EDUCATOR GUIDE

Teaching the Native American Lives Series

Minnesota Humanities Center

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Center

SHAKOPEE MDEWAKANTON
SIOUX COMMUNITY

UNDERSTAND
NATIVE
MINNESOTA

CLEAN
WATER
LAND &
LEGACY
AMENDMENT

This guide was developed by the Minnesota Humanities Center, with generous support from the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) through its Understand Native Minnesota campaign, and is also funded in part by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund that was created with the vote of the people of Minnesota in November 4, 2008.

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Teaching the Native American Lives Series

Each biography in the Native American Lives series highlights individual resilience and creativity, as well as the challenges Native people have faced. The courage of such leaders continue to shape Native nations today. These stories invite students to see how individual lives reflect larger histories of Native survival, sovereignty, and cultural contributions. Together, the biographies show that Native nations are not only part of the past, but are sovereign, living communities whose leaders continue to shape American life.

Guiding Principles

When teaching these biographies, keep the following principles at the center:

- **Present Native people as whole human beings** — leaders, artists, athletes, family members, and community builders.
- **Connect personal stories to collective histories** — each life reflects the survival, cultural continuity, and knowledge systems of Native nations.
- **Highlight enduring sovereignty** — these biographies are part of the ongoing story of sovereign Native nations and their role in shaping the Americas today.
- **Create space for reflection and dialogue** that acknowledges challenges such as assimilation and racism, while also highlighting strength, resilience, and persistence.

Approaches to Teaching Through Inquiry

The Native American Lives series is well suited to inquiry-based instruction. The following practices can help educators design meaningful, student-centered learning experiences:

Begin with Primary Sources

Spark curiosity and deeper questioning by introducing photographs, maps, oral histories, or artifacts before reading the biography.

Develop Compelling and Supporting Questions

Frame each biography around a big question (e.g. How do individuals contribute to the strength of their communities?) and use supporting questions to guide exploration. Use the Big Ideas identified for each biography to frame your questions.

Situate Stories in Historical Contexts

Connect each biography to local, state, or national histories so students see both continuity and change.

Integrate Multiple Perspectives

Pair each biography with other Native voices, community stories, or tribal nation resources to highlight diverse experiences.

Facilitate Reflection and Dialogue

Create respectful classroom conversations that help students process complex topics and connect them to their own lives.

Conclude with Informed Action

Encourage students to demonstrate learning through civic or creative action, such as exhibits, reflections, or peer teaching.

Extended Learning Resources and Support

The back of each book includes:

Historical Context

Background on the Dakota and Ojibwe peoples, emphasizing their deep connections to Minnesota.

Chronological Framework

A detailed timeline of Native American history spanning from 900 CE through the 20th century.

Reference & Classroom Supports

A glossary of key terms, background information, and teaching suggestions, along with additional resources to deepen understanding of Dakota and Ojibwe history and culture.

Student Learning Extensions

Activities that build on the book's themes, offering opportunities for writing, discussion, and visual projects.

Creator Profiles

Biographical notes on the authors, illustrators, and series editors, all of whom have strong ties to Indigenous communities and storytelling.

Minnesota Academic Standards Connections

The Native American Lives series connects to many areas of Minnesota's academic standards. Below are examples of Social Studies and English Language Arts anchor standards that align with the series. These titles can also be used to support learning in art, science, and other subjects. We encourage teachers to explore multiple content areas and make connections that fit their classroom.

For complete standards language and grade-level benchmarks, visit the Minnesota Department of Education: education.mn.gov/mde/dse/stds/.

English Language Arts Standards (2020 MN Standards)

Because ELA standards emphasize skills rather than specific content, the Native American Lives series can be connected to nearly any standard within a unit of instruction. The anchor standards below provide especially strong opportunities for connection.

Reading 3	Read and comprehend texts highlighting historical and contemporary Dakota and Anishinaabe perspectives.
Reading 4	Read critically to comprehend, interpret and analyze themes and central ideas.
Reading 6	Analyze how fact, fiction, time, and author perspective influence meaning and style, including Dakota and Anishinaabe voices.
Writing 2	Write routinely for various purposes and disciplines, representing one's own personal perspective, identity and voice.
Writing 7	Engage in inquiry-based learning and research processes.
Listening, Speaking, Viewing and Exchanging Ideas 1	Exchange ideas through discussion and collaboration as listener, speaker, and participant, including diverse perspectives such as Dakota and Anishinaabe voices.

Social Studies (2021 MN Standards)

Specific titles that connect particularly well have been listed after each standard.

CITIZENSHIP AND GOVERNMENT

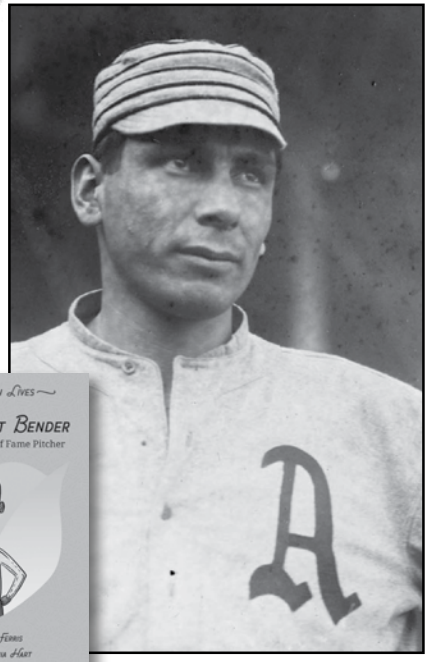
2. Democratic Values and Principles	Explain democratic values and analyze tensions in U.S. government and society. *Flanagan*
3. Rights and Responsibilities	Explain and evaluate rights and responsibilities in democracy. *Flanagan*
6. Tribal Nations	Evaluate the unique political status and governance of Tribal Nations. *Flanagan*

HISTORY

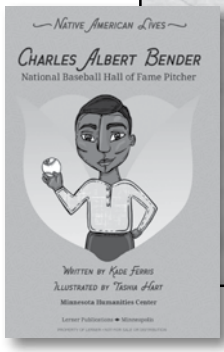
18. Context, Change, and Continuity	Ask questions about how things change and what stays the same in history. *Bender, Deloria, Schommer*
19. Historical Perspectives	Identify diverse points of view and how perspective shapes history. *Bender, Deloria*
20. Historical Sources and Evidence	Investigate and interpret historical sources, including oral traditions. *Deloria*
22. Connecting Past and Present	Use history to understand the roots of current issues and design responses. *Deloria, Schommer*

ETHNIC STUDIES

23. Identity	Analyze how power and language shape social identities. *Bender, Deloria, Schommer, Flanagan*
24. Resistance:	Describe how people fought for freedom and dignity. *Bender, Deloria, Schommer, Flanagan*
25. Ways of Knowing and Methodologies	Use Indigenous studies approaches to understand and challenge injustice. *Deloria, Schommer*



Charles Albert Bender: National Baseball Hall of Fame Pitcher



Author: Kade Ferris
Illustrator: Tashia Hart
Recommended Use:
Grades 4–8; adaptable as read-aloud for 1–3

Overview

This book shares the story of Charles Albert Bender, an Ojibwe man who rose from poverty on the White Earth Reservation to become one of baseball's greatest pitchers. As a child, Bender attended Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where he was a model student and athlete. At the age of 19, he joined the Philadelphia Athletics, helping the team secure multiple World Series victories, and perfected the slider pitch. Despite facing racism on and off the field, he built a lasting legacy as a Baseball Hall of Famer whose life embodied resilience, cultural survival, and Native pride.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze how racism and forced assimilation shaped the lives of Native people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- Understand sports as both a site of opportunity and exclusion in American history.
- Recognize Native voices, resilience, and cultural survival as integral parts of U.S. history.

Big Ideas to Explore with Students

Representation – The importance of Native visibility through participation in sports, media, and public life.

Survival and Identity – How Native peoples preserved identity and culture under assimilation pressure and displacement.

Boarding Schools – Carlisle Indian Industrial School and other boarding schools sought to strip Native children of their cultures.

Resistance and Resilience – The different strategies Native peoples used to endure and push back against injustice.

Legacy and Mentorship – Bender's innovations and role in supporting future players.

Native Pride – Recognition of Native excellence through Bender's Baseball Hall of Fame induction and defiance of societal odds.

Geographic Context

Bender grew up on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, where Ojibwe identity and family responsibilities shaped his early life. His career took him across the U.S., but his roots remained in his community.

Homes on the White Earth Reservation in 1880

Political Context

Bender's life unfolded during an era of federal assimilation policies, including boarding schools that stripped Native children of their languages and cultures. His achievements pushed against the racial prejudice and stereotypes Native people faced in mainstream society.

Historical Context

In the early 1900s, Native athletes faced systemic discrimination yet found opportunities to excel in sports. Bender's career illustrates how Native peoples navigated assimilation pressures while making lasting contributions to American life, challenging stereotypes through skill, pride, and perseverance.

Ella Cara Deloria: Dakota Language Protector

Author: Diane Wilson
Illustrator: Tashia Hart
Recommended Use: Grades 4–8; adaptable as read-aloud for 1–3

Overview

This book shares the story of Ella Cara Deloria, a Yankton Dakota scholar, linguist, and novelist who devoted her life to preserving Dakota language and culture. Raised on the Standing Rock Reservation and educated in boarding schools, she balanced the pressures of assimilation with her commitment to Dakota traditions. Through influential works such as *Dakota Texts, Speaking of Indians*, and *Waterlily,* Deloria documented Dakota knowledge, challenged stereotypes, and uplifted women's leadership. Her scholarship continues to inspire Indigenous language revitalization and cultural survival today.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze the importance of language and cultural revitalization survival in Native communities.
- Understand how Deloria's life reflects both the pressures of assimilation and the determination to preserve and recognize Dakota culture.
- Recognize the contributions of Indigenous women scholars to anthropology, literature, and history.

Big Ideas to Explore with Students

Assimilation, Language, and Survival – How Native people resisted assimilation and asserted preserved identity through language.

Kinship and Reciprocity – Dakota worldviews emphasizing family, community, and women's leadership.

Representation – The importance of Native women scholars and authors in shaping public understanding.

Intellectual Sovereignty – How Deloria reframed anthropology by centering Indigenous knowledge systems.

Geographic Context

Deloria was born on the Standing Rock Reservation and was a member of the Yankton Dakota, part of the Oceti Sakowin (Seven Council Fires). Her Dakota upbringing informed her scholarship and teaching.

Political Context

Deloria's life spanned an era of forced assimilation through boarding schools as federal Indian policy. By documenting language and lifeways, Deloria actively resisted these efforts and created tools for protecting Dakota culture for generations to come.

Historical Context

At a time when anthropology often treated Native peoples as "subjects," Deloria brought insider knowledge and authority, recording Dakota oral tradition, kinship, and tribal systems. Her novel *Waterlily* and her ethnographic works remain vital resources for language learners, historians, and Native nations today.

Peggy Flanagan: Lieutenant Governor

Author: Jessica Engelking
Illustrator: Tashia Hart
Recommended Use: Grades 4–8; adaptable as read-aloud for 1–3

Overview

This book shares the story of Peggy Flanagan, an Ojibwe woman whose leadership has transformed politics in Minnesota and across the nation. Born and raised in St. Louis Park, she found her voice through storytelling and advocacy, eventually becoming the first Ojibwe woman elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives. In 2019, she made history as the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota, the highest-ranking Native woman elected to executive office in U.S. history. Her journey reflects resilience, representation, and the power of listening and leading with community values.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze how representation shapes leadership, creates opportunity, and policy in the United States.
- Understand the unique challenges and contributions of Native women in public life.
- Recognize storytelling as a powerful tool for advocacy and systemic change.

Big Ideas to Explore with Students

Representation and Leadership – Why it matters for communities to see themselves reflected in government.

Storytelling as Leadership – How sharing personal stories can build understanding and influence change.

Family and Responsibility – How Flanagan's role as a mother and community member shapes her public service.

Native Values in Public Life – Including Ojibwe teachings such as respect and responsibility for future generations into politics.

Equity and Opportunity – How leaders work to ensure all communities have fair access to resources and representation.

Geographic Context

Flanagan was raised in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and is an enrolled citizen of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe. Her upbringing and tribal affiliation grounds her ways of working and political career in-community.

Political Context

Flanagan's career reflects broader movements for Native sovereignty, racial justice, economic justice, and equity in Minnesota and beyond. Her leadership highlights both the barriers Native women face in politics and the transformative possibilities of substantive authentic representation.

Historical Context

Flanagan's election as Lieutenant Governor in 2019 marked a historic moment for Native representation in U.S. politics. Her advocacy for education, equity, and Native sovereignty connects her leadership to longer histories of Native resilience, activism, and community to support communities that survive and thrive.

Carrie Cavender Schommer: Dakota Language Teacher

Author: Diane Wilson
Illustrator: Cole Redhorse Taylor
Recommended Use: Grades 4–8; adaptable as read-aloud for 1–3

Overview

This book shares the story of Carrie Cavender Schommer, a Dakota woman whose lifelong dedication to language and culture helped revitalize her people's identity. Born in 1930 at the Upper Sioux Indian Community, she grew up speaking Dakota and later faced the challenges of assimilation, boarding schools, and the legacy of her family's history of forced relocation. As a teacher and elder, she created curriculum, developed a written system for Dakota language, and mentored generations of learners. Schommer's story showcases the power of language and education in strengthening Indigenous identity and community.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze the relationship between Dakota language, culture, and identity.
- Understand the impact of boarding schools, colonization, and displacement on Dakota survival of the Dakota culture.
- Recognize the role of elders and intergenerational teaching in sustaining Indigenous knowledge.

Big Ideas to Explore with Students

- **Language, Identity, and Empowerment** – How Dakota communities held on to preserved culture through language and used education as a tool for survival.
- **Intergenerational Teaching** – The role of elders and family in passing down language and culture.
- **Community Leadership** – Schommer's contributions as a teacher, elder, and advocate for Dakota people.
- **Lasting Intergenerational trauma for Dakota families**, including Carrie's ancestors.

Geographic Context

Schommer grew up in the Upper Sioux Indian Community (Hekute), where Dakota language, traditions, and land-based practices shaped her worldview.

Political Context

Schommer's life was shaped by federal policies of assimilation and boarding schools that attempted to erase Indigenous languages and traditions. Schommer's language revitalization work reflects broader Dakota resistance, sovereignty, and advocacy for cultural and land reclamation.

Historical Context

From the trauma of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 and land dispossession, to the pressures of 20th-century assimilation, Dakota communities continue the fight to maintain identity and traditions. Schommer's story illustrates how one woman transformed those histories of loss into a lifelong mission of language revival, cultural renewal, and community empowerment.

Building Background Knowledge

Use these resources to build your own understanding and to give students richer, more accurate perspectives when teaching the Native American Lives Series. While these resources are not comprehensive or limited to Dakota and Ojibwe sources, they're meant to spark ideas and share examples that can help you begin exploring how to teach Native lives in broader, more inclusive ways.

Overall Background Educator Resources

Smithsonian Native Knowledge 360° – Comprehensive background materials and inquiry lessons from Native perspectives.
https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/lessons-resources/search-resources

PBS Molly of Denali – A children's program and resources that highlight Native voices, stories, and cultures in engaging ways for younger learners.
https://static.pbslearningmedia.org/media/media_files/b362cb0f-09f9-4666-a290-705c826f6a52/da18c97e-700f-445e-96e4-ecaa58001261.pdf

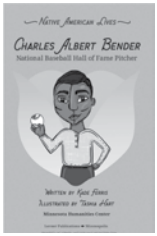
Brenda Child - *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families*, 1900–1940 (1998)

Minnesota Department of Education – "American Indian Literature Resources"– A starting point for educators to incorporate American Indian literature, with a focus on Anishinaabe and Dakota, into their classes.
https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/indian/teach/

Understand Native Minnesota – Publications to Support Teaching of Native Content – Produced by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, this guide provides K-12 educators in Minnesota with reliable and culturally respectful teaching resources aligned with Minnesota's K-12 academic standards.
https://www.understandnativemn.org/publications/

Enhancing Background Knowledge on Each Book

These resources are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are not confined to Dakota and Ojibwe sources. They are offered to encourage broader thinking and provide starting points for teaching about Native lives.



Charles Albert Bender

Tom Swift, *Chief Bender's Burden: The Silent Struggle of a Baseball Star* (2010)

NBC DFW, "Get to Know the History of Native Americans in Baseball"
https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/sports/get-to-know-the-history-of-native-americans-in-baseball/2811534/

Jeffrey Powers-Beck, "Chapter 4 - Bender, Meyers, and Thorpe in the Big Leagues," *The American Indian Integration of Baseball* (2004)

Ella Cara Deloria

Ella Cara Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (1944)

Janette K. Murray, "Ella Deloria: a biographical sketch and literary analysis"
https://commons.und.edu/theses/445/

Susana Dalena Grajales Geliga, "Ella Deloria: A Dakota Woman's Journey Between An Old World And A New"
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historydiss/69/

Peggy Flanagan

Achieve Twin Cities, "EDTalks: Peggy Flanagan 'Knowing Where We Come From'"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a1UQ0rB9lw.

Politico, "Peggy Flanagan's unlikely American political journey"
https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/28/peggy-flanagan-minnesota-lt-governor-interview-00176425

Carrie Cavender Schommer

John Hickman and Jon Carlson, Interview of "Carrie Schommer, Upper Sioux Agency (2011)"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1Utom1aO9I

"Carrolynn (Carrie) Schommer: Dakota First-Language Speaker and Educator" | Phillips Indian Educators
https://www.pieducators.com/wisdom/carrie_schommer

Minnesota Historical Society, "Jeffers Petroglyphs: Dakota Elder Carrie Schommer"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iA-QFY4oO0

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Coming January 1, 2026: three new powerful stories you won't want to miss!

Explore More

Order/pre-order books, access additional resources, professional development opportunities, and series updates at the Native American Lives series webpage.

mnhum.org/program/native-american-lives-series

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