't satisfied with the death of Sitting Bull. On December 29, 1890, the Seventh Cavalry—Custer's old regiment that had been defeated at Little Bighorn—rounded up about 350 starving and freezing Sioux and took them to a camp at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. The soldiers demanded that the Native Americans give up all their weapons. One Native American resisted this order and fired his rifle. The soldiers fired back with deadly cannons.

Within minutes, the Seventh Cavalry slaughtered 300 unarmed Native Americans, including several children. The soldiers left the corpses to freeze on the ground. This event, the **Battle of Wounded Knee**, brought the Indian wars—and an entire era—to a bitter end.

A PERSONAL VOICE

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

BLACK ELK, quoted in *Black Elk Speaks*

to each adult head of a Native American family. The government would sell the remainder of the reservation to settlers, and the resulting income would be used by Native Americans for farm implements. But the Native Americans received nothing from the sale of these lands. By 1934, whites had taken about two-thirds of the territory that had been set aside for Native Americans. Speculators, who bought land to sell at a profit, grabbed most of the best land. Much of the land that remained was useless for farming.

**EDUCATING THE NATIVE AMERICANS** While the Dawes Act addressed the physical assimilation of Native Americans, education addressed their minds and spirits. Off-reservation boarding schools, like the one attended by Zitkala-Sa, flourished. Among the reformers was Richard H. Pratt, who founded the Carlisle boarding school in Pennsylvania to "kill the Indian and save the man." The Carlisle school and others like it taught Native American children that their traditional ways were backward and superstitious. The teachers promoted the values of white civilization and then returned the "educated" children to the reservations, where the skills they had learned were useless. What resulted was a generation of Native American young people caught in a tragic conflict between the culture of their parents and that of their teachers. They didn't fit in on the reservations, yet they faced discrimination when they tried to live in the white world.

**THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BUFFALO** Perhaps the most significant blow to tribal life on the plains was the destruction of the buffalo. Railroad companies like the Kansas Pacific hired buffalo hunters to accompany the workers and supply them with meat as they laid track westward, often in violation of treaties. Working for the railroads, hunter William F. Cody killed nearly 4,300 bison in eight months, earning himself the nickname "Buffalo Bill." Trappers, who had already destroyed beaver and other wildlife, now turned to the buffalo as a source of income. "Wherever the Whites are established," a Sioux chief bitterly observed, "the buffalo is gone, and the red hunters must die of hunger."

Tourists and fur traders also shot buffalo for sport from speeding railroad trains. General Sheridan noted with approval that buffalo hunters were destroying the Plains Indians' main source of food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. In 1800, approximately 15 million buffalo roamed the plains; by 1886, fewer than 600 remained. In 1900, the United States sheltered, in Yellowstone National Park, a single wild herd of buffalo.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**F. Recognizing Effects** How did the assimilation policy affect Native Americans?

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**G. Analyzing Causes** What events led to the Battle of Wounded Knee?

**SKILLBUILDER**  
**INTERPRETING CHARTS** Look at the maps on page 383. What connections can you draw between the loss of Native American lands and the decline of buffalo populations?

The Legend of the Buffalo



1800 15,000,000



1870 1,000



1996 200,000

The buffalo provided the Plains Indians with more than just a high-protein food source.

**THE SKULL** of the buffalo was considered sacred and was used in many Native American rituals.

**THE HIDE** was by far the most precious part of the buffalo. Native American clothing, tepees, and even arrow shields were made from buffalo hide.

**THE BONES** of the buffalo were made into hide scrapers, tool handles, sled runners, and hoe blades. The hoofs were ground up and used as glue.

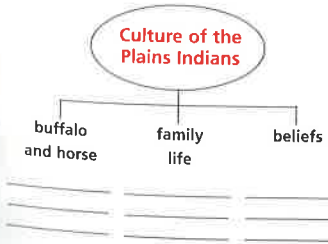
**THE HORNS** were carved into bowls and spoons.

Section 1 Assessment

1. TERMS & NAMES

- Identify:
- Great Plains
  - Homestead Act
  - exoduster
  - Sand Creek
  - Massacre
  - Sitting Bull
  - George A. Custer
  - assimilation
  - Dawes Act
  - Ghost Dance
  - Battle of Wounded Knee

2. SUMMARIZING Fill in supporting details about the culture of the Plains Indians.



Which was changed most by white settlement?

3. RECOGNIZING EFFECTS

This chapter says that the destruction of the buffalo was "perhaps the most significant blow to tribal life." Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

THINK ABOUT

- how Native Americans used the buffalo
- how Native Americans viewed ownership of land

4. EVALUATING Why do you think the assimilation policy of the Dawes Act failed? Support your opinion with information from the text.

THINK ABOUT

- the experience of Native Americans such as Zitkala-Sa
- the attitudes of many white leaders toward Native Americans
- the merits of owning property
- the importance of people's cultural heritage