

REGARDING COLUMBUS

An often-published cartoon shows the Indian people standing on the beach watching the arrival of Columbus. The caption reads, "Well, there goes the neighborhood." Another similar cartoon shows the same scene with one Indian saying to the other, "Let's let them stay. What harm can they do?"

Humor has always been a way to uncover the deep-seated truth about people's feelings. There have been many jokes about Columbus being a 'lost sailor' and mistaking the people of the New World for inhabitants of the Indies. But whatever Columbus may have been to the rest of the world, his exploits are seen differently by American Indians.

In this 500-year anniversary of the voyage of Columbus, it is not a time for rejoicing among the Indian population. The viewpoint is that the often-celebrated sailor brought about change that ultimately destroyed Native people. Although exploration of the New World was inevitable, the manner in which Columbus and his successors treated the Indian people is a sad period of history. Change was rapid and gave the Indian people no alternative to historical events. Needless to say, today's Indian population does not join with the rest of America in celebration of Columbus. To some, he was a hero but we need to look at the true history to show how Columbus came to be the specific historical figure that he is.

"DISCOVERY" ??

Webster's dictionary defines 'discovery' as, "the first to find out." Archaeological data shows that the Indian people have been in America for well over 60,000 years. Indian people believe that the tribes have been in America since the beginning of time. That is the true meaning of 'discovery.' In the history books the children read, the word 'discover' is consistently used with the voyages of Columbus. It makes it appear that he was the first human being to arrive in the New World. In fact, many timelines that are posted in classrooms show 1492 A.D. as the beginning of American history. Few timelines show the thousands of years of sophisticated Indian culture that had developed in America before that time.

So, what word do we use instead of 'discovery?' A T-shirt logo says that "Columbus didn't discover America, he invaded it." Perhaps we should look at how Columbus' arrival should be put into words. In the classroom, we should speak of Columbus' 'arrival' or 'landing' in the New World. An emphasis should be placed on the fact that there were many, many cultures in the Americas before Columbus and that his arrival was not a 'discovery' but rather, a voyage to an area that was new to European culture. This will give children an impression and respect for the cultures that had been in America prior to 1492.

WHO WAS COLUMBUS?

Recently, there has been much research into the origins of Columbus, with little result of definite historical facts. Most commonly, it is agreed that he was the son of a weaver, but his birthplace is disputed. Genoa, Corsica and Spain all claim him to be a native son. In addition, his name is in dispute since he changed it to fit the language of the country he lived in. Christopher Columbus is merely the English version of his name taken from a variety of various spellings.

Columbus was not always a sailor and navigator. Earlier, he was a 'jack-of-all trades' for the better portion of his life. He was a bookseller, weaver and tradesman before the lure of navigation. He became proficient at meteorology, navigation and seamanship. As did most tradesmen of the time, he became interested in finding sources of natural riches such as spices and goods from the Orient. At the time, a voyage to the East was long and strenuous and took years. It soon became apparent to Columbus that a different trade route should be possible that would shorten the journey to the East.

Columbus did NOT make his voyages to prove the world was round. Most navigators knew that the curvature of the earth existed. Most scholars of the time acknowledged a round earth but did not know the circumference and were hesitant to agree that a voyage around the world was feasible. Columbus encountered opposition to his 'round-world' theory not because of disbelievers but because people thought it might be impossible to sail around the world in a lifetime. Nowhere is it written that he was daring enough to risk 'falling off the edge of the world,' as is commonly thought in textbooks.

As most tradesmen of the period, Columbus was looking for a way to make profits. His navigational and sailing skills gave him an advantage to pursue his business ventures. Many people believe that his motive for exploration was to spread Christianity or simply because he was an adventurer. In reality, his motive was wealth. He had read of the exploits of Marco Polo who brought back riches from the Orient. Columbus' idea was to also tap the riches of the East but at the same time, find a shorter route. This became his idea and obsession for finding a shorter route by sailing WEST instead of east.

Contrary to popular textbook readings, Queen Isabella of Spain did **not** pawn the royal jewels to finance Columbus' expedition. At the time, the Spanish treasury was poor from the many battles with the Moors. Columbus' insistence that Spain finance his venture in order to acquire riches for Spain finally resulted in Isabella's OFFER to pawn the jewels. At last, through financial juggling and loans, Spain managed to finance Columbus' expedition. In return for the riches he hoped to bring back, Columbus insisted on 10 percent of the bounty, not just for his voyages, but for all subsequent exploration because of his pioneering efforts.

THE VOYAGE AND LANDING

Columbus kept very specific logs of his journey but sometime over the years, the original logs were lost. After his return, Columbus re-created his logs, but many errors were made, especially in the navigational area. Because he was not really sure where he landed, he assumed it was in the Orient.

Most historians agree on the fact that Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain with the three ships, the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. After a month in the Canary Islands repairing the Pinta, Columbus set sail again on September 6th, 1492. On October 12, land was sighted and the voyagers came to land. Another inaccurate historical item we see in textbooks is that Columbus himself was the one who first sighted land. Recent research shows that one of the seamen on the Pinta saw land and shouted, "Tierra" (Land). Since the royalty of Spain promised great riches to the first person to sight land, Columbus paid the seaman a small amount and wrote in his log that he himself was indeed the first to see the New World.

Historians do not agree on the exact landing site of where Columbus landed. Nearly every island in the Bahamas claims to be the first landing place. We do know that Columbus took Native people back to Spain with him. He said that they "...are docile and ought to be good servants." In reality, the people he took with him were treated as slaves and never returned to their homeland.

After Columbus made his second voyage to the Caribbean in 1494, it became clear that he was eager for all the riches the New World could offer. He took 1,500 Arawak Indians captive and filled his ship with 500 of them to be taken to Spain as slaves. Only 300 of the Arawaks survived the voyage and were ultimately put up for sale in Seville, Spain. Columbus urged royal backing for more ventures in slave trade but soon saw it was proving to be unprofitable because of the high death rate.

Still searching for riches, gold in particular, Columbus continued to sail the Caribbean. In one journal entry Columbus writes, "Gold is a wonderful thing. Whoever owns it is lord of all he wants." When he heard rumors of gold in the island province of Cibao, he instituted a system by which the Indians would provide the gold. Each person over the age of 14 was required to bring a certain amount of gold dust to a certain collection spot. When they complied with the required amount, they were given a token to wear

around their neck. If the Spanish found any person without a token, they would cut off the hands or kill them as an example to the others. During the two years under this system, over 1/3 of the Native population of Hispaniola was killed. Conservative estimates count this to be between 125,000 and a half million people.

Columbus made four voyages to the New World. After each voyage and return to Spain, Columbus demanded more and more profits and Admiralty titles. The Spanish treasury, although growing from the plunder in the New World, was not rich enough to give Columbus his ever-increasing percentages. On several occasions Isabella withdrew her original contracts with Columbus because of his insistence on a larger and larger share.

Columbus became a proverbial thorn-in-the-side to the Spanish royalty as well as to his fellow merchants. His boasting and profiting made him a nuisance to the extent that he was ultimately shunned by his peers. In 1506, he died in Valladolid, Spain. Where his remains are buried today is still a mystery since they were moved several times.

THE COLUMBUS LEGACY

To most people, Columbus was a hero who opened up trade and colonization in a new part of the world. He has been romanticized throughout history and his legend has been accentuated by romanticism and pure fiction.

Within the American Indian community, the view of the Columbus anniversary is a grim one. Why idolize a person who exploited Native populations? Why make a hero of a man who took slaves and brought a myriad of diseases to an otherwise peaceful people? It is a question that has been asked of all explorers who changed the face of history. The idea of Manifest Destiny has ruled since the first person made a journey to an unexplored land.

The National Council of Churches has joined with many other groups to call for a rethinking of Columbus. They stated, "A celebration is not an appropriate observance of this anniversary." Some states such as North and South Dakota have chosen to celebrate 'Native American Day' instead of Columbus Day.

So, let's re-think Columbus and look at his exploits in a different light. We can't change history, but the important job for educators is to teach about history in an honest way.