Blankets

In the coming months, we will honor those receiving names, participate in sweat lodge ceremonies and celebrate and honor our seniors. In all these celebrations, we will use blankets. Such a simple item has a great deal of cultural significance, and it is important to know the history. When you graduate, have a baby, and even pass on, blankets are very integral to our culture and way of life. Please read some of these research items and then find the word for blanket in your language.

 Blanket: ______________________ pronunciation: ____________________

Background information:

[Pendleton blankets: A thread to the past - CBS News]
[Louie Gong | Our Founder's Designs – Eighth Generation]

Questions to consider:

Does knowing the history of the significance of blankets to our people change your view of receiving a blanket? What shift has occurred for you or what new learning do you have now? How might you feel when you are given a blanket some day?

For more reading:

Indian Trade Blankets

Today there is a resurgence of interest . . . but first a bit of history

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"When I was a child, my family attended sacred Navajo ceremonies and dances . . . .
All around were men, women and children dressed in their finest velvet, satin, or cotton print clothes. There was the glint of silver jewelry accents. And they were always wrapped in Pendleton blankets."

A Woman's Experience by Rain Parrish.

Whether woven by a Native American or mass-produced by American woolen mills on a Jacquard loom, the blanket is a constant of Native American life and it is inextricably tied to the tradition of trade in the Southwest. To this day, the rituals tied to blankets are part of Indian life from birth to death: blankets are given to celebrate births, marriages, christenings. The Native Americans use blankets to pay off debts, to show gratitude, or to indicate status. Blankets are used as temporary shelter, as curtains or awnings, for warmth and for adornment. Indians cradle their babies in blankets, they dance in blankets, and when they die, often they are buried in their blankets.

Historic photo by
T. Harmon Parkhurst
Courtesy of
Museum of
New Mexico

The blanket has *always* been an integral part of Native American life. Historically, Indian people wore blankets made from woven plant fibers, animal hides and fur and eventually from fabric woven by hand from wool or cotton. Long before the advent of white settlers, Native Americans traded blankets in exchange for other goods; therefore, to accept commercially made blankets from Europeans in trade for beaver pelts was a natural transition.

It also became a matter of necessity as the whites moved west, killing buffalo and displacing many tribes. Without the buffalo hides, the Plains Indians were forced to rely on traders for their blankets.

The first trade blankets were very simple, featuring solid colors and a few contrasting stripes. The thick, striped **Hudson Bay Company** blanket was made in England and was traded by European trappers to the Blackfeet and Northern Plains Indians. As a quality wool blanket became an important trading commodity for trappers and explorers, American companies such as **Racine Woolen Mills** in Wisconsin, **Buell** in Missouri, **Capps** in Illinois, and the **Oregon City Mill** in Oregon began production of woolen trade blankets. Then in 1896, **Pendleton Woolen Mills** in Pendleton, Oregon became the only mill *founded specifically* to produce trade blankets. Each woolen mill had its own distinguishing characteristics, although their designs were similar. The Oregon City blankets were very intricately detailed, while the Capps blankets were simpler and more suited to Plains Indian tastes. The first Pendleton blankets incorporated either stripes, blocks, rectangles or crosses. In 1901, the introduction of the *Jacquard loom* affected the designs dramatically, enabling the mills to create more intricate zigzag designs.

By the late 1800s, most Indians had settled on reservations; trading posts became the focal points for food, jewelry, clothes and, of course, blankets. Through the trading posts, the English and American woolen mills found a built-in market for their blankets, the quality and designs of which were appreciated by the Native Americans who became the mills' best customers. Eager to please their Native American customers, many mills sent designers to live among the Indians in order to learn what designs and colors would appeal to the different tribes and pueblos across the United States and Canada. From the beginning, Pendleton produced high-quality blankets that eventually became the favorite Indian trade blanket. By the end of World War II, all the American woolen mills had gone out of business with the exception of Pendleton.

Throughout America, many non-Indians have grown up knowing the name Pendleton--because an aunt would have nothing but *Pendleton* jackets, because grandparents used Pendleton lap robes in their drafty automobiles, because "Indian-style" Pendleton blankets were draped over the backs of couches or folded at the foot of a bed. And because of their design, throughout the country they were called "Indian blankets," even though they were neither designed by Indian craftsmen nor were they Indian-made. The name Pendleton itself became a universal and generic descriptor for any of the distinctively patterned blankets, even those made by other mills.

Today there is a resurgence of interest in older trade blankets. The pre-World War II blankets that are especially sought after by collectors were light, warm, inexpensive and easy to replace . . . and were therefore really *used*. As a result, few have survived in good condition. The renewed interest in trade blankets has also created a new market. We are seeing an abundance of coats, couches and teddy bears made from old and new blankets. In addition, exciting *new* designs are being created by Pendleton. Notably, Santa Fe artist Ramona Sakiestewa recently became the first Native American to design a series of blankets for Pendleton.

There is such irony in this colorful story in which Native Americans are both the inspiration for the designs of American trade blankets as well as the blankets' most important consumers. But long before Europeans introduced commercially made blankets, and long before there were American trading posts, blankets were an integral part of Native American life and survival. As Bob Kapoun states, "Blankets have become a statement of American Indianness." The soul of this understanding reverberates in one of the most poignant statements ever recorded in American history. In his surrender speech delivered in 1897, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said:

> "It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

Our thanks to **Bob Kapoun** of The Rainbow Man in Santa Fe. His book with Charles Lohrmann, *Language of the Robe* (Peregine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, 1992), identifies and classifies the American trade blanket. The book offers hundreds of colorful and historic photographs of trade blankets and the people who wore them. Equally important, the book presents personal perspectives and sensitively chronicles the trade blanket's history as it coincides with the lives of Native Americans.

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