

WE SHALL REMAIN

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In Their Own Words: An interview with the makers of WE SHALL REMAIN

Interviewees

Sharon Grimberg, executive producer, WE SHALL REMAIN

Mark Samels, executive producer, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho), director, *After the Mayflower, Tecumseh's Vision, Trail of Tears*

R. David Edmunds (Cherokee), series advisor

Harry Oosahwee (Cherokee), language dialect coach, *Trail of Tears*

Shirley Snee (Sicangu Lakota), executive director, Native American Public Telecommunications

Cassius Spears (Narragansett), cultural advisor, *After the Mayflower*

Questions (click on a question to skip to the answer)

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Why WE SHALL REMAIN?

Grimberg: Most Americans, when they think about American history, think about this country being a country of immigrants; the Europeans who came here and built new lives. What they don't really think about is the fact that this continent was very, very densely inhabited before any white people came here, and that those original inhabitants of this continent played an incredibly important role in shaping this country. We wanted to change that, and I think that's what WE SHALL REMAIN does. It re-looks at American history, and looks at the role that Native Americans played in shaping the United States. We explore westward expansion, but looking east instead of looking westward. We tried to re-imagine the American experience through the eyes of Native people.

WE SHALL REMAIN IS AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PRODUCTION
IN ASSOCIATION WITH NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLIC TELECOMMUNICATIONS FOR WGBH BOSTON.



Native American
Public Telecommunications



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How did you choose the five stories that make up the series?

Grimberg: In the beginning, when we were thinking about what stories we wanted to tell, we went in with a certain concept about what these films should be. And we worked very closely with Native historians and advisors, and people in the production community to think about what the important stories were, what stories should we tell, and how should we tell them. And they really reshaped our thinking about it.

We wrestled with how to tell this story. There might have been an encyclopedic approach that would have started with a first contact story and sort of taken us across three, four hundred years, and tried to give our viewers a big picture. And we realized that was very difficult way to tell this story. We'd never be able to tell every Native person's history in detail. So what we wanted to do was to focus on five pivotal moments and several Native leaders, taking viewers on a three-hundred-year journey. We wanted people to understand about the complexity and density of Native populations in the North East in 1620, and we also realized it was very, very important to take this story into the twentieth century. Too often the story of Native Americans stops at the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the Indian wars, and it almost feels like that's the end of Indian history for many Americans. Well it's not the end of Native American history, and it would have been a terrible travesty for us to end the series there.

Samels: We wanted to have very discrete stories that were strong stories with strong characters. But we wanted to select those stories in a way that they formed a whole. And I think the idea that informed us in that selection process, was this idea of strategies of survival and strategies of resistance. And I think each of the shows demonstrates a different approach to the threat to Native people's very way of life.

How do these five diverse stories fit together?

Eyre: I think each one of the five episodes in the series is very different in terms of the aesthetic, and the mixture of documentary and dramatic narrative. It doesn't have a continuity that you would expect in a traditional mini-series. If you see one of them, I don't think you can really say you've seen them all, because they're so eclectic. And I think that the eclectic nature of it is part of Indian country as a whole. Indian country, in my mind, is the most diverse group of American people in this country. And that's because there's over five hundred different tribes, and hundreds of different languages. There are different points of assimilation, and different economics. Different dislocations. Different religions. We're all pretty diverse in our own right as filmmakers, so the series reflects it.

What role do Native languages play in WE SHALL REMAIN?

Grimberg: It was very important to us to include Native languages in these films, so we worked very closely with actors so that they could learn Nipmuc and Shawnee and Cherokee. In *Geronimo*, you'll see that many of the interviewees actually chose to speak Apache rather than English. They felt more comfortable speaking Apache.

It's a very moving to hear a language you've never ever heard spoken before. There is immediacy and a connection to that story that I think would have been very, very different if everyone had chosen to speak in English. And it really shows the viability and the strength of that Apache culture to this day.

Oosahwee: I think the language really brings it together, ties the whole history to what it was. We did have Cherokee speakers during that time period, and they did speak a lot of our language during the treaty sessions. So therefore I think use of the language was really important during this production and I think it really will add to the whole production itself.

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Sometimes I feel like that people don't know that languages exist, tribal languages especially, across the country. You know, we have so many tribal people that have lost languages over the years, and to have a tribal group that can still speak a language and is trying to maintain it, is going to be unique in itself. Hearing the language is going to bring awareness to people that the language does still exist, and it's pretty strong, especially in Oklahoma where we have a lot of speakers.

Sneve: One of the ways that the WE SHALL REMAIN series really embraces Native America today is through the use of Native languages in these films. As a person who learned my Native language in college, it's important for me to have other people know that our languages are still alive and still very important to our cultures.

How did Native cultural advisors contribute to the films?

Grimberg: We had cultural consultants to help us with everything from what people would have worn, how they would have dressed, and when they would have worn war paint and when they wouldn't have, how they would have interacted socially, prepared their food, and how they came together for celebrations.

Spears: You'll find that people just kind of group all of us [Natives] into one. We've got the big war bonnets and everybody thinks we ride horses and have spears, and it's nothing like that all. So when you actually study the individual tribes and their different locations, you'll see that they work with their environment, their resources in that area. That is how they're dressed. They're dressed with white-tail deer skin that's been tanned or they have turkey feathers in their hair, or their colors aren't bright because they're hunting. Their diet is completely different because they're eating the foods in this general area. Their structures, their dugout canoes, you can go on. Everything is from their resources. So how are you going to tell a story about Native people if you don't include all that?

So when you're putting a headpiece in and you're using a feather from a bird that even doesn't live in this area, we can almost tell the quality of the movie is going to be because you've already started off wrong. So that's why I feel that it's really important to have a cultural advisor on set, and if you want a quality movie, to actually include this type of detail. It also makes the actors feel a lot more comfortable about what they're doing.

How have Native peoples traditionally been portrayed in Hollywood?

Eyre: One of the important things in this series is that it gives an alternate perspective of the factual traits of Native people. A lot of times I joke around that, wouldn't it be great to have a Wal-Mart commercial with Native people in it? Because Native people per capita probably support Wal-Mart more than any other people in the country. But then the mass media would probably say, "Well how do we know that person's Native?" And then they would mandate that you put braids on the person or something. It's important that we don't have the braids and the feathers. And it's important that we show the spectrum of Native America. For me, part of the perspective is showing the diversity of the series and the subjects.

Edmunds: Well, there are the stereotypes of Native American people that are often used in other documentaries. One usual focus of many stories is that Native Americans are basically warriors who are resisting militarily. Instead, WE SHALL REMAIN highlights the importance and the intricacies of the situations, like how the Cherokee Nation, like other nations throughout the world, had its own politics and interacted with the Americans. The other thing, which I think that we've done very successfully, is we show that Indian people are not victims. Instead, we illustrate that Indian people are agents in their own history.

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What is different about the Native people portrayed in WE SHALL REMAIN?

Grimberg: We wanted to present Native American people who are real. People who laugh; who are sometimes angry; who have a whole range of emotions. And so, it was very important to us to create situations in which real interactions occurred. Where people are playing with their kids. Where they are teasing each other. Where they're not simply stereotypically majestic and noble. We wanted to give people a real diversity of emotions and feeling and create real characters.

Eyre: My favorite part about the episodes I was involved in was the humor in them. The fact that, you feel like these are real people, faced with huge obstacles and circumstances. And I'm not sure what I would have done in those cases. And you get to live through that a little bit as you're making a project.

What was it like to share the set with another director?

Eyre: WGBH and Sharon Grimberg offered that Ric Burns and I might work together on *Tecumseh's Vision*. And so Ric and I sat down in New York and talked and had a great lunch. And as we started to work it was an amazing experience, because he is so passionate and so driven that I really felt like "Wow, I need to learn from this guy." He's one of the most passionate filmmakers that I've ever met.

And even though we're both directors and you wouldn't think that it would work well, it worked great. We were in Indiana and went out to Outback Steakhouse every night. Had our vegetables and talked. It was great to work with another filmmaker that's a real filmmaker. You have so much that you're comparing and contrasting. And we were ultimately collaborating. Standing back for one and the other would move forward. Then I'd move forward, he'd move forward. And we gave each other the space to do that because we trusted each other. It was easy for me to look at Ric and say "Okay. He's got that." And then all of a sudden it dawned on me that maybe co-directing isn't so bad.

What filming techniques were used to unify the films?

Samels: Anytime you attempt to do a historical program prior to the middle of the 19th century you're in a situation where you have a paucity of images. Even after the middle of the 19th century often times you don't have enough images. How you fill them in is really one of the biggest challenges of the whole field of historical documentary filmmaking.

Very early on in the process we started to think about the texture of this series. I think one of the things that we concluded was that often times dramatic re-enactments fall short because they have too much of a sense of realism. So we looked at the elements that conspire to give you that impression, and we started to peel them away. We looked at the actual use of film stocks and how we treated the film; the use of color, contrast, composition, and focus. Each and every one of those elements we examined carefully to think "How can we create a greater sense of authenticity?" And often times it's by subtracting something and offering the opportunity for the audience to fill it in themselves. It's imagining what's not there.

So we're often using very dark spaces. Or lack of focus. Or something obscured. In combination with that we're often trying to accentuate the texture and palette of the time rather than modernism. You know, there really weren't the kind of primary colors in the world we're recreating for the most part. There were some vibrant colors, but not the same colors we live and work in. And so we tried to approximate that in the look of the series. And I think through a combination of the way it was shot, the way the film was processed and the way that a number of different people contributed to the look, we really achieved that higher level of authenticity.

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Eyre: We talked a lot about the way that these would be shot. Ric Burns, our cinematographer Paul Goldsmith, and I, especially with *Tecumseh's Vision*, talked a lot about how the things that you don't see are the most important elements. It's like a sketch. And the sketch offers the audience the opportunity to put their own imagination into the material. And interact with what they're seeing.

So we did a lot of sketching with soft focuses. With tight lenses, wide lenses. And we also wanted to do the grandeur of the landscapes and the beauty of the landscapes. So we kind of came at it from that perspective and that worked out really well for us.

What do you hope WE SHALL REMAIN accomplishes?

Samels: I hope what people take away from WE SHALL REMAIN is a little bit of surprise, to be honest with you. I think if we have a familiarity with things Indian or Native American, it's a superficial familiarity. And I think this series offers anybody who has an ounce of curiosity of who Natives are, and really what America is, a tremendous readjustment of their view. It's not a depressing, dark story. It's not an inevitable story. It's a surprising story in every way. It's a surprising story in the depth of the response that Native people had. It's a surprising story in the ingenuity that they showed. It's a surprising story in the complexity within these communities.

Eyre: I think it's important to young people and to the rest of us. I remember last year I was at an Indian school speaking, and I asked the Native youth at that school who their heroes were. I remember the kids saying Beyoncé, and of course Michael Jordan. It struck me that none of them identified themselves with a Native hero or a Native leader. And it saddened me. And I said to myself "Now what does it take for our people to identify with leaders that are like them or of themselves?"

So when you make something you hope that it has some effect. And that's one of the effects that I hope this series has. Which is that young people can say "Okay I'm Wampanoag and I'm important. Millions of people are seeing a story about us tonight." And that goes with the rest of the series. That goes with the Cherokees and the Apaches and all the rest of the people in the series.

Edmunds: There is something in this for all Americans, whether they are interested in history or not, to really gain a better understanding about the American past. And the American past is a past for all Americans; white, Native American, African-American, Hispanics, and we're all part of that. We all share that and we'll share that in the future. This illustrates how that mélange has taken place in the past and how it will continue. This is not a melting pot. This is a great American stew. And those lumps are going to continue in that stew and we're all going to have to learn to live together. And this I think offers some insights into how we've attempted to do so.

Why AMERICAN EXPERIENCE? Why PBS?

Samels: As we were approaching our 20th season, we really started to reflect on the programs that we'd made, and we'd done some really nice films on Native American subjects. But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that there was a really substantial part missing. It was in a subject area that, frankly, we felt had not been adequately covered. So it was relatively fresh. And the more we looked, the more we realized the stories were really central to the whole enterprise of America itself.

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of public television and the opportunities we have at AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is that we are afforded a really important resource: time. Time to get it right. It took a long

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time to figure out what stories were the right stories to tell, a long time to get those stories right, and an even longer time to get the combination of narration and commentary and dramatic re-enactments right.

Eyre: Working on a PBS project, we weren't as rushed as a normal production, and ultimately, the executive producers trusted the filmmakers to do these projects. They really stood back and said "We've hired these people to do them. And we're going to trust in what they do." There are obvious differences between the five episodes as a result; each one has a piece of the individual auteur in it.

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ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including twenty-five Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and fourteen George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for *Two Days in October*.

ABOUT WGBH BOSTON

WGBH Boston is America's preeminent public broadcasting producer. More than one-third of PBS's prime-time lineup and companion Web content as well as many public radio favorites are produced by WGBH. The station also is a pioneer in educational multimedia and in access technologies for people with disabilities. For more information visit wgbh.org.

For more information about AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and WE SHALL REMAIN visit pbs.org/weshallremain

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