

By the People: Conversations Beyond 250

“Before Wyoming: The West in 1776”

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

What was going in the West while the thirteen colonies fought for independence? Over the summer, hundreds of people across Wyoming gathered at a series of community film screenings and panel discussions to find out the answer to that question. They came together to watch a new documentary from Wyoming PBS, Wyoming Humanities, and Caldera Productions called “Before Wyoming: The West in 1776.” Expanding the story of 1776 beyond the East Coast, the film explores thriving indigenous nations, early European influence, and the changing world of the West through historians, Native voices, artifacts, and the perspective of young people today. In this episode, we speak to the film’s producers and experts about the history it tells and nuances of telling this history.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *With this year being the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, there’s been a lot of focus on the East Coast and the 13 colonies. But just because more has been written about the East, doesn’t mean time was standing still for the rest of the country, the lands that would become the United States we know today. So, what was going on in the West in 1776?*

Over the summer, hundreds of people across Wyoming gathered at a series of community film screenings and panel discussions to find out the answer to that question. They came together to watch a new documentary from Wyoming PBS, Wyoming Humanities, and Caldera Productions called “Before Wyoming: The West in 1776.” The film expands the story of 1776 beyond the East, revealing the overlooked history of the Northern Rockies and the Great Plains. It explores thriving indigenous nations, early European influence, and the changing world of the West through historians, Native voices, artifacts, and the perspective of young people today. And now in this episode, you get to join in on this important conversation as we speak to the film’s producers and experts about the history it tells and nuances of telling this history.

You’re listening to By the People: Conversations Beyond 250.

By the People is a national initiative developed by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

Throughout 2026, humanities councils across the United States, its territories, and DC developed community-driven programs in collaboration with local partners. These programs explored 250 years of our nation’s cultural life and imagined our shared future.

In each episode of this podcast, we'll revisit one of these inspiring programs to hear from the community leaders, historians, performers, and culture bearers who steward and preserve the living traditions that have shaped this nation.

The statewide screening series for "Before Wyoming" was hosted by Wyoming Humanities, so without further ado, I'll turn it over to the humanities council and the film's producers to tell you more.

Chloé Flagg:

Hi from Wyoming. Thanks so much for joining us today. I am Chloé Flagg, the Executive Director of Wyoming Humanities Council, also a co-producer of the film, *Before Wyoming: The West in 1776*. Today with us we have Geoff O'Gara, producer and director of the film, and Lynette St. Clair, educational consultant and Eastern Shoshone language preservationist.

Ok Geoff and Lynette, 1776...the West...the area we know as Wyoming. What's there? Who's there? What's happening? What's going on in the West in 1776?

Geoff O'Gara:

Well, I'll start off just by giving a little bit of a sort of visual portrait of what it would be like then, because the plains were then still populated by immense numbers of buffalo, and in that period, I want to be a little broader than just 1776. The Eastern Shoshone and other tribes were moving. The Eastern Shoshone had come out of the Great Basin and onto the plains. They were one of the first tribes to acquire horses and began using them amidst that great sea of buffalo. I guess the main thing I would think you'd notice if you had landed in the middle of it was how dynamic and in motion it was. So, there were peoples moving here and there. The Shoshone were suddenly had a much wider range to hunt. They were, in the words of their own elders, "rich" because they could hunt bison by horseback, and they could dominate a huge sector of the of the Great Plains.

It didn't last long because there were other forces coming in. The main thing I think you would feel though is number one, there are people here and they are living a very active lifestyle, and second, it's a very dynamic world. Things are changing rapidly, but it still looks in many places like parts of Wyoming do today. There are vast open spaces. There are vast plains areas and mountainous areas where you're just not going to run into a lot of people today, and you can still see what it would have looked like then to the Eastern Shoshone and other tribes.

Lynette St. Clair:

And I'm going to add to that by saying, imagine you're dropped in the middle of this area, and just imagine what you hear. You hear the bellowing of the buffalo, moving freely across the prairies and across the lands, you hear the clamoring of people, children laughing, women having conversations in Shoshone, people being identified through their clans or their bands by the foods that they ate and the foods that they hunted. You know, you had the Agaidika, you know our salmon relatives from over the mountain. You have the Gweechoon Dekka, who are the buffalo eaters. You have the Tukudeka, who live up high in the mountains. You have all of these different factions of the Shoshonean family sharing the

same distinct languages and cultures. That's what you see here, and that's what you'll see if you watch this film.

Chloé Flagg:

Alright, the film we're talking about today is *Before Wyoming: The West in 1776*. Geoff, tell me about the film. Tell me about the inception of the film. How did this come to be?

Geoff O'Gara:

Well, the film really was...I would give the Humanities Council of Wyoming a lot of credit. You know, this opportunity to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the country was coming up, and there was support being issued to all the states to participate with some kind of activity. And as we kind of brainstormed about it. The obvious thing about Wyoming is it didn't exist where it is now, 250 years ago. So, what are you going to do to kind of join in this conversation and become part of it? And the obvious thing was, look at the old maps, talk about what was here, find people from communities that were here when there were no Europeans or Americans here, and see if there's a story to tell about what was going on in this part of the world, and by that, I mean the Northern Rockies and Great Plains when the revolution was going on in the 13 colonies on the East Coast. Happily, with the help of people like Lynette, we found there were a lot of stories to tell, more than we could even fit in in this project, but it made for a lot of a lot of good work for us to do.

Chloé Flagg:

Thank you so much, Geoff. Yes, and Lynette, like I said, is an educational consultant. She's also a Shoshone language preservation expert. Lynette, thank you so much for everything that you brought to this project. For you, what is important about this story, and why is this worth telling?

Lynette St. Clair:

So, amplifying our indigenous voices is really important, and that's what I hope this film will help people understand. Is just centering our indigenous perspectives, understanding that we had a history here long before America was founded, and we want to be able to share people share that history with people so they're informed, and so we can continue telling our stories in from our own perspective and from our own voices, because so long ago and so many stories that have been written about Indigenous peoples of this country have been told from one perspective. So, it's nice to be able to have a multiple perspective on this topic.

Chloé Flagg:

Absolutely. And I think you bring up a really good point. And I know Dr. Melissa Morris, an associate history professor at the University of Wyoming, featured in the film, has brought this up, right, that so much of what we understand about history in America is the written record, and we don't credit or give weight to oral histories, right? Which indigenous populations have used for centuries to share their

knowledge and their histories, right? So, how do you think, Lynette, in your role as an educational consultant, and then Geoff, in your role as a filmmaker, how can historians and filmmakers and education better integrate indigenous perspectives and oral histories into the broader narrative of this period, for sure, but in general too.

Lynette St. Clair:

I think just by doing what Geoff and his team has done is in that's including the voices of the people. It's so important for us to be able to tell our stories because, like you mentioned, Chloe, you know our elders are the ones, our oral histories are the ones that tell us who are what our history was, what it is, and also it helps to elevate our living histories and dispel, I guess, persistent stereotypes that we have about the people here. We're not vanishing as so many people think. Contrary to popular belief, we're still here. We've been here for you know since time immemorial, and we're making, you know, contributions to this land and and trying to assert our own agency over the stories that we we have to tell.

Geoff O'Gara:

I can add to that a little bit. I'm trying to remember the quote. Hilary Mantel, the English writer, said that history is always changing behind us, which is a great perspective on on what we're doing with this, and what I think you find in a lot of other good histories. There are a lot of stories to tell. The maps from the 18th century say parts unknown for this region, so we knew there were stories there because, in fact, through the oral histories, through the winter counts, which is a kind of hide-painting way of telling the story of the past, Native peoples have been telling stories about what was really going on here at that time as well. We just have to bring them to light, and there are conventional historians in that sense of writing books like Ned Blackhawk who have been doing that, and that those stories are beginning to come out. We're sort of joining in that parade through the wonderful cooperation that we got on the Wind River Reservation and the help that we got from Lynette and people like John Washakie, any number of folks who were willing to talk to us about what they had learned through oral histories passed down through the generations, what we could see in winter counts that were there.

The tricky part with documentaries is you got to find a way to make it visual. You can't just -- I mean, we can do talking heads, but we don't want to do that. We want activity. The other thing we found, though, that is that in Wyoming, the landscapes are in many places largely unchanged from what they were, even as long as 250 years ago. So, you can get things like that that you might not otherwise be able to get. We also had a lot of assistance. We had places we could go. We could go to the natural corrals in the Red Desert where Native peoples used to keep horses when they got horses. We can go to the Buffalo Initiative, which Lynette is very much a part of, where we could actually see bison living as they would have been back then, and Native peoples interacting with them. So again, we found ways with a little help to bring some of these things to life visually and tell that story. But as Lynette has said, those stories are there, you just, as Colin Calloway, a historian, said to us, "You just have to know where to look for them."

Lynette St. Clair:

I'm so glad you brought that up because, of course, place-based education is really a part of what this story is all about. You know, Geoff mentioned the corrals and the Red Desert area, and you know, just looking at the history here in the landscapes, it is very much unchanged. And how lucky are we that we live in Wyoming, where we have this beautiful landscape with these stories that are written in petroglyphs, and those ancient stories tell us about the migrations of the people, about the animals, about what was happening in that time that predates even you know 1776. It goes way back, you know, for thousands and thousands of years. So, we're really fortunate as Wyomingites that we're able to enjoy these sites.

Geoff O'Gara:

I want to mention one other contribution that we got that helped us make this story visual, and that is I just kind of randomly called the Minutemen Reenactors up in Lexington, Massachusetts, and said, "We'd love to film up there. What would you think? Sort of wondering if they wouldn't feel like, "Well, you're telling a story about the West and Native Americans. That's not our thing. They were wonderful. They welcomed us up with a film crew. We shot. We interviewed them. They actually knew that the story was much bigger than just what happened on The Green at Concord and Lexington. So that was really helpful because again, you need to make these things visual to make them work in a documentary.

Chloé Flagg:

Yeah, and really, truly, when watching when watching the film, when you all get the chance to watch the film, those of you listening, those scenes, Geoff, really do kind of root us in our in our known history, right? Like what we understand of 1776. And then and then the film just takes us away with what we absolutely do not know, right. The stories that are not told, that are not known to a lot of us. And so I think that that that's really an exciting part of this film, and at the screenings that I've heard about, been to, been a part of, I hear again and again like I have so many questions, and I want to know more, and it's kind of it's almost like this is just a teaser, right? So the film really does reframe our understanding of the 18th-century period, but the 18th century West as a place of innovation, mobility, and power. Can you speak to those three things: innovation, mobility, and power.

Geoff O'Gara:

What we found very quickly in talking to Native peoples and to others as well was that this was a time of incredible upheaval in the West. So, it wasn't just like this huge event happening on the East Coast. There were things happening out here that were of huge amounts of substance, and the peoples moving around different communities being pushed by different forces, and then new things coming in -- the horse. So, before Europeans or Americans arrived in the Northern Rockies and Great Plains, the horse arrived. That's a story all in itself, and not long after, the gun arrived, and we'll get to what happened

after that. But as Lynette and her ancestors know very well, those things radically changed the balance of power in the American West. And the Eastern Shoshone, which I'm going to let her tell you about, ended up being quite dominant for maybe a short period of time. But it was significant.

Lynette St. Clair:

Yeah, having the ability to basically run the whole Plains area and the Great Basin area, the Eastern Shoshone people and the Shoshone Nation were integral to trade routes, for example. We had amazing trade routes that predate, you know, the arrival of the Western settlers. And people are amazed at the different types of beads and the different types of materials that we were able to acquire here, and it was all made possible, you know, with having the horse that was able to give us the the power and control of the plains, buffalo hunts, and you know, really just keeping this area and incoming warring tribes at bay with the ability to be you know great warriors.

Our people were really good warriors, and they were great horse people. And so, as you know, we're thinking about now. How does that play into our stories now, or who we are as Shoshone people now? We're still great horse people. We have the horse races, the Indian relay races that are popular, and we also have you know people who understand that relationship with the horse, and you have a lot of tribal people that are horse whisperers, if you will. That are able to be in that relationship with the horse.

But I also wanted to mention going back to you know the buffalo hunts. Our people were able to control the buffalo herds through hunting them, but it also again fast forward to now where the Shoshone people were able to reintroduce the bison here on our reservation. You know, ten years ago. We started out with ten, and now you know we were over 100 in our herd. The buffalo had disappeared, and we were able to bring them back through that reciprocal relationship. So, we understand what that relationship is all about, and it's just again the land and the people and the relationships that we have here that we were able to be in that in that position, you know, over 250 years ago.

Geoff O'Gara:

You know, I think I think one of the things that I hope happens with films like this and other way, other ways of telling stories that are missing from the lexicon right now, is that people become aware that, back then and today, this is a kind of dynamic world. This is a civilization that is being changed by things and changing itself in various ways that Lynette is really describing to you now. It's not like some Rousseauian idea of, pardon my language, the "noble savage", static, unchanging, you know, living in the woods. Da da da da. It's not like that at all. And one of the fascinating things about going back to the 18th century and looking at it is just how rapidly these various communities--the Hidatsa, the Blackfeet, the Crow, all these other Comanche--were adjusting to this wave of changes coming in from various directions and thinking on their feet all the time. How do we deal with this? Who do we make an alliance with? Where do we move physically? It's a fascinating period, and I want people to understand that that carries forward to today. You go to the Wind River Reservation. You go to the Buffalo Initiative. You go to these places, and there is so much going on. It's just a really interesting community.

Chloé Flagg:

Yes, thank you, Geoff. Yeah, and I think I think what the film does so well is really help us understand the contrast with that dominant narrative of quote unquote “frontier hardship,” right? This idea that you know white settlers came West and did they did endure hardship relative right to where they were coming from, but they were coming to a place that was already rich in people, and societies and economies. And it was just a very different way of life. That’s what I so appreciate that about the film is it's not a competing narrative by any means. It's just simply the truth of what was taking place in this area.

I had an opportunity last night to attend a community screening, and share with folks some thought that I had most recently, and I kind of want to think, you know, get your perspective on this, the two of you. So, this is an indigenous perspective, right? The film is from an indigenous perspective. It tells the indigenous story of the of the land in 1776. This area of Wyoming in 1776, but for those of us here in Wyoming who love this place so deeply, this is our story too. This is the story of the land, and it doesn't it doesn't have to be controversial or complicated to embrace this history as people that love this area. How do you feel about that? Is that true? Do we need to keep a clear delineation between indigenous history only and Wyoming history only or can we more broadly think of it as the landscape's history, the people's history? What do you think?

Lynette St. Clair:

Well, that's a really interesting question. Yes, this is the people's history, and it is the story of this land, and that's really important to understand. And I think the other thing is the takeaway that I hope people get from this film is that everybody has a culture, everybody has come from somewhere. Fortunately for us, our history is embedded in this land. You know it's transformed the way in which we look at the world. In in so, you know, in response to that question about you know is this everybody's history...yeah, it is, but you know, let's be clear that you know there's two very defined worldviews, and your history, you know, may be different from mine. But the story of this land is here. It's embedded in what this country was founded on. So yeah, you can look at it as our history and the story of you know everybody, but there's two very different stories because it's based on those worldviews.

Chloé Flagg:

Thank you, Lynette.

Geoff O’Gara:

They interact. I think that again, lately my favorite historian Colin Calloway has said history doesn't take sides.

I think that’s an important thing to think about when we look at this. But that there are many things we still are learning, even about the revolution itself, that affect what was happening in the West. You know, one element of that was there was a large population of “unlanded” folks, colonists, you would

say, who needed a place to go, and folks like George Washington were aware of that and the need to give them space in the West, which meant, you know, moving out and dispossessing the peoples who were already there. One of the big reasons for the conflict was the British were making treaties with Native Americans. They were actually ceding lands to them, which of course they already occupied and owned in a sense, whereas the colonists were not willing to because they had people they needed to put somewhere. And again, that's just...Rick McIntyre writes about that very well in his recent histories of the revolution. It's just another complication or complexity to history that we get by telling these additional stories. I think it raises the value of all of it.

Lynette St. Clair:

True. When we're talking about the land, for example, we're connected both cultures. Everybody that call themselves Americans. Our ancestors are one of the highest enlistees for the for the armed forces. And they continue to protect and fight for this land, just like everybody else who calls themselves American, you know, we want to protect this land. This is our motherland, and everybody, you know. So that in that respect, it is a shared direction that we have gone, and it's a shared history. Yeah.

Chloé Flagg:

Thank you for that. And I, I always like to remind folks, Lynette, you know, indigenous people fought in WWI for the United States of America before they were granted citizenship to this nation. And I think that there's so much room in the existing historical record and the existing narrative to include those perspectives, and I think you brought it up earlier, right, Lynette? Like place-based education is real, and it's very important. And there's a lot more that we can learn by being in places and understanding those spaces and all the complexities that that flow through them.

Lynette St. Clair:

Understanding these histories and how we can learn from each other and be able to, again, dispel any persistent myths or stereotypes about both both races, all races, I think is something that I hope people get take away from this. You know, just the continuing stories of this land, and also that our elders and the land serve as living archives, and they are the keepers of our wisdom, and we need to protect the cultural knowledge and the lands that we have here that we call home.

Geoff O'Gara:

And I'll second that, and just add that one of the things we see in doing a documentary like this is the value of that place-based education. That you can go out to Natural Corrals in the Red Desert, and Dudley Gardner, an archeologist, can hold out his hand with a little blue bead in it that was there before any Europeans or Americans arrived because the Native American trade network went coast to coast back then. This is all something we didn't know until we started learning it, and I think really there's a lot of more layering beneath that that still can be done. Historians, archeologists, tribal elders who provided

us all kinds of important information for this documentary—it's all out there, and I don't want to say there's a lot of work to do because it's a pleasure to do this stuff. But there's a lot of exploring to do.

Chloé Flagg:

Well thank you both so much. There's so much to take away from this film and also so many questions it leaves us with, with is one the exciting thing about it. I'm so excited for the world to see it. I know right now we're really focusing on making sure folks in Wyoming know this history, have the opportunity to speak with producers and historians and, like I said, maybe take some ownership and pride in the history of this landscape and the history of the people who were here before us. So thank you both Lynette and Geoff, again producers of the film. We're so excited to have had you here today and so appreciative of all your hard work and energy in the last year plus putting this together for us all to enjoy.

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *Thanks for listening to By the People: Conversations Beyond 250. This podcast was produced by the Federation of State Humanities Councils as part of the national By the People initiative, developed by the Federation and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. You can learn more about By the People at statehumanities.org/bythepeople or at festival.si.edu.*

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