

THE MAGAZINE OF THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

# DESTINATION

## DISCOVERY

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# FACE OF A NATION

*Portrait of a People*

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CHANGING CHANNELS: A DELTA'S BLUES • DEATH OF BLACKBEARD • PERPLEXING PLATYPUS





THE SUMMER THE KINZUA DAM WAS CLOSED, THE ALLEGHENY River began backing up. What was called a flood-control project flooded enough of the Seneca Allegany Reservation in New York to create ninety-five miles of new shoreline. Homes, orchards, graves—what hadn't already been burned or desecrated—were inundated; 570 residents were uprooted. The longhouse, center of the traditional Seneca religion, was wiped out. The culture shock was simply too much for some of the elderly: more than a dozen of them died.

It would perhaps be comforting to speculate that the building of the Kinzua Dam belongs to a yellowing page of history—but this project was completed in 1965. It was built despite years of protest, editorial pleas, intervention by Quakers, alternative plans, even a song by Johnny Cash, "As Long As the Grass Shall Grow." It even proceeded with unusual speed for the Army Corps of Engineers, according to Duce Bowen (Beaver Clan), storyteller and docent at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum on the reservation: "It may have been the first project they ever finished ahead of time."

The end came so quickly that many Seneca—those who hadn't yet grasped that they would actually have to move—had not even gathered all their possessions before the Corps burned and bulldozed their homes. The tribe's new homes had electricity, heat, indoor plumbing, but the contractor had cut corners—weak foundations, no insulation—and pocketed the savings. Half of the buildings lasted less than twenty-five years. "People wanted to go home," Duce said, "but they couldn't; there was no home to go back to."

By treaty, the Seneca were assured in 1794 that on their land they would not be disturbed "in the free use and enjoyment thereof." Gazing at the waters from anywhere around ninety-five miles of shoreline, that promise looks a little soggy. For some Seneca, the Kinzua Dam is a still-festering wound, an enduring reminder of a struggle they have been waging for two hundred years.

There are at least three battles now being fought by the Seneca. The most headline-grabbing is economic, the most valiant is cultural, the most difficult is personal. In each case, the prize is survival, the cost is adaptation, and one of the dividends is melancholy. But few doubt the outcome.

"We never gave title to those 10,000 acres," said Bowen. "Some day, that dam will cease to be, the waters will dissipate, and that land will be ours again."



SHEILA KENJOCKETY WAS GIVING DIRECTIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION building of the Seneca Nation. *Would that be equivalent to City Hall?* she was asked.

"No," said Kenjockety, an aide to the president. "That would be equivalent to the White House. We're a country, not a municipality."

Inside his equivalent of the Oval Office, President Barry Snyder (Wolf Clan) was trying to deal with a mid-February snowstorm.

The mild-sounding "lake effect"—a local euphemism for caterwauling winds sweeping off Lake Erie and whipping the landscape into an impenetrable whiteness—did not bode well for travel. Snyder had to cancel his regular trips from the tribe's Cattaraugus Reservation to the Allegany Reservation, about thirty-five miles south. With \$800,000 worth of maintenance vehicles around, Snyder had one question: Where were they? He wasn't a hard nose, he was a businessman, anxious to put the tribe on a firm footing. So among the publications he leafed through with more than passing interest were *Sovereign Nations* and *Gaming and Wagering Business Magazine*.

"I've spoken in schools around here," said Snyder, "and kids just don't know American Indian history at all. Here they are, twenty minutes from the reservation, and they ask me questions like, 'Are you guys still allowed to have two or three wives?' The people in New York who have the authority to legislate aren't much better; they have no idea about Indians or our treaties. Some of them have no idea that there even *are* Indians in the

State of New York. People chuckle, but it's true."

Snyder says this in a quiet and melodious way, as though he's not peeved at all.

The Seneca tribe is a nation within a state within a nation. This can get a little confusing and, to be sure, with every blessing there comes a curse. The tribe's sovereign status allows it to build bingo halls and sell highly taxed items cheaply on the non-taxed reservations. Many Seneca decry such enterprises as unseemly, nontraditional, yet they bring in the kind of money other businesses do not. There are few other businesses anyway, because no one is willing to fund them.

"When an Indian goes into business he has to have [his own] cash, or basically he doesn't go into business," said Snyder. "One of the draw-

backs—or excuses—on why institutions won't build on a reservation is that they can't get a grip on a property if there's a default. So that's why the gas, cigarettes, and bingo crop up. That's where our money basically comes from, because we're a government without taxes."

Last July, when an appellate court ruled that New York could tax a reservation's sale of gas (and in time, presumably, cigarettes) to non-Indians, hundreds of Seneca stormed onto Route 17 and the New York State Thruway in protest. Both roads were closed. The standoff lasted four days and flowered into a rally in Buffalo's Niagara Square where the protestors sang, drummed, and chanted in Governor Mario Cuomo's general direction. They came up with a name that produced a perfectly redolent acronym: Seneca Coalition Against Taxes. (Right now, the ruling is under appeal).

The Seneca nation has less than \$10 million to serve a population of more than six thousand, a little over half of whom live on the reservations. Bingo contributes more than 40 percent to the budget. (The hall at Cattaraugus can hold 2,200 players or, on frenzied Saturday nights, however many show up.) Snyder now has the delicate task of contemplating what no leader of a federally recognized

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tribe in America can ignore, thanks to the Pequots: casino gambling.

Twenty years ago, the Mashantucket Pequot tribe of Ledyard, Connecticut, had shrunk to a few dozen members rambling around a hundred-acre reservation. Today, a year and a half after opening its Foxwoods High Stakes Bingo & Casino, the tribe is reclaiming land and members, and is thought to be taking in \$100 million a year even before slot machines were installed early this year. Revenues are expected to shoot up as much as 70 percent.

Snyder knows there are members who oppose gambling as the ultimate assimilation, and oppose him for even thinking about it. "I have plenty of people who say that because I wear a suit I'm less of an Indian. Sometimes we're our own worst enemy. If we've adapted more, it may be because that's the way we stay alive at all. It doesn't mean that you're not Indian. And never did. Everything comes from the heart."



**T**HE SENECA ARE NOTHING IF NOT TENACIOUS. AS GEORGE H. J. Abrahms put it in *The Seneca People*, "The Seneca Indian Nation has endured more than three and a half centuries of the

most intensive European aggression directed against any North American tribe."

The *Hodенosaunee*—the People of the Longhouse—predate Columbus by two or three centuries. When Benjamin Franklin and other framers of the Constitution were casting about for governmental models, they looked at the guiding principles of the powerful Iroquois Confederacy—the Mohawks, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Senecas—which had extended its reach across New York in the symbolic shape of a longhouse, the style of their sturdy dwellings. The Seneca, inhabiting lands near Lakes Erie and Ontario, became known as the Keeper of the Western Door.

Today, the Seneca Nation holds title to three reservations. Oil Spring, near Cuba, New York, is a mile square with a gas and cigarette mart but no residents. Cattaraugus spans 21,680 acres in three counties and runs along the Cattaraugus Creek from Gowanda to the shore of Lake Erie. The Allegany Reservation takes a long, narrow, curving course from the Pennsylvania border about thirty miles up the Allegheny River to Vandalia, New York. At 30,469 acres, it would be the largest reservation in New York,



Pete Jones (above) grew up on the Cattaraugus Reservation, went West, and in 1977 came back to the homelands and the old ways of pottery. "Not too many people knew about it," he says. "I didn't know much about it either." He learned, and revived it. Bingo is a latecomer to tribal tradition, but it is fast taking root. The Seneca, a

sovereign nation with few capitalists, depend on the game to bring in more than 40 percent of the tribe's budget of \$10 million.





**Sliding to a halt at the far end of the trough, a player's snowsnake is still urged on (opposite). Such tenacity, a tribal trait, is quietly displayed by those Seneca who exhort tradition (clockwise from top left): Rovena Abrahms preserves the past in corn-husk dolls;**

except that—since the dam was built—10,000 of those acres are under water.

Aside from some pre-fab houses, most of the dwellings on the reservations lean toward trailer homes and older houses in a myriad of conditions. Some have cable dishes; a few have no electricity or running water. There are churches of varied sects, from Methodist to Mormon to Longhouse. At Cattaraugus the utterly plain white longhouse sits next to a lacrosse field, the Seneca equivalent of Little League. At this

**Michelle Stock, who almost had the Indian taught out of her, wants to start a school on the reservation; Longhouse elder Myrtle Peterson passes the language on to Diana Beaver; Barry Snyder, president, governs this sovereign nation.**



time of year, a lacrosse stick gives way to the javelin-like snowsnake. In this traditional Seneca game, a player's hurled stick wiggles down a grooved trough of snow like a snake. Longest throw wins.

Nobody lives in the longhouse anymore. Once the home and heart of the tribe—the heart from whence everything comes—it now functions like a church for the minority of Senecas who still follow the old ways. The Midwinter Ceremonial had just been completed, one of several ancient celebrations that Longhouse adherents cling to with the same tenacity as the stubborn stubbles of cornstalks thrusting through the rising mounds of snow in the fields.

Myrtle Peterson has celebrated many winters in the longhouse. Now eighty-one, she runs her shop—Arts, Crafts & Herbal Medicines—out of a small blue trailer on the Allegany reservation, where she was born and raised, largely by her two grandmothers, who spoke not a word of English. "I remember my grandmother used to hitch up a horse and buggy and her and I would go to the Longhouse. Whether it was storming or real dark, there we'd be. I loved it."





As a Hawk Clan mother, Myrtle is one of the leaders in the Longhouse, as women always have been in Iroquois custom; it was the women who either picked or "dehorned"—unseated, that is—the chiefs. "I do for them," Myrt said of her tribe, and she does, planting corn for seasonal celebrations, and tobacco for rituals. She makes corn-husk masks, as women traditionally do (the men make False Face masks), all used in Longhouse ceremonies, all done in her shop, along with beadwork, Indian nation flags, dream catchers (a delicate snare to intercept nightmares), corn-husk dolls, and herbal medicines. It is, as she puts it, a good way to do.

"I make a blood poison salve that has healed many limbs that were supposed to be amputated," she said. "We've cheated the hospital and the doctors many times on account of my herbal salves. Never advertised it, everybody knows about it."

Myrtle has lately been contemplating the plants and trees to be planted around the two health centers being constructed on the reservations. She looked dubiously over the architect's plans: obviously not an Indian. *Out* with the decorative but useless red maples, she declared, *in* with the utilitarian sugar maples! What's

the point of a Douglas fir when you can have a Juneberry? And where was the cedar, sweet grass, sage?

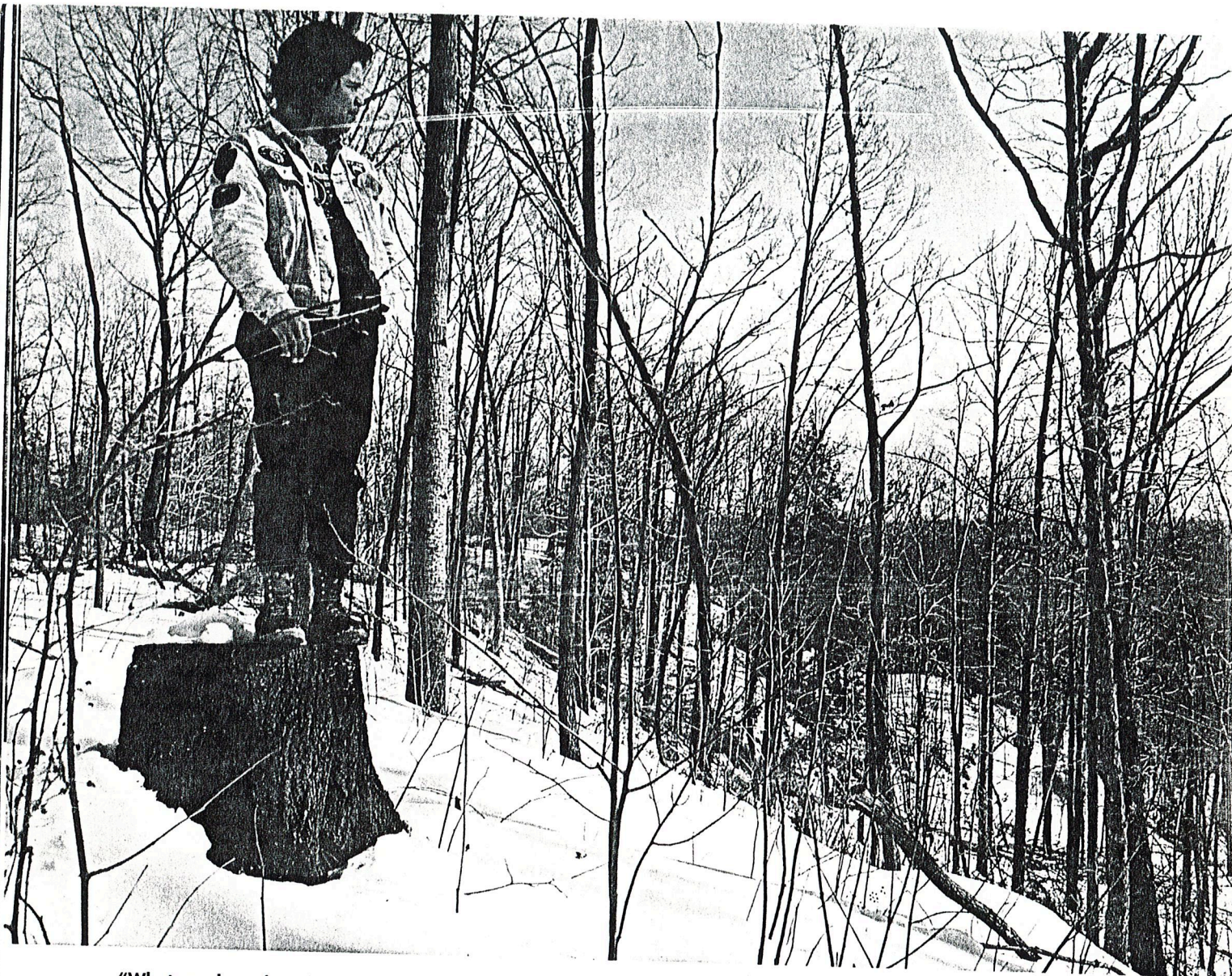
Unlike many religions, the Longhouse stresses more the things you should do than what you shouldn't do. There are only four or five proscribed activities, drinking being one, gambling another. Just the same, enough Longhouse members are so hooked on bingo that they stop at Myrt's for yet another reason: loans.

"I don't advertise that, either," she said. "I don't have to."

Nor does Myrt have to advertise her language skills. She has taught in schools at both reservations (when the reservations had their own schools). She's still teaching, whether she gets paid or not. "I don't want them to lose the language. So I keep on." Perhaps fewer than a hundred speak Seneca fluently. Losing the language would be equivalent to closing the book on the tribe.

Diana Beaver is one of those trying to keep the book open. Through a program called Language Link, she is being paid a stipend to become fluent in Seneca in forty weeks. She will learn from an elder and in turn pass the language on to a whole group of students. Since she could choose her mentor, Diana came to





**"What you have here is a bunch of modern-day Indians who like to be Indians but don't know how to be," says Bob Jones, 25. "It's because we don't know who the hell we are.**

**You go to school, learning about the white man's ideals, and wind up feeling like me, stripped of my culture and language."**

Myrtle said, "you have to marry an Indian." So I fixed them." She laughed uproariously. "I married a Greek!"

"In everyday life it doesn't mean much," continued Diana, who belongs to the Wolf Clan. "I know a guy who sells gas in Cattaraugus, he's a Wolf Clan. He never gives me a discount."



Myrtle and asked if she would help. Of course she would. Diana shows up for lessons almost every day. The two women speak only in Seneca, Myrt sets her straight on pronunciation, and Diana picks up some history and Longhouse learning as well.

Everything used to work through the clan system. You lived with your clan, married outside it. If there was a death in your clan, another clan rushed in to take care of the details. There are two clan moieties, animal and bird, and four clans in each: Beaver, Turtle, Bear, Wolf; Heron, Snipe, Hawk, Deer. No one seems quite sure how the deer wound up in the bird moiety—perhaps because it was originally a killdeer, or because it's as fleet as a bird.

Everyone knows their clan, although some of the customs have gone the way of the chieftain system, which the Seneca abandoned in 1848 in favor of tribal elections. "Some people even marry in their own clan," said Diana. "When I was younger they'd always say, 'Don't marry in your own clan—don't marry your relatives!'"

"I was told all the time, 'Don't you ever marry a white man,' "

**ASSIMILATION IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD TO THE SENECA.** "I HEAR IT again and again," said Bob Jones (Wolf Clan), "and it's disgusting. But true, I guess. You go to school, learning about the white man's ideals, and wind up feeling like me, stripped of my culture and language through no fault of my own or my parents or their parents. That's why all my friends are probably drunk right now, or healing up and getting ready to go out again tonight."

In 1987, a high school student from the Allegany reservation surveyed his fellow students from the reservation to find out how many had in some way been affected by alcoholism. The response was one hundred percent. The national statistics are also dire: alcoholism among American Indians is six times the national average. Their infants are twenty times more likely to be born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. One in six Indian teenagers is estimated to have attempted suicide; 80 percent of the suicides are alcohol-related.

"It's because we don't know who the hell we are," said Jones, twenty-five, who is an ironworker out of Local 6 in Buffalo. "What you have here is a bunch of modern-day Indians who like to be Indians but don't know how to be. It's a tough thing trying to mix old-time culture and tradition with modern-day politics."



Jones ran into trouble early. Once he was kicked out of school for beating up his bus driver. He drank, and probably would have become a grim statistic if he hadn't run into recreation director (now a tribal counselor) Ross John, who turned Jones onto politics. Jones now rarely misses a Council meeting.

"Malcolm X said something to the effect of, If you know who you are, then you're unlimited as to where you want to go. I believe that, so that's what I'm trying to figure out who the hell I am. Every now and then I still go out and raise hell. And it's not good, I realize it. But, you know, since I've been reading all these books, trying to puzzle out what happened to us and where we want to go, I haven't even had time to think about going to some bar."

Jones sprinkles his passionate conversation with references to books like *Forgotten Founders* (the Iroquois influence on American government) or *Stolen Continents* (the Indian disenfranchisement in North and South America), while pondering the role of spirituality in government.

"It was in the Longhouse that we used to make our decisions," said Jones, "and the Creator of All Things was in the middle of it. That's what gave us logic and stability and greatness. No decision was ever made if it would upset the seventh generation to come. There's nothing wrong with the system we have now, but it lacks that spiritually, and without it, you tend to lose your differentiation between want and need.

"The old Indians weren't afraid to hurt, to go without. Now everyone wants everything, and they're looking at this big thing called gaming. I'm not a good public speaker, but if I could I'd be first to tell these guys to forget it, we're not ready for it, don't even look at it. Pay attention to the tribal school and get these kids learning their culture."

At the Cattaraugus reservation, the boarded-up infirmary is the last structure still standing of the Thomas Indian School, which Bob Jones's mother and father attended. Many Seneca have terrible memories of the institution, less a school than an assimilation factory, where students were forced to speak English and were beaten if they didn't, and where they learned nothing about their own culture. In short, not altogether different from treatment they received in non-Indian schools.

Michelle Stock remembers the subliminal message she was getting in public school, like a tape that looped endlessly in her mind: *blend in, blend in, blend in with the white system*. It took her a long time to shut it off.

"I had a B.A., but it wasn't enough when I worked at the Salamanca school," she said, "and I felt a real lack of respect from some of the people there—some I had gone to school with. It was like, 'What does she know, she's an Indian.' So for all the wrong reasons I went back to get my master's. Eventually, I was going for the right reasons, and after I had the degree I had grown up enough to realize it didn't make a damn bit of difference. I could have a Ph.D. behind my name and it wouldn't matter. I guess the point is, we're still fighting to get some respect."

Now thirty-seven, Stock is the acting education director at the Allegany reservation where she was born and raised (Wolf Clan). She fights like most Indians. "We're passive aggressive," she said, as she utters denunciations in a calm voice—soothingly unsettling. "We still have to fight stereotypes. We exist as fantasy creatures in some minds—we're Halloween costumes in stores, mascots for sports teams. And Cowboys and Indians—that's like Nazis and Jews to us."

Salamanca, where Stock used to teach, is sometimes called "the only city in the world on an Indian reservation," an honor the residents have occasionally wished they could do without. In 1991, when a ninety-nine-year lease between the city and the nation ran out, the Seneca's leaders had the temerity to use what their forebears had not: business acumen. They came up with a fair market value for the lease that gave some citizens of Salamanca apoplexy

and led to a long, loud, but ultimately doomed crusade against the lease payments.

Unfortunately, tension leached into the schools. Indian students (22 percent of the student body) and white students who had been friends began battling. Parents from the reservation pulled their children out. The boycott lasted a week, and led to the formation of a tribal board of education that is still hammering things out with the Salamanca school board.

In November there was a referendum among the Seneca on whether to start a private tribal school, kindergarten through third grade. The majority favored it, to give their children what they have lacked: awareness of their heritage, and use of their language.

Thanks to the Kinzua Dam that flooded her parents' land, Shock grew up in a relocation house. She is a member of the Longhouse. She feels the pull of the old ways against the needs of the modern tribe. "I remember when I first saw the bingo hall go up—it just seemed so contradictory and weird. And selling cigarettes—though tobacco is sacred in our traditions—it's not the same kind of thing. And yet it is a way that our government has seen to bring some funds into the tribe." If the funds for the school should wind up coming from casino profits, it would be just one more incongruity to overcome.

"We've adapted," said Stock, "and that's why we've survived. But by adapting, you sacrifice some things, some traditions, and so there are a lot of contradictions. It comes from living in two worlds, and the effects of living in two worlds.

"We are acculturated, no doubt. But we're not assimilated. And we'll go out kicking and screaming before we'll assimilate."

She said it quietly but firmly, and smiling. 

.....  
Tom Bedell wrote about solving crimes through forensic medicine in the August issue. He lives in Vermont.



**VIEW  
MORE  
ABOUT IT**

## HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

*As the nation moved west in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a final clash of cultures ensued. A world-premiere mini-series.*

*In 1864, Kit Carson led 2,400 Navajos from their home in Canyon de Chelly; one-tenth died on this trail of tears.*

## A CLASH OF CULTURES

► Sunday, May 16

*Defending their homeland in the Northwest, the Nez Perce outfought the U.S. Army for four months.*

## I WILL FIGHT NO MORE FOREVER

► Monday, May 17

*Long after other chiefs moved to a reservation, Geronimo and Victorio fought on in the hills of Arizona.*

## THE APACHE

► Tuesday, May 18

*The Cheyenne and Arapaho were waiting to surrender on Sand Creek when the Army attacked at dawn; the bodies of old men, women, and children were afterwards found in the snow.*

## THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN IS A DEAD INDIAN

► Wednesday, May 19

*Resisting gold prospectors who trespassed upon the Black Hills, American Indians achieved their greatest victory at the Little Big Horn.*

## A GOOD DAY TO DIE

► Thursday, May 20

*Fourteen years after Custer's death, the Seventh Cavalry exacted revenge at Wounded Knee.*

## KILL THE INDIAN, SAVE THE MAN

► Friday, May 21

*All episodes air at 10 p.m. and 1 a.m.*

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