SOFTWARE & TECH

History Of The Cheyenne Tribe

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Introduction: The People of the Great Plains

The history of the Cheyenne tribe is a story of resilience, adaptation, and cultural endurance that spans centuries. Known as the **Tsitsistas**(meaning "the people" or "our people" in their native Algonquian language), the Cheyenne have long been recognized as one of the most iconic and influential Native American nations of the Great Plains. Their journey from the woodlands of the Upper Midwest to the vast grasslands of the West is a defining narrative of indigenous survival against overwhelming odds. To understand the history of the Cheyenne tribe is to explore a rich tapestry of migration, warfare, diplomacy, spiritual devotion, and ultimately, a determined fight to preserve identity in the modern world. Their story is not merely a chapter in American history; it is an ongoing legacy of a people who have shaped and been shaped by the land they call home.

Origins and Early Migration: From the Woodlands to the Plains

The Algonquian Roots of the Cheyenne

The earliest known history of the Cheyenne tribe places them in the Great Lakes region, near present-day Minnesota. As part of the larger Algonquian language family, the Cheyenne shared linguistic and cultural ties with tribes such as the Ojibwe, Cree, and Blackfoot. Archaeological evidence and oral traditions suggest that the Cheyenne were a settled, agricultural people who lived in fixed villages, cultivated corn, beans, and squash, and practiced a lifestyle typical of Eastern Woodlands cultures. Their society was organized around clan systems and seasonal rounds of hunting and gathering.

The Push Westward

During the 17th and early 18th centuries, the Cheyenne began a gradual migration westward. This movement was driven by a combination of pressures, including conflicts with neighboring tribes, the expansion of European fur trade networks, and the introduction of firearms that altered the balance of power in the region. The Cheyenne initially moved into the area of the Sheyenne River in North Dakota (from which their name is derived, via the Dakota Sioux word *Šahíyena*, meaning "little red speakers"). By the mid-1700s, the Cheyenne had encountered the Mandan and Hidatsa peoples along the Missouri River, where they adopted new agricultural techniques and trade practices.

Transformation into a Plains Horse Culture

The most profound transformation in the history of the Cheyenne tribe occurred when they acquired horses, likely through trade with the Comanche and other southern Plains tribes, as well as through raids on Spanish settlements. The horse revolutionized Cheyenne life, allowing them to abandon their sedentary villages in favor of a nomadic existence centered on the vast bison herds of the Great Plains. By the early 19th century, the Cheyenne had fully embraced the Plains lifestyle, living in portable teepees, hunting buffalo on horseback, and developing a highly mobile and militaristic culture. This period marks the emergence of the Cheyenne as we most commonly know them in historical accounts: proud warriors, skilled horsemen, and fierce defenders of

their territory.

Life on the Great Plains: Culture and Daily Existence

The Central Role of the Buffalo

No single animal was more important to the Cheyenne than the buffalo. Every part of the animal was used: the hide for clothing, bedding, and teepee covers; the meat for food, both fresh and dried as pemmican; the bones for tools and implements; the sinew for thread and bowstrings; the hooves for glue; and the horns for spoons and cups. The buffalo was not merely a resource; it was a sacred being, central to Cheyenne cosmology and spirituality. The seasonal buffalo hunt dictated the rhythm of life, with large communal hunts organized by tribal leaders and policed by military societies to ensure fair distribution and avoid waste.

Social and Political Organization

Cheyenne society was organized into ten major bands, each with its own chiefs, council, and territory. These bands came together during the summer for ceremonial gatherings and cooperative hunts. The Cheyenne had a sophisticated political system that balanced the authority of civil chiefs, whose role was to maintain peace and make decisions for the welfare of the people, with the influence of warrior societies such as the **Dog Soldiers** (also known as the **Hotamétaneo'o**). The Dog Soldiers emerged as a particularly powerful military and political force, especially among the Southern Cheyenne, playing a decisive role in the conflicts of the 19th century. The Cheyenne also maintained a formal Council of Forty-Four, a governing body of peace chiefs who served ten-year terms, ensuring stability and continuity in tribal governance.

The Cheyenne Language and Oral Tradition

The Cheyenne language, part of the Algonquian family, is a complex and tonal language. It is still spoken by several hundred people today, primarily on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana and among the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes in Oklahoma. Oral tradition has been the primary means of transmitting Cheyenne history, laws, and spiritual knowledge. Stories of the culture hero **Sweet Medicine**(also known as Motsii'eeve) recount how the sacred laws, ceremonies, and the Council of Forty-Four were given to the Cheyenne. These narratives are not mere myths but are considered living history, guiding the Cheyenne people in their relationship with the world and each other.

Spiritual Beliefs and Ceremonies: The Sacred Way

The Four Sacred Arrows and the Medicine Lodge

At the heart of Cheyenne spirituality are the **Four Sacred Arrows**, which are believed to have been given to the people by Sweet Medicine. These arrows are the most sacred objects of the Cheyenne tribe, representing the spiritual and physical well-being of the nation. Two arrows are for warfare, and two are for hunting. The ceremony of the arrows, known as the Arrow Renewal, is a powerful and secret ritual performed at times of great crisis to renew the spiritual strength of the people.

The other major Cheyenne ceremony is the **Sun Dance**, or the Medicine Lodge ceremony. This annual summer ritual involves days of fasting, dancing, and self-sacrifice, offered for the renewal of the earth and the well-being of the tribe. The Sun Dance is a profound expression of Cheyenne faith, connecting participants with the Creator, the spirits, and the natural world. Despite suppression by the U.S. government in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sun Dance continues to be practiced today, a testament to the enduring strength of Cheyenne spiritual traditions.

Conflict and Resistance: The Cheyenne in the 19th Century

Early Conflicts and Treaties

The history of the Cheyenne tribe in the 19th century is marked by a series of escalating conflicts with the United States. The first formal treaty between the Cheyenne and the U.S. was signed in 1825 at Fort Atkinson, establishing friendship and trade relations. However, as American westward expansion intensified, so did the pressure on Cheyenne lands. The Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 attempted to define tribal territories, but the influx of settlers along the Oregon and Santa Fe trails, the discovery of gold in Colorado, and the slaughter of the buffalo herds soon made these boundaries meaningless.

The Sand Creek Massacre (1864)

One of the darkest chapters in the history of the Cheyenne tribe is the **Sand Creek Massacre**. On November 29, 1864, Colorado militia under the command of Colonel John Chivington attacked a peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho village at Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado, killing and mutilating at least 150 people, mostly women, children, and elders. The Cheyenne chief Black Kettle, who had been assured of protection by U.S. authorities, narrowly escaped but saw his people slaughtered. The massacre galvanized Cheyenne resistance and unleashed a wave of retaliatory warfare across the Plains. Sand Creek remains a profound wound in Cheyenne memory and a somber reminder of the brutality of American expansion.

The Indian Wars and the Battle of the Little Bighorn

In the decades following Sand Creek, the Cheyenne allied closely with the Sioux (Lakota) and other tribes in a desperate struggle to defend their lands and way of life. The Cheyenne were prominent in the **Red Cloud's War** (1866–1868), which resulted in the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868, guaranteeing the Black Hills and the Powder River country to the tribes. But the discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1874 led to another wave of encroachment, sparking the Great Sioux War of 1876–1877.

The most famous engagement of this war was the **Battle of the Little Bighorn** on June 25, 1876, where Cheyenne and Lakota warriors annihilated the 7th Cavalry under Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Cheyenne leaders such as **Lame White Man**, **Two Moons**, and **Wooden Leg**played key roles in the battle, defending the immense encampment along the Little Bighorn River. While the victory was stunning, it was ultimately hollow. The U.S. Army responded with overwhelming force, relentlessly pursuing the Cheyenne and Lakota, forcing their surrender and destroying their ability to sustain a nomadic life.

The Northern Cheyenne Exodus (1878–1879)

After the Little Bighorn, the Cheyenne were gradually forced onto reservations. The Southern Cheyenne were confined to a reservation in Indian Territory (Oklahoma), while the Northern Cheyenne were placed with the Lakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Conditions on the reservations were dire, marked by disease, starvation, and cultural suppression. In September 1878, a group of about 300 Northern Cheyenne, led by chiefs **Dull Knife** and **Little Wolf**, fled their reservation in Oklahoma in a desperate attempt to return to their homeland in Montana. This event, known as the **Northern Cheyenne Exodus**, was a harrowing journey of over 500 miles, facing relentless pursuit by the U.S. Army. The Cheyenne were eventually cornered at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where a tragic breakout led to the deaths of many men, women, and children. The survivors were finally allowed to settle on a reservation in Montana, which today is the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.

The Reservation Era and Cultural Suppression

Assimilation Policies and Boarding Schools

Once confined to reservations, the Cheyenne, like other Native American tribes, faced systematic efforts to erase their culture. The U.S. government implemented policies of forced assimilation through the Dawes Act of 1887, which broke up communal tribal lands into individual allotments, and through the establishment of off-

reservation boarding schools such as Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Children were forcibly taken from their families, forbidden to speak their native language, and punished for practicing Cheyenne religion. Despite these efforts, the Cheyenne held fast to their traditions in secret, maintaining their ceremonies, songs, and oral histories underground. The spirit of the Cheyenne people could not be extinguished.

Economic Hardship and Adaptation

The reservation era brought chronic poverty and economic hardship. The buffalo was gone, and the Cheyenne were forced to take up farming and ranching on lands that were often arid and unsuitable for agriculture. The government's ration system created dependency, and corruption among Indian agents was rampant. Yet the Cheyenne showed remarkable adaptability, learning new skills while never fully abandoning their traditional values. Cattle ranching became a mainstay of the economy on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, while some Southern Cheyenne found work as laborers, sharecroppers, and later in the oil and gas industries.

The Modern Cheyenne Tribe: Resilience and Revival

Self-Determination and Sovereignty

The history of the Cheyenne tribe in the 20th and 21st centuries is one of cultural revival and political empowerment. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 allowed tribes to reorganize their governments, and both the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma established modern constitutional governments.

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