The Cree

At Home Deep in the Forest and on the Vast Plains
The Cree is one of the most interesting cultures in all of North America, because the Cree have inhabited such a large territory. They are an innovative and resourceful people who have adapted to their ever-changing environments. Their history has evolved into a culture that is both distinct and different than most other native North American groups.

The word Cree comes from the French word, Kristineaux, which is actually a mis-pronunciation of the word, Kenistenoag. Kristineaux became shortened to Kri, spelled Cree in English. Today, most Cree use this name only when speaking or writing in English.

**In the beginning**

Before the European fur traders arrived near Hudson Bay in the late 1600s, the Cree were already a well established and complex nation. In fact, the Cree people have occupied more land than any other Native North American group. The Cree were a nomadic people, meaning they were constantly on the move. The bands of the early Cree moved with the seasons, sharing much of the same lands as their Algonquin neighbors, the Assiboine and Ojibway. As a result, all three nations share a very similar history and cultural traditions, even if they didn’t always get along.

The Cree are part of the Algonquin people. The Cree, Ojibway, and Assiniboine are all considered to be Algonquin because they share a similar language.

*Algonquin Language Distribution and present day Cree populations*
Legends of the Lenape tribe, the Cree ancestors, claim that they are the Grandfathers of all other Indian peoples. The legends claim that the Cree were the first people to inhabit North America. Later legends of the western Cree tribes claim that the Cree language is the first and oldest of the Indian languages, and that all other languages are descended from them. The Ojibway, whose ancestors are called the Anishinabeg, or First People, refer to the Cree as Kinistenoog, "They Who Were First".

As a result of being spread out over such a large area, the traditions and cultural differences between the Cree tribes evolved into three distinct regional groups: the Plains Cree (southern Saskatchewan, Alberta), Woodland Cree (Great Lakes Region), and Swamp Cree (southern boreal forest). Since Dave and Eric will be traveling in the area inhabited by the Woodland Cree, we will discuss the Woodland Cree.

Being nomadic in the boreal forest means having to pick up your home and move whenever the season changed, animals migrated, or waterways froze. Generally speaking, the Cree would winter inland where game was still plentiful and move toward the waterways to trade and fish during the summer.

The Cree people made their existence from the forest. Everything they needed was provided by the forest. Animals like moose, deer, beaver, and bear provided meat for the Cree. Birch bark, ash, and spruce provided building materials and fuel.

Like the Ojibway, the Cree used birch bark to serve many different needs. They used birch bark for shelter, transportation, paper, fuel, and trade. Canoes and wigwams, baskets and bowls were only a few of the thousands of products made from birch bark.

How many products can you think of that the Cree may have used birch bark for?
European Contact

Before the early European fur traders came into contact with the Cree in the late 1600s, the Cree lived very comfortably in the northern reaches of the boreal forest. The Cree was a vast network of tribes that extended from James Bay to the far reaches of Lake Superior.

They were a powerful tribe, feared by their enemies, the Lakota, against whom they waged fierce wars. The Cree also had many friends in the forest. Together with their Assiniboine and Algonkin-speaking allies, the Cree were regarded as some of the finest and most relentless warriors in North America.

When the Hudson Bay Company began penetrating deeper into the Canadian interior, life began to change for the Cree who were living between James Bay and Lake Winnipeg. As posts were developed further and further from Hudson Bay, the Cree were able to trade directly with the voyageurs and couer du bois. This greatly affected the Cree way of life.

By 1680, the Cree were well established fur traders and became more reliant on manufactured goods being brought from the east. While the Cree had been considered to be a terrifying nation to other tribes in North America, the Cree readily embraced (or at least didn’t fight) their new European neighbors. In fact, many of the Hudson Bay posts would give priority or special distinction to furs trapped by the Cree.

The Cree had been a hunter-gatherer tribe for thousands of years, and was now faced with the challenge with developing and modernizing in order to compete with neighboring, and often warring nations. Within Cree communities, people began to work harder at fur trapping than gathering food for part of the year, expecting the fur prices to cover food
for the rest of the year. And since the fur trapping had to keep going further and further toward the interior of Canada, the Cree had to move along. Their territory began to shift west toward Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabasca, and gently moving south toward the Great Plains of Saskatchewan, Montana, and Alberta.

There had always been distinctions between the Cree living in the boreal forest and those Cree living near the plains. However, as the Cree continued to spread out across North America, their ways of life began to differ significantly.

The Woodland Cree remained culturally intact, since their lives did not require changing. However, as the Cree became more and more dependent on the Plains, their culture began to change and take on certain attributes of their Sioux, Lakota, and Pawnee neighbors.

The Plains Cree, during the later 1700s through the mid-1800s lived in harmony with the buffalo. Huge herds of buffalo still roamed the great plains of Saskatchewan and Alberta, and quickly became the staple of Cree diet. The buffalo also provided the Cree with rawhide for clothing, bones to make weapons and tools, and a seemingly infinite number of other resources. And since there was no birch bark on the plains, the Cree began building their wigwams out of animal hides, similar to other plains tribes. No part of the buffalo went un-used.
Woodland Cree Religion and Ceremony

While the Plains Cree began developing and altering their lives and traditions, the woodland Cree traditions and ceremonies stayed the same throughout. Because of their immense knowledge of the forest and their beliefs in the spiritual power of the natural world, the woodland Cree believed that all elements of nature had a guiding spirit.

Inside the forest were sorcerers with the power to defeat enemies, cause starvation, provide a successful hunt, or make someone fall in love. Windigos were ever-present and one had to be keen to not allow this trickster to tip your canoe or take over your body.

The Cree also used many of the forest’s plants for medicinal or ceremonial practices. Teas made from Labrador, black currant, raspberries, and mint helped a wide variety of ailments and provided vital nutrients to their simple diet.

Unlike the Plains Cree, the Woodland Cree did not develop complex group ceremonies. Instead, most of the ceremonies of the Woodland Cree were personal. When a boy reached maturity, he was sent off on a vision quest. The quests could last for several days. It was only when a spirit or spirits revealed themselves to the boy, would he become a man. The spirit or spirits would then become the boy’s personal guide. Men would also go on vision quests, either to accompany their sons, or if a previous vision quest had told him to do so.

Everyday Cree Life and Arts

Within the Cree community there was a very specific division of labor between the men and women. Women were generally the food gatherers. Women spent their days
foraging, checking trap lines, tanning hides, making snowshoes, hauling wood, and making, mending, and decorating clothing. Men were excellent hunters and fishers. Moose, beaver, ptarmigan, geese and ducks, and bear were all eaten by the Woodland Cree. The rivers and lakes provided an abundance of sturgeon, walleye, and trout. When the men were not out hunting or fishing, they spent their time making tools, weapons, and canoes.

Food preparation was an on-going task. There were very few meals eaten as a group. Instead there would always be food boiling or warming over a fire, which was eaten periodically throughout the day. Wild rice was the staple of Cree diet. During the fall, wild rice was gathered in great quantities so as to last the Cree throughout the rest of the year. Very few meals didn’t have wild rice in it. Wild rice was considered a medicine for helping everyday ailments like headaches and aches and pains.

Entire families lived within the wigwam. This helped to keep everyone warm and provided a firm family tradition. In Cree culture, you are taught from a very early age to respect those who are older than you. Multi-generational families helped to preserve the culture and arts by passing down myths, legends, and techniques.

Art was a very important part of Cree life. Decorations could be found on anything. Before the Europeans traders came into Cree contact, quills and small rocks were used to decorate clothing, weapons, and tools.

Following European contact, beads were introduced to the Cree, and they created some of the finest, most intricate bead patterns found in the Interior. Dyes and new types of fabrics were also used as decoration and clothing.

The Cree Today

During the fur trade, Cree populations throughout Canada were drastically reduced due to forced relocation and diseases that the Europeans brought. Because the diseases had never been encountered by the Cree, their bodies did not have the proper immune systems and many died as a result.

Today, people of the Cree Nation can be found throughout Canada (Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Quebec), and parts of Montana. About 120,000 Cree live in 135 bands in Canada. They have the largest population and are spread over the largest geographic area of any native group in Canada. The Cree are one of the only nations who have lived in the eastern boreal forest and western Plains.

While most Cree live in homes today, there is a growing interest among the Cree to re-discover their history and ancestors. Throughout Canada there are programs and classes that modern Cree can take to better understand where they have come from by learning about their history.
Activities for the Classroom

Learn about the Cree from their neighbors

Objective: Students will gain an appreciation for Cree cultures by comparing them to other Native American nations and territories.

Skills Used: Guided internet research, skills of historical analysis and interpretation, ask historical questions and seek out answers from historical sources, describe how people in different times, cultures, and places viewed the world in different ways, understanding relationships between geographic factors and society, explain the relationships among location of resources and population distribution.

Procedure: Students will divide into groups of four. Each group will be assigned a Native American tribe to investigate. Students will choose from the Woodland Cree, Lakota, Navajo, and Inuit. Students will decide who will be the recorder, fact-finder, presenter, or artist.

The Recorder is responsible for recording and organizing the data collected by the fact-finder. The Recorder will then write a one page overview of the tribe, including territory (present and past), cultural traditions, religion, and influence European contact.

The Fact-Finder will use the specified web sites to discover vital information about the Cree, Lakota, Navajo, or the Inuit. The Fact Finder will answer the questions on the Native American Findings Worksheet.

The Artist will be in charge of developing a visual organization chart with pictures, either drawn or from the web, to illustrate the particular territory, cultural practices, time-line, and natural resources available and used by the tribe.

The Presenter will then inform the audience about the specific tribe by giving an oral presentation, highlighting the visual aid. The Presenter will also be in charge of answering questions from the audience.
Use the following web sites to research your particular Native American group.

| CREE      | http://www.geocities.com/bigorrin/cree.htm                      |
|           | http://worldbook.bigchalk.com/139960.htm                      |
|           | http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/Plains_Cree/contents-e.html |
| LAKOTA/ SIOUX | http://worldbook.bigchalk.com/512040.htm                      |
|           | http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5579/dakota.html     |
|           | http://www.montana.edu/wwwfpcc/tribes/Religion.html           |
|           | http://www-personal.umich.edu/%7ejamarcus/new/                 |
|           | http://www.hanksville.org/daniel/lakota/Lakota.html            |
|           | http://www.hanksville.org/daniel/timeline2.html               |
| NAVAJO    | http://bird.kchs.k12.nm.us/nhs/nh00005.htm                    |
|           | http://www.millicentrogers.com/jewelry/history/navajo.html     |
|           | http://www.nps.gov/nava/nav.htm                               |
|           | http://worldbook.bigchalk.com/384460.htm                      |
|           | http://curtis-collection.com/tribe_data/navaho.html            |
| INUIT     | http://worldbook.bigchalk.com/280080.htm                      |
|           | http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/iqqaipaa/home-e.html        |
|           | http://www.windows.ucar.edu/cgbin/tour.cgi?link=mythology/inuit_culture.html |
|           | http://www.civilization.ca/educat/oracle/modules/dmorrison/page01_e.html |
Native American Findings Worksheet

Fill this worksheet out as you discover information about your Native American tribe. Be as specific as possible!!

The tribe our group studied is the ______________________.

Our tribe lives ____________________________________.

Our tribe uses ________________ for shelter. The shelter is made out of ___________________________________________________.

The tribe’s diet consists of ________________________________________________________________

The tribe’s traditional clothing was made out of _____________________ ____________________________________________

The tribe’s creation myth is about
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
Some of the most famous members of the tribe have been _____________
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
                                                                                          

Today members of the tribe live (where) __________________________

Three interesting facts that we learned about our tribe are:
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
                                                                                          
How Cree Life Has Changed

Objective: Students will determine the results of European contact with the Cree. Students will write an expository essay detailing cultural and everyday Cree life before, during, and after European contact.

Skills Used: Word analysis, vocabulary enrichment, historical analysis and data collection, guided internet research, identify appropriate resources to identify and determine validity of historical events.

Procedure: As a class or in groups, research the Cree at the following websites:
http://www.geocities.com/bigorrin/cree.htm
http://worldbook.bigchalk.com/139960.htm
http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/Plains_Cree/contents-e.html

Determine what defines a cultural event and how things have changed over the course of the students’ lives. Determine outcomes of significant historical events during the last ten years. Create a cause and effect flow chart for each historical event discussed.

Develop three separate flow charts for Cree Life.
1.) Pre-European contact
2.) Fur Trade Years
3.) 20th Century

List specific cultural and everyday life activities performed by the Pre-European Contact Cree. Include region, shelter, language, tools, weapons, clothing, and food.

Determine the causes and effects for altering Cree life in all of the indexes mentioned above.

Students will then organize their flow charts into a five paragraph expository essay detailing the changes in Cree life that have occurred since the fur trade and European contact.
Questions for the Chat Room and Classroom Discussion

**Topic:** The Woodland Cree

**Suggested questions for students to ask:**

Where do the Cree live today?

How long have the Cree been living in North America?

How did the Cree adapt to such a wide region?

What are some of the differences between the Woodland and Plains Cree?

What is a vision quest?

What language do the Cree speak?

What did the Cree eat? Do they eat like this today?

What impacts did the fur-trade have on the Cree?

Who were some of the Cree allies? Enemies?

How did the Cree travel?

What type of shelter did the Cree live in?

What type of shelter do Cree people live in today?

What type of fish did the Cree like to catch?

What is a windigo?

Did the Woodland Cree eat buffalo?

Did the Woodland Cree make art? What kinds of art did they make?

What is metis culture?