

NATIONAL  
MUSEUM  
OF THE  
AMERICAN  
INDIAN

# LONE DOG'S WINTER COUNT

KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE



# LONE DOG'S WINTER COUNT: KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE



**Grade Level:** 4–8

**Time Required:** Approximately 4 one-hour class periods and 2-3 homework sessions

## OVERVIEW

Students learn about the oral culture and history-keeping of the **Nakota** people, who made the Lone Dog Winter Count. Then they create a monthly pictograph calendar of their own to document a year of their personal history.

## CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

National Council for the Social Studies

- Provide for the study of the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.
- Provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

## OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

- Learn about the practice of making winter counts among some Native American groups.
- Study the Lone Dog Winter Count.
- Learn about history keeping in an oral culture.
- Understand how storytellers use pictographs as mnemonic devices.
- Create a pictograph calendar of a year in their own lives.



*The Nakota Make Peace  
with the Crow Indians*  
Lone Dog Winter Count  
(detail), 1851-52.

## BACKGROUND

Communities are defined by their languages, cultures, and histories. The languages of Native Americans were not traditionally written. They were only spoken, which meant that tribal histories and other important information had to be remembered by people and passed down orally from generation to generation. This is what is known as an **oral tradition**. Sometimes, Native communities used creative tools to help them remember their complex histories. A **winter count** was one such tool that certain Native American communities of the Northern Great Plains region used to help record their histories and to keep track of the passage of years. Here is how it worked: in these communities, the annual cycle was measured not from January through December; but rather from the first snowfall to the next year's first snowfall. This entire year was sometimes referred to as a winter. Near the end of each year, elders in each community met for an important discussion. They talked about the things that had happened since the first snowfall and they chose one particular event to serve as a historical reminder for the whole year. The year was then forever named after the chosen event. It then became the responsibility of one person in the community to design

Background continued

and paint onto a buffalo hide a **pictograph**, a picture that symbolized the event. The **keeper**, as this person was known, painted a new pictograph on the hide each year to commemorate that year's event. The hide, with all of its symbols representing the community's history, was known as the winter count. The important job of keeping the winter count was often passed down from father to son in the same family. If the images on a winter count faded or if the hide became worn, the keeper would make a new copy to preserve the information. Some winter counts were also drawn on paper or cloth.

The winter count keeper was also a storyteller. These storytellers were very important to the oral tradition because it was their job to preserve and pass along the community information. By using the winter count, the storyteller was able to teach community members about their history and to answer questions about events that had occurred in the past. The winter count served as a **mnemonic device**. This means that the pictographs drawn on it helped the people remember lots of things that happened each year. For example, when we look at a family photograph today, it can remind us of many things about the people in the picture. By looking at a pictograph on a winter count, community members could recall not only the event that the year was named for, but other things too, such as when babies were born, when marriages took place, or when new leaders were chosen. As a record of history, the winter count reminded the people of who they were and where they had come from, in the same way that our written histories serve today. This helped keep the community strong and united because it was the connection to their past. In an oral tradition such as that of the Nakota, remembering history was a very important job that was done with seriousness, respect, and utmost care. This is why winter counts were so important to the American Indian communities that used them.

## THE LONE DOG WINTER COUNT

The Lone Dog Winter Count (pictured on the front of this poster) came from the **Yanktonais Nakota** community. A Yanktonais (YANK-tow-nigh) man known as Lone Dog was the last known keeper of this winter count, and that is why it bears his name. This Winter Count contains pictographs that document seventy years of Yanktonais history, beginning in the winter of 1800 and ending in 1871. The Lone Dog Winter Count contains the records of many important events: of encounters with other Native peoples and with non-Natives, of years when there were disease epidemics, and of times of war. The pictographic symbols begin in the center of the hide and spiral outward in a counter-clockwise direction.

The Yanktonais are part of a much larger tribe of Native Americans known as the Sioux. There are three dialects of the Sioux language—**Dakota**, **Nakota**, and **Lakota**. The Yanktonais are Nakota speakers. Traditionally, the Yanktonais were further divided into **tiyospaye** (tee-YO-spa-yay), or smaller communities of one or more extended families with grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and allies. The tiyospaye was an essential part of Nakota social, political, and cultural life. The members of a tiyospaye traveled and often lived together in a small village, crossing the Plains in search of buffalo and places to camp. The Nakota territory encompassed much of what is now the eastern portions of North and South Dakota (see map activity). Their Lakota cousins, who lived to the west and the Dakota, who

lived to the east, were also divided into smaller groups of tiyospaye. Winter counts have been found and identified from Lakota and other Nakota tiyospaye.



*Killis Two* (Lakota) in a posed photo of a winter count keeper.

Photograph by John Anderson. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 03494000

## THE YEAR THE STARS FELL

This astronomical event recorded on the Lone Dog Winter Count was seen by people in many parts of the world in the fall of 1833. It is known widely as the Leonid Meteor Storm. It was also recorded on other Sioux winter counts. The red ovals represent falling stars, which surround a black crescent moon.

It is a cold clear night on the high northern plains in November 1833. A group of Yanktonais Nakota have gathered to gaze at the night sky. The starlit skies envelop the Earth from horizon to horizon. There are no other sources of light to interfere, and millions of stars hang brilliantly suspended above the ground, almost touchable. Some are bigger and brighter than others, some glow with warm reddish tones, others pulse vividly white, and some are tinted blue and silver. Tonight something very special is also happening in this sky. Every few minutes a reddish light streaks across the sky and fades into nothing. To the Yanktonais, it seems as if the stars are falling. The people will observe this celestial phenomenon throughout much of November, and it will serve as a significant event in their collective memory and become a part of the community's history.

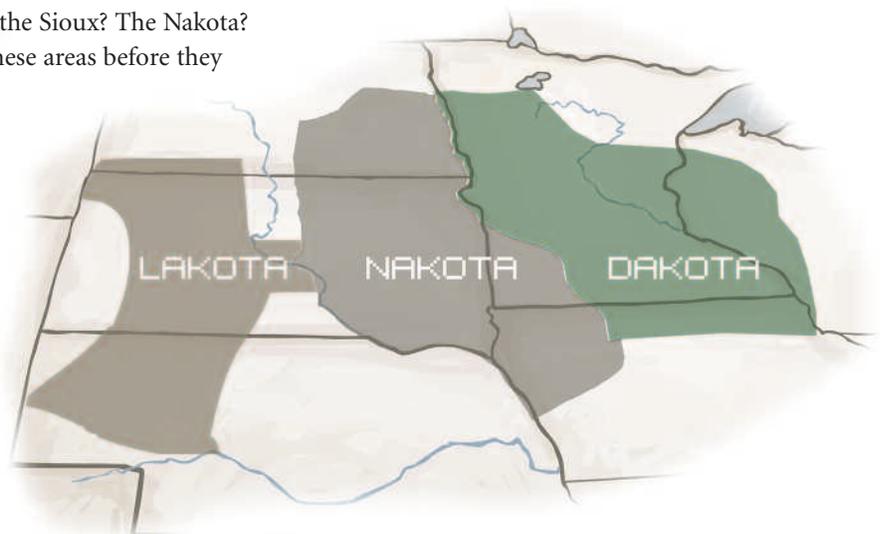


Lone Dog Winter Count (detail)

## TRADITIONAL SIOUX LANDS

Discussion and Research Questions:

- What states are the traditional homelands of the Sioux? The Nakota? (Remember that American Indians lived in these areas before they were states)
- What is the environment like in these states?
- What are some of the native animals in these states?
- What are the names of some rivers and lakes in these states?



Map courtesy of National Museum of Natural History and National Anthropological Archives, *Lakota Winter Counts: An Online Exhibit*. <http://www.wintercounts.si.edu> Based on *Handbook of North American Indians*, Smithsonian Institution

## PREPARATION

Make copies of the following handouts:

- Reproducibles 1-4

## PROCEDURE



1. In small groups, have students study the poster image of the Lone Dog Winter Count, or use a projector to show them the winter count image from the following website: <http://www.americanindian.si.edu/wintercount/LoneDogWC.html>

As a class, discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of images do you see on the front of this poster?
- Do you have any guesses about what all of these images have in common? (The Indians of the Plains region [the Sioux in this case] lived in villages made up of homes called tipis. The buffalo was an important source of food and other materials. The buffalo hide in the picture was used to make a Winter Count, which was a way of helping to preserve the history of a community of Sioux people for many generations.)
- How many stages of life can you recognize in the photographs of the people? Why is it important to show all four? (Infant, adolescent, adult, and elder—we're learning about preserving community history for future generations.)
- Look closely at the images on the buffalo hide (the Winter Count). What do you think they are? What stories do you think they tell?



2. Use the Teacher Background Information to explain the Lone Dog Winter Count to students. For older or more advanced students, copy the Teacher Background Information and have students read it on their own.



3. Have students experiment with creating pictographs to help them remember an important story. Give students this assignment to complete: ask an older relative (parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent) or another adult to choose a family or other story about the student to tell, preferably one the student hasn't heard before. The story should be fairly detailed; it should take 5-10 minutes to tell. Before hearing the story, students should gather pen and paper, but refrain from writing while they are listening to the story. Instead of writing, students should draw 4-7 pictographs that will help them remember the story and retell it accurately and with as

much detail as possible. After listening to the story, the student should finalize the pictographs, and then retell the story for the older relative, who should make sure that the retelling is accurate and that all the important details are included.



4. The next day, have volunteers tell their family story to the class, showing the class their pictographs. Discuss with students how easy or difficult it was to remember the story, how the pictographs helped, and how they decided what to draw. Remind students that most families keep their important history orally.



5. Have students read the text of Reproducible 1, The Year the Stars Fell. Make sure that students understand what a meteor shower is and how it appears. Discuss how the lack of ground lights (in cities, etc.) increases our ability to see the night skies. Have students review the map of traditional Sioux lands. Complete the discussion and research questions. Students will need access to various types of maps of the region to complete the research questions.



6. To gain familiarity with pictographs, have students complete the matching exercise on Reproducible 2, the Lone Dog Pictographs handout. Here are the correct answers: 1-L, 2-K, 3-I, 4-B, 5-G, 6-D, 7-F, 8-E, 9-C, 10-A, 11-J, 12-H. After students complete the handout, discuss the following question with the class:

- How did the Native artist draw differences between types of people (Natives of different tribes, whites, men/women)?



7. Explain to students that they will be creating a pictograph calendar of their own. To make the project interesting for people of their age, they will be counting months, not winters. Their "count" will be a series of pictographs that will enable them to retell their personal history, month by month, over the last year.



8. Give each student a copy of Reproducible 3, the Personal Pictograph Calendar—Planning Handout. Give them about a week to work outside of class on gathering events for this planning handout. Explain that they should think of occurrences at home, at

Procedure continued

school, with friends, in their community, or in their country. They should list at least two of these events in the column “Two Events That Occurred During This Month.” Then explain that, like the Nakota, they will choose one event (of the two already listed, or an additional event) and create a pictograph of it. On the Planning Handout, this event is called the Calendar Event.

Explain and demonstrate how to complete the Planning Handout. On the board, list at least two events that occurred during one month. For example, in February, you might list “visited grandmother on her 93rd birthday” and “shoveled driveway four times in one day during blizzard.” Choose one of these events as the Calendar Event. Then, create a pictograph of the event. Explain how the pictograph is a mnemonic device that will help jog memories of other things that have happened. Be sure students understand that their Personal Pictograph Calendar documents their personal history; the Lone Dog Winter Count documents community history.

 9. After students have completed the Planning Handout, give them 1-2 class periods to work on their personal pictograph calendar. These calendars can be created on poster board, sheets of brown craft paper, or fabric. The pictographs can be drawn or painted and arranged in a spiral (like Lone Dog’s) or a line, square, or another shape.

 10. Organize a personal history-telling event. If your class is small enough, each student can use his pictograph calendar to tell his personal history to the entire class. Or, in groups of four or five led by a parent volunteer, students can tell their personal histories. Invite students’ families to attend. Videotape the students’ stories as examples of how history is often kept in today’s world. Make copies for the students’ families. Display the personal pictographs in your classroom.

 11. Have students read the text of Reproducible 4, *Remembering Native American History Today*. Discuss the following questions with students.

- What questions would you have liked to ask Lone Dog about this winter count?
- How does retelling it help preserve a community’s history? How does writing it down preserve history?

## EXTENSION

Learn about other winter counts at these websites:

- **Smithsonian Winter Count Project**  
<http://www.wintercounts.si.edu>
- **The Buechel Memorial Lakota Museum**  
[http://www.sfmission.org/museum/exhibits/wintercounts/buechel\\_wintercount\\_objects.shtml](http://www.sfmission.org/museum/exhibits/wintercounts/buechel_wintercount_objects.shtml) describes the winter counts collected by Fr. Eugene Buechel.
- **The Carnegie Museum**  
[http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/north-south-east-west/lakota/winter\\_count/L\\_WC.html](http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/north-south-east-west/lakota/winter_count/L_WC.html) displays a contemporary winter count by Thomas Red Owl Haukaas, M.D. (Sicangu [Brule] Lakota/Creole).
- **National Museum of the American Indian**  
<http://www.americanindian.si.edu/wintercount/index.html> to learn about the 2001 Little Wound School digital workshop in which the Little Wound Tribal School of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, sent a team of students, teachers, and an elder to the NMAI Cultural Resources Center in Maryland to participate in a workshop on Lakota and Dakota winter counts and their connections to the students’ Native American heritage.

# REMEMBERING NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY TODAY

To Native American communities today, remembering history is just as important as it was to previous generations. Native people have faced many challenges to their cultures as a result of wars, diseases, forced relocations, and political and religious pressure to adopt non-Indian ways of life. While Native Americans have endured, survival has come at a great price. Many tribal histories, languages, songs, dances and other aspects of culture have been

seriously eroded or altogether lost. Communities must maintain vigilant efforts to keep from losing even more. Today, most Native Americans speak English, but many still speak the language of their tribe and pass it on to their children. Remembering and preserving community histories and cultures is an important priority for Native Americans today.



Oral history is very valuable. We try to keep that alive. Today, I still visit with many of the elders from different communities, and we talk about one major event that happens during the year. Some students at our college participate in a Winter Count project where they do the history of their own family. When they do that they understand the spiritual importance of it. Today, we use modern technology—video and sound recordings—to help us record our community histories.

—**Albert White Hat** (Lakota), *Lakota language instructor, Sinte Gleska University*

Photo courtesy of Lakota Studies Department, Sinte Gleska University, photographer unknown



I am a member of a Winter Count Society which is made up of descendants of people who had winter counts, or who have gotten them back—anything to do with winter counts. I'm very proud of my people and my history. My mother used to tell me, "There are billions of people in the world, and you were lucky enough to be born as a Lakota." I've always had a good sense of my history, and I want to instill that in my son. My family will know their history, in any and every way.

—**Tipiziwin Young** (Lakota/Nakota/Dakota-Standing Rock Sioux)

Photo by John Lenker, courtesy of National Museum of Natural History



My great-great-grandfather . . . translated the Lone Dog Winter Count in the 1860s. Our challenge is to remember as a tribal people . . . we have a responsibility to continue that way of keeping track of what happens in a year . . . At the same time, as we live our lives each day, we have to take what we learn from those winter counts and take what we learn from our elders and pass it on to the children. A people without history is like wind blowing in the prairie grass.

—**Steve Emery** (Lakota-Cheyenne River Sioux),  
*Administrative Attorney, Rosebud Sioux Tribe*

Photo by John Lenker, courtesy of National Museum of Natural History

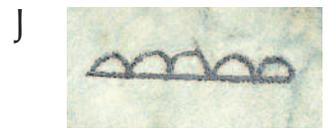
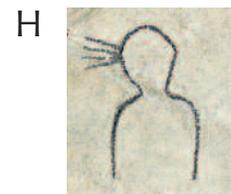
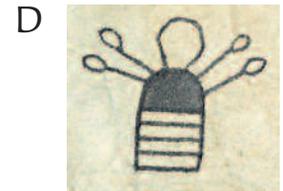
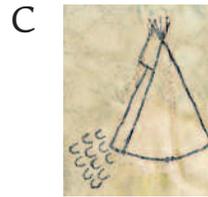
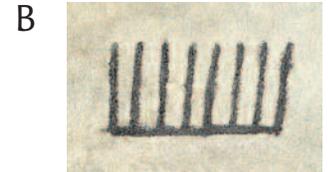
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is it important for Native Americans today to preserve their histories?
- What role do modern technologies play in recording Native American histories today?

# LONE DOG PICTOGRAPHS HANDOUT

Match the letter next to each pictograph, at right, with the explanation, below.

- \_\_\_ 1. The Nez Perces came to Lone-Horn's lodge at midnight. 1852-53
- \_\_\_ 2. White soldiers made their first appearance in the region. 1823-24
- \_\_\_ 3. Plenty of buffalo meat. 1845-46
- \_\_\_ 4. Eight Nakotas were killed. 1863-64
- \_\_\_ 5. La Framboise, a Canadian, built a trading store with dry timber. 1817-18
- \_\_\_ 6. The Nakotas killed a Crow woman. 1857-58
- \_\_\_ 7. The Nakotas made peace with the Cheyennes. 1840-41
- \_\_\_ 8. Buffalo belly was plenty (food, clothing and other materials). 1816-17
- \_\_\_ 9. Buffalo were so plentiful that their tracks came close to the tipis. 1861-62
- \_\_\_ 10. Four-Horn was made a calumet or medicine man. 1856-57
- \_\_\_ 11. There was a remarkable flood in the Missouri River and a number of Indians were drowned. 1825-26
- \_\_\_ 12. The whooping cough was very prevalent and fatal. 1813-14



## PERSONAL PICTOGRAPH CALENDAR PLANNING HANDOUT

Month/Year	Two Events that Occurred During this Month	Calendar Event	Pictograph
January	1. 2.		
February	1. 2.		
March	1. 2.		
April	1. 2.		
May	1. 2.		
June	1. 2.		
July	1. 2.		
August	1. 2.		
September	1. 2.		
October	1. 2.		
November	1. 2.		
December	1. 2.		

## GLOSSARY FOR TEACHERS

**Oral tradition**—in a society without a written language, the way in which all history and culture is remembered by individuals and passed down orally from generation to generation.

**Winter Count**—a series of pictographs drawn on buffalo hide, cloth, or paper that was used to help remember community history among some tribes of the Northern Great Plains.

**Pictograph**—a figure drawn on a winter count to serve as a symbol of one significant event chosen by the community to commemorate each year.

**Keeper**—the person with the responsibility of maintaining a winter count and remembering and passing on the history associated with it.

**Mnemonic device**—an object, such as a winter count, that serves as a memory aid and a tool to help keep track of history.

**Nakota**—one of three dialects (slightly different versions) of the Sioux language. Also used as a term to identify the groups of American Indians who speak the dialect.

**Dakota**—one of three dialects (slightly different versions) of the Sioux language.

**Lakota**—one of three dialects (slightly different versions) of the Sioux language

**Yanktonais**—one of three sub-groups of Nakota speakers. Lone Dog, the last known keeper of the Lone Dog Winter Count, was a Yanktonais.

**Tiyošpaye**—among Sioux tribes, an extended family group that lived and traveled together; usually numbering about 150-300 people.

## TEACHER RESOURCES

### Books and Articles for Adults

Burke, Christina E. "Collecting Lakota Histories: Winter Count Pictographs and Texts in the National Anthropological Archives." *American Indian Art* 26:1 (2000): 82-89, 102-03.

DeMallie, Raymond J., ed. *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 13 Plains*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2001.

(See esp. articles on the Sioux and on Tribal Traditions and Records)

Greene, Candace S. and Russell Thornton, eds. *The Year the Stars Fell: Lakota Winter Counts at the Smithsonian*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming.

### Books for Children

Bruchac, Joseph. *A Boy Called Slow: The True Story of Sitting Bull*. New York: Putnam, 1998. (primary)

Penman, Sarah, ed. *Honor the Grandmothers: Dakota and Lakota Women Tell Their Stories*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000. (middle school)

Sandoz, Mari. *The Story Catcher*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. (secondary)

Standing Bear, Luther. *My People, the Sioux*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1975. (secondary)

Todd, Anne M. *The Sioux: People of the Great Plains*. Mankato, Michigan: Bridgestone Books, 2003. (middle school)

Wood, Ted and Wanbli Numpa Afraid of Hawk. *A Boy Becomes a Man at Wounded Knee*. New York: Walker, 1992. (primary)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## FRONT PHOTO CREDITS

National Museum of the American Indian

*Winter Count or Calendar, ca. 1870 by Shunka Ishmala (Lone Dog, Sioux, lifedates unknown), 60X84 in. Photo by Janine Jones.*

*Albumen print panoramic view of buffalo on the plains, ca. 1900* Photographer unknown.

Bottom strip, left to right: *View of Oglala Sioux Camp, 1878. Near Fort Keogh, Montana(?). Photographer unknown.*

*Spotted Tail (Brule Sioux), a child of Sinte Gleska, Albumen print studio portrait, ca. 1880. Photographer unknown.*

*Two young Sioux women on horseback, 4 July 1912. Sioux Powwow, Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota. Photo by Roy E. Phelps.*

*Chon-nom-pa-kin-yan (Flying Pipe, Yankton Sioux), Albumen print studio portrait, ca. 1890. Photo by William Henry Jackson.*

*Crow Dog (Oglala Sioux), Black and white postcard, ca. 1900. Photographer unknown.*