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# Indian Sign Language at Bent's Old Fort

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Unit Two: Expansion, Reform &  
Compromise

Grade 8

Length: 1 to 2 class periods

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## Overview

This lesson asks students to act out a mock trading post experience using Plains Indian sign language to “trade” for 19<sup>th</sup> Century supplies and artifacts.

## Key Concepts Addressed

- Students will know ways that the frontier served as a zone of cultural interaction.
- Historians study interaction of diverse people, events and ideas.
- How do technological advances simplify and complicate peoples’ lives?

## Warm-up Question

How do people and cultures do business with one another when they can’t speak the same language?

## Activities

1. Give a brief overview of the Bent Brothers trading operations along the Santa Fe Trail with emphasis on the out-post at Bent’s Old Fort in southeastern Colorado. Explain that Indian trading was important to the U.S. economy and that Indians often became “addicted” to trade goods.
2. Demonstrate some key hand signals that would be needed in the Bent’s Fort trade room.
3. Set up a trade table at the front of the room with a variety of objects. Teach the students the sign language symbol for each.
4. Choose several students to simulate the trade activities – some representing Native Americans and some representing the Anglo-American traders.
5. Find out what the students want to trade for, and talk them through the interaction.
6. Wrap up the experience with a discussion about the frustrations of communications, and the ways trading with the Anglo -Americans would change Indian life – for better and for worse.

## Assessment

Here are three suggestions for assessing student knowledge on this lesson:

1. Objective: Quiz with a ten-question multiple-choice instrument.
2. Subjective: Ask students to write a one-page reaction paper about what they learned during the demonstration.
3. “Ticket Out” Question: How did a trading post like Bent’s Fort “complicate” the lives of Native Americans?

## Materials

The more items you can “round up” for this lesson, the more interesting it becomes.

- On the trading table, you might consider coffee beans, lump sugar from a Latin-American market, hanks of beads in different colors, a tomahawk, a metal cooking pot, a brick of tea, “Florida water” cologne, wool blankets, a beaver trap etc.
- Costumes help the simulation. Try a vest and broad-brimmed hat for the trader, and brightly-colored blankets to wrap around the “customers”. If you can obtain an animal pelt of some kind it is an extra plus.

## Other Resources

On Sign Language:

- *The Indian Sign Language* by W.P. Clark
- *Indian Sign Language* by William Tomkins
- *Indian Talk: Hand Signals of the American Indians* by Iron Eyes Cody.
- An On-Line Dictionary: [www.inquiry.net/outdoor/native/sign/](http://www.inquiry.net/outdoor/native/sign/)
- Check out YouTube for videos on Indian Sign language.

On Trade Goods:

- The Bent’s Old Fort bookstore has all the reproduction trade goods you would ever need. Call at 719-384-2800 or go to: <http://www.nps.gov/beol/supplyyourpark/bookstore.htm>

