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WEST

Words: Michelle Hespe
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IN NORTH DAKOTA, THE INDIAN HISTORY IS AS ENGROSSING AS THE TALES OF THE FIRST WHITE SETTLERS DETERMINED TO CALL THIS WILD LAND THEIR HOME



Main image: Jay Doan from Rolling Plains Adventures musters cattle on his family's working cattle farm, McKenzie, North Dakota
Above: Indian artefacts

The sun is midway through a spectacular setting in North Dakota as Jay Doan heads out to round up 2,500 head of cattle. Jay and his family run Rolling Plains Adventures, which offers everything from hunting coyote, deer and pheasants to horse riding and more.

So he's in his element here. Saddled up, he hits the plains at a canter and builds to a gallop, water flying up from around his horse's hooves on the swampy ground. The cattle start moving in noisy unison, a whirlwind of dust swirling as Jay whoops at them.

It's mesmerising to watch. North Dakota is as beautiful and enchanting in the summer as it is challenging and intimidating in the dead of winter. Many adventurers and explorers have lived their entire lives here, like Jay, on America's Great Plains – falling under its spell.

THE PROMISED LAND

An unnamed woman's diary entry in Medora Museum, central North Dakota, sheds some light on life in the early days of North Dakota.

With an un-ladylike need for independence firmly setting her apart from her familiars, the woman set off in 1830 when she heard about the promise of living in a place where she'd be given a plot of land for a shack and veggie patch. The great expanse of North Dakota was up for grabs – even if you were an outlaw or a peasant. She was one of many who joined the droves.

The first white settlers in the government's 'promised land' must have been shocked and often scared for their lives – huddled beneath

animal hides and sparse threadbare blankets in sub-zero temperatures, with Indians expertly navigating the land around them as though it were a children's playground.

It was called The Great Dakota Boom. The US government was giving away the land or selling it off incredibly cheaply to anyone who wanted to make a home for themselves and, in doing so, tame small packages of the wild child of Mother Nature.

THE INDIAN

Dakotah Wind Goodhouse is from the Sioux Tribe, of Standing Rock, North Dakota. His tribal name is 'The Scout That Came From Behind To Lead' or simply 'The First Scout'. He works at the North Dakota Humanities Council, checking educational papers and updated records on the history of Native American Indians.

Much of the history that was written about Dakotah and his people was skewed or incorrect because it was based on papers put together by non-native explorers, such as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark – both veterans of Indian wars in the Ohio Valley and men who had two main things on their minds: to study the land and everything about it and see how this vast space could benefit western society.

The relationships that Native American Indian tribes had with white settlers varied in many different ways. There were nearly 500 ethnically-identifiable tribes or nations in the United States at the time, so it's impossible to know how each one dealt with the changes that fell rapidly descended upon their way of



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

Delta Airlines (www.delta.com) flies from Australia's east coast to Los Angeles and onto Denver, Colorado, with connections to Bismarck in North Dakota. Return tickets vary from \$2,500 to \$3,000.

WHERE TO STAY

Rolling Plains Adventure (www.rollingplainsadv.com) have rustic apartments on the ranch for 4 to 15 people. Rates vary according to packages and activity options. In Medora, the Rough Riders Hotel (www.medora.com) offers modern rooms from \$189.

WHAT TO DO

To see how Indians lived on the Great Plains, visit the Knife River Indian Village (www.kniferiver.com). For nature spotting at Theodore Roosevelt National Park (www.theodore.roosevelt.national-park.com), contact Dennis at Epic Sports (www.epic-sports.net).

For more information about visiting North Dakota, go to www.ndtourism.com



life. But one thing's for sure – the way of life they'd known for centuries irrevocably changed in the mid 1800s.

Their culture, rituals, homes and headdresses are now all but gone, decimated when the white man settled and the tide of miners, homesteaders, towns and railroads sprung up faster than mushrooms, destroying life as it had been for as long as anyone could recall. The native people even lost their wild roaming livestock of buffalo they'd managed to keep as a sustainable resource for centuries.

"When I was younger," Dakotah says, "there was a medicine man that came to our school, and I remembered him telling us that our responsibility was to bring our culture back. I took that on as a personal commitment and a responsibility. I felt strongly that it was a weight on me."

But Dakotah is facing a battle. "When I graduated from university 10 years ago" he says, "I was the only one in my class with a traditional Indian name."

THE COWBOY

Jay Doan is from a family that first settled in McKenzie, North Dakota, as homesteaders during the Great Dakota Boom. They've stayed on, five generations later opening up their land to people who want to experience life on the plains. "This is no McRanch with 5-star meals," Jay says. "It's a working cattle farm where people can really experience what life here is all about."

After graduating from college, Jay moved to California and did the corporate thing. But his thoughts kept returning to the ranch where his brother had set up the hunting arm of the business. One day, after catching up with his sibling, he

decided to return home. "Everyone needs to get away sometimes" he says. "And I did, but I appreciated what we have here so much more when I came back."

Today, on the 4,000 hectares that the family has built up from the humble 64 hectares their great-great-grandfather originally settled back in 1882, the family operates a business that attracts people all over the world. "It's a great feeling, to be able to preserve the history of the place to share with others," Jay says. *



Above left: Cowboy Café, Medora **Left:** Dakota Goodhouse **Below:** Cabin at Rolling Plains Adventures

