

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

Wooden Leg Describes His Childhood

Wooden Leg was a Northern Cheyenne warrior who lived during the nineteenth century. He witnessed the transition from traditional life on the plains to life on reservations. He participated in several famous battles including the Battle of the Little Big Horn, which the Cheyenne called the Battle of the Greasy Grass. In 1903, Wooden Leg was interviewed extensively by Thomas B. Marquis, a former agency doctor for the Cheyenne. In this excerpt, he describes his childhood.

As a little boy I used to ride in a travois basket when the tribe moved camp. Two long lodgepoles were crossed over the shoulders or tied to the sides of a horse. Thus they were dragged over the country. Buffalo skins were used to stretch across between the widely gaping poles behind the horse. Upon or into these bagging skins were placed all of the family property, in rawhide satchels or as separate loose articles. The smaller children also rode there. I have fond recollections of this kind of traveling/ Many an hour I have slept in that kind of gentle bed. Roads were not needed for this kind of vehicle. A travois can be taken anywhere a horse will go, and there never is any jolting. The spring of the poles and the skin takes up all of the shocks.

When I was six years old I asked my father: "Will you give me a horse?" "Yes, you may have any horse of mine that you want, but you must catch him," he replied. He gave me a rawhide lariat rope. He and my mother and some other older people laughed about it, but I took the matter seriously. With the lariat looped and coiled I went out among the herd to search for horses belonging to my father. I selected a small pony as being my choice. I maneuvered a long time before I could get the loop about its neck. It struggled, but I hung on. When it quieted down I followed carefully along the line, talking soothingly, until it allowed me to pat its neck. After a while I got into its mouth and around its lower jaw a loop of the rawhide, according to the old Indian way of making a bridle. When it had calmed after this new advance I began to make strokes upon its back. Then I tucked the long coil into my belt, the same as I had seen men do, and I climbed quickly upon the little animal. It shied, and I fell off. But I still had my rope, this uncoiling from my belt as the pony moved away. I seized the tether and followed again its guidance to the coveted mount. More petting and soothing talk. Another attempt at riding. Off again. Before making a third try I spent a long time at the gentle taming procedures. Nevertheless, the pony shied and then bucked after I mounted it. But I grabbed its mane and stuck to my seat. Within minutes I had control. I rode to my father's lodge.

"Yes, that is your pony, to keep," he told me.

Bands of us boys went out at times on horseback to hunt wolves. We had only the bows and arrows. We killed many wolves with the arrows. My father had given me a good bow and a supply of arrows when I was nine or ten years old. We then were in the Black Hills country.

Source: *Wooden Leg A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, Interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis, University of Nebraska Press, 2003, pages 5-7.

