

INTRODUCTION: WAYS OF LOOKING AT HISTORY

In the beginning of this class we might ask the questions, "What is history?" and "What is the difference between the ways the Indians kept track of their history and the white men kept track of their history?" History is what has happened in the past. Anything that is already past and over with is history. But history is more than just the things and events of the past. History is the interpretation of the past. Many people live whose names are never recorded in books and records of history. Many things happen that are forgotten. Just certain things and certain people and certain events of the past stand out and are remembered. When we look at our history--whether it is Shawnee history, or Indian history, or American history or World history--we don't have knowledge of everything that happened in the past. Just certain things are important enough to be remembered and incorporated into the kind of knowledge we call history.

The Indian peoples that lived in North and South America before the white men came had ways of interpreting their own past. Their ways of looking at their history were different from those of the white men. The Indians, for the most part, were not concerned with leaving records and documents and books. They did not write down accounts of events that took place, or descriptions of their chiefs and famous men. A very few Indian groups in Old Mexico and Central America did have systems of writing, and they did keep records of things that were important to them. Most of these writings of the Indians of Mexico were concerned with their method of keeping track of time and about their religious ceremonies. However some of their writings were about outstanding leaders and the main political events of the times. But most Indians did not have a system of writing, and the knowledge which they had about the world and about their past they kept in their memories. This knowledge was transmitted mostly by word of mouth from generation to generation.



Symbols used in the system of writing of the Maya Indians of southern Mexico and Guatemala. These symbols represent whole words rather than speech sounds. They are called hieroglyphs.

Among the Indian people the old people were usually the custodians of knowledge and tribal history. These old people had learned a great deal about the world from their experience in living in it. Furthermore these old people had spent many years in hearing and memorizing and learning to recite the traditions of their people. Among the Indians old people were greatly respected. When they spoke about the past, younger people listened and paid attention. Thus, by the time a person reached old age, he had heard the traditions of his tribe told many times. He knew these stories