



COURTESY PENDLETON WOOLEN MILLS

TRADING IN GLORY

Indian Trade Blankets

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One of the most humble and utilitarian of items traded to Indians over the course of the past few centuries in North America—the colorful woolen blanket—has become ingrained into tribal cultures throughout the United States and Canada. The gift of a Pendleton blanket is a sure sign that the recipient is greatly honored. It's certain Pendletons will be part of graduations, honoring gifts, weddings and other special occasions across Indian Country for many years to come.

How did blankets manufactured by non-Indians become so beloved by Native people?

As far back as the Revolutionary War era, woolen blankets were used as barter. The first Hudson's Bay Company blanket was ordered in 1780, and featured the same black, yellow, red and green stripes as they do today. Woolen blankets had many advantages over furs, says Bob Christnacht, the blanket and home division manager of Pendleton Woolen Mills in Pendleton, Oregon. Unlike furs and skins, "Wool still keeps you warm when it's wet," says Christnacht. "Early on, blankets became a sign of protection and warmth. You can wrap a blanket around a person and hold that person in your arms. It's very personal." Not to mention that, of the many items traded to Indians, blankets were one of the very few items of quality. "Native Americans also found iron cooking pots and metal-bladed knives superior to what they could produce," says Christnacht. However, it's the trade blanket that has lived on to evolve into such an integral part of Native culture.

Blanket dealer and collector Barry Friedman goes one step further: "It's the only trade item that was manufactured with



Left: One of 17 Chief Joseph patterns produced by Pendleton. Right: This blanket design was created exclusively for the American Indian College Fund and is based on an early 19th-century photograph by Edward S. Curtis. The blanket incorporates classic Navajo elements. The central dragonfly, an emblem of water, symbolizes life.

integrity and built to last.” Friedman, an Emmy-nominated comedy writer, has loved and been obsessed with trade blankets for more than 40 years. He is a leading dealer of vintage trade blankets and exchanges information on vintage blankets with Pendleton on a regular basis. Says Friedman, “Vintage collectors covet blankets made between 1892 and 1942. In 1942, Pendleton ceased making Indian blankets and instead manufactured Army blankets and sleeping bags for our World War II troops. They didn’t resume Indian blanket production until 1947.”

After the end of the Indian Wars in 1890, Indians were packed off to reservations. They soon started trading for items needed for their new lives—commodities like coffee, flour, tobacco, sugar and blankets. However, Indian traders needed some trade item that would garner fast cash to put back into their business. Indian traders like Lorenzo Hubbell quickly hit upon a solution: they invented the Navajo rug! The Navajos had traditionally made tightly woven wearing blankets for their own use and trade. Now they converted their entire weaving production to the Oriental rug-inspired designs requested by the traders. Commercial woolen mill operators saw an opportunity to sell Indian-pattern blankets to the Indians while Indians created all their weavings for non-Indians—a practice that still endures some 110 years later.

The first recorded sale of a geometric-pattern Indian blanket was by J. Capps & Sons in 1892. Other firms quickly followed with their own designs. Pendleton, however, was the only company that specifically went into business to manufacture blankets for the Indian trade. The original mill started producing round-cornered Indian blankets in 1896, but Pendleton as we know it didn’t exist until 1909, when the Bishop family purchased the then-defunct mill. Fearful of losing one of their major industries, the people of Pendleton put up a bond to help finance the sale, says Christnacht. The \$30,000 bond was paid off in 1929.

The Bishops built a new mill building using concrete, which included a sprinkler system to reduce the danger of fires that had doomed other mills, and on Sept. 1, 1909, the new mill was completed. The pure fleece woolen blankets, now with square corners, were an immediate hit: Pendleton did \$65,000 of business its first year. One of the Bishop brothers, Roy, traveled to the Southwest and took samples to traders who did business with Navajos; their first customer was Babbitt Brothers in Flagstaff, Arizona, a relationship that continues to this day. Navajos immediately embraced the colorful blankets. Today, Navajos purchase 25 percent of all Pendletons, and Indians as a whole account for more than 50 percent of all Pendleton blanket sales. Some of the earlier blankets are still being made today by the Bishop family. In the 1940s, Pendleton added woolen shirts and women’s wear to its line.

Pendleton launches eight to 10 new blanket patterns and retires about the same number each year. Currently, there are 75 patterns, including 17 different color combinations of the company’s most famous pattern, the Chief Joseph. The company also produces numerous special commissions for tribes, private companies and museums, such as the American Indian College Fund, the Heard Museum, Babbitt’s Wholesale and the National Museum of the American Indian.

Pendleton was quick to realize the value of noting what patterns and colors Indians liked best. “We had Native people giving us ideas from day one,” says Christnacht. The firm was ideally situated next door to the Umatilla Confederated Tribes’ reservation and close to several others. “Major” William Davidson, Pendleton’s star salesman, spoke 27 tribal languages and traveled the entire western United States showing his wares to tribal communities. “He could talk to customers all over the Southwest,” says Christnacht.

The Tamástslikt Cultural Institute in the Umatilla community is one place where Pendleton admirers can learn more about the rela-



The original Pendleton Mill in Pendleton, Oregon, early 1900s. The mill opened in 1909 and still in operation today.

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tionship that has sprung up between Indians and the famed blanket producer. The tribe has commissioned special Pendleton patterns, some of which are found only in the museum's gift shop.

Hopi artist Ramona Sakiestewa was the first Native artist selected by the company to design specially commissioned Pendletons. In 1990, she created a series of six blankets commemorating Southwestern trails such as the Santa Fe, Hopi Tuwala and the Iron Horse, in collaboration with the Dewey Trading Company. Her talent shines through with each design. The soft-as-silk "Southwest Trails Series" blankets feature a special-edition label banded in ultrasuede. "It was very easy to work with Pendleton," Sakiestewa notes. "It was a positive experience."

Such custom patterns are made much easier thanks to the advent of electronic Jacquard looms. Christnacht explains, "Before high-speed looms and computers came along, our designers had to make up punch cards (resembling a computer

punch card) that would chart every one of a blanket's thousands of stitches. It would take days and days to do in the earliest days—as long as a year for one pattern!" Pendleton's looms can now work with up to 14 different colors, which makes newer Pendletons even more colorful.

Pendleton is also looking to the future. They're planning a new line of churro wool saddle blankets and will soon introduce reproductions of vintage blankets by other firms. Whether you prefer a vintage Pendleton or one of Pendleton's dazzling new creations, you're holding a piece of the history of Indian Country and the continuing evolution of Native culture. 🍃

Deb Krol, Native Peoples' book editor and a frequent contributor, has received many journalism awards but has yet to do something important enough to be awarded the finest tribute of all: a Pendleton blanket.

OTHER TRADE BLANKET BRANDS OF NOTE

Although Pendleton owned the lion's share of the tribal blanket trade, a handful of other firms did substantial Indian trade business. Some of the most noteworthy include:

Buell Manufacturing Co.—Buell, of St. Joseph, Missouri, made Indian blankets from 1900 to 1911. Their blankets are the most faithful interpretations of classic Navajo weavings; excellent-condition examples are extremely rare and valuable.

J. Capps & Sons—The first collectible Indian blanket manufacturer, Capps, based in Jacksonville, Illinois, made its initial commercial Indian blanket on June 17, 1892. They were the supplier of Indian blankets to Buffalo Bill for his Wild West shows, and he endorsed their products. In 1917, Capps shifted to war production and ceased Indian blanket production. Vintage collectors love them for their simple yet elegant patterns and beautiful coloration.

Knight Woolen Mills—One of the "home" industries operated by the Mormon Church in Provo, Utah, Knight Woolen Mills created Indian blankets from approximately 1915 to 1920. They're exceedingly rare.

Oregon City Woolen Mills—This firm, founded by Jewish immigrants in 1865, started making Indian blankets in 1905 and soon became Pendleton's biggest competitor. Their blankets featured bright, and sometimes bizarre, patterns. Oregon City blankets range from wild geometrics to a unique rodeo-theme blanket commemorating Walla Walla Frontier Days. Oregon City ceased producing Indian blankets in 1935, leaving only Pendleton in the field.

Racine Woolen Mills—Known for their intricate patterns, dense weave and dramatic color schemes, Racine blankets are considered by many collectors to be the finest Indian trade blankets. Racine pictorials are the highest-priced items in the Indian blanket-collecting world. Racine began making robes and shawls for the Indian trade in 1893. The mill closed in 1912, but it contracted with other mills to weave its designs until the 1930s.

Shuler & Benninghofen Woolen Mill Co.—In its 1912 catalog, this Hamilton, Ohio firm offered five blanket patterns exactly the same as Racine's. Only the names were changed. It's unclear if the company made Indian blankets before the Racine contract. The last Racine-designed blanket rolled off the looms in the 1930s.



BUYING TRADE BLANKETS WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SHIRT

Barry Friedman has some suggestions for both beginning and experienced blanket collectors.

The most important advice: Know what you're buying. "Knowledgeable buyers are at nobody's mercy," writes Friedman. Study books like Friedman's *Chasing Rainbows: Collecting American Indian Trade and Camp Blankets* and other guides. Learn about labels and the importance of age, condition, colors and rarity of pattern.

Shrinkage kills a blanket's value "more than anything other than cannonball-sized holes," says Friedman. To check for shrinkage, lay the blanket on the floor. The edges will lay perfectly flat if it's unshrunk; the edges of a shrunk blanket will ripple. The average Indian blanket measures 60 inches by 72 inches; if yours measures less, it's likely shrinkage has occurred.

Hold the blanket up to strong outdoor light; this will reveal any thin spots, repairs, holes or other issues.

Most blankets had sewn-on labels originally; labels were regularly changed throughout a company's production. "Numerous Pendleton labels were used over the years, for example, and if your blanket has retained its label, the blanket can be dated very accurately," says Friedman.

In almost every case, experts like Friedman can still identify blankets whose labels have disappeared over time. "Companies made certain patterns in certain years, and a 1921 Oregon City blanket is as obvious to me as a '65 Mustang would be to a car enthusiast."

Vintage trade blankets can be had through dealers such as Friedman, Cindy Rennels in Clinton, Oklahoma (www.cindysantiquequilts.com) or Jonathan Day's Indian Arts in Flagstaff, Arizona (www.traditionalhopikachinas.com), as well as antiques stores, flea markets, yard and estate sales, or secondhand stores. Online auction sites are also an option, but Friedman advises caution. "Monitor variances can make a blanket that is the color of guacamole look brick red on your computer!"

Prices can range from less than \$100 for a common blanket in poor condition to \$10,000 and up for a mint-condition early Racine or round-corner Pendleton. Value is based on age, condition, pattern and color.

Trade Blanket Resources

Chasing Rainbows: Collecting American Indian Trade & Camp Blankets, by Barry Friedman, is available for \$50 through his Web site, www.barryfriedmanblankets.com.

Language of the Robe: American Indian Trade Blankets, by Robert W. Kapoun and Charles J. Lohrmann, is available through various sources for \$39.95 (\$30 at Amazon.com).

Pendleton Woolen Mills, by Avanyu Publishing, is a reprint of the 1911 Pendleton catalog. It's available at Amazon.com for \$12.

Pendleton Woolen Mills: www.pendleton-usa.com