Ishi’s Return

Program Synopsis

Ishi’s Return is a half-hour film about Ishi, billed in 1911 as the “last wild Indian,” when he wandered out of the woods in Oroville, California, and became a national sensation. When Ishi died, his brain was removed and sent to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Eighty years later, his descendants in California fought to have his remains repatriated to his ancestral home. Ishi’s Return is from Native filmmakers Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho) and Brian Wescott (Athabascan/Yup’ik) and producer Roberta Grossman (500 Nations, Homeland).

In Their Words

“I think Ishi symbolized something to all native Californians, anyone who’s ever heard of Ishi. I think that once it was found out that his remains weren’t treated as he requested, [they needed] to bring him home. We bring home people from Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, any places that they may have been. Those families want to know. They want to be able to have that chapter of their life closed. Ishi was no different.”

— Floyd Buckskin, Hereditary Headman of the Ajumawi Hesugawi Band

Images courtesy of University of California, Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology.
By the Numbers

1. 1864: Ishi was born into the Yahi-Yana tribe in 1864 and died of tuberculosis on March 23, 1916, just five years after beginning his work with anthropologist Alfred Kroeber at the University of California. Ishi’s real name is not known, as tribal custom dictated that a person’s name not be revealed to an outsider. Researchers at the University of California gave him the name “Ishi,” which means “man” in the Yana Language.

2. 1848: The California Gold Rush began.

3. 1908: Ishi and three others thought to be his mother, a sister and an older man were discovered living in the wilderness in what is now Tehama County, California. They fled and it is believed that Ishi alone survived.

4. 1911: Ishi was discovered near a slaughterhouse in Oroville and was taken to jail. He caught the interest of anthropologists at the University of California Anthropology Museum. He was first released to an anthropologist named T.T. Waterman and later worked with Alfred Kroeber to document and preserve the Yahi language and traditions. The museum employed Ishi as a janitor and research assistant and gave him living quarters.

5. 1916: Ishi died of tuberculosis just five years after beginning to work at the University of California Anthropology Museum.

6. 1916: An autopsy was performed and his body cremated at the Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Colma, California. Against Ishi’s wishes, his brain was sent to Washington, D.C. in early 1917.

7. 1990: The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed as a way to offer Native Americans and Native Alaskans the right to determine the destiny of their ancestral remains and cultural objects that has been housed in museums throughout the United States.

8. 2000: On Aug. 10, Ishi’s brain was released by the Smithsonian to the Redding Rancheria and Pit River Tribe. Ishi’s brain was reunited with his cremated remains and given burial in an undisclosed place by his Yani relatives.

Ishi drying a new fire drill. Deer Creek, Tehama, California.

Image courtesy of University of California, Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

Brian Wescott

Ishi’s Return provided an opportunity to revisit a pivotal moment in Native history, the unexpected appearance of a starving Indian in Oroville, California, in 1911. He was hailed as the last wild Indian. His story provides a stark reminder that “Indian” and “modern” were supposedly mutually exclusive.

Native people have always been modern people, living in the present and preparing for the future just like everyone else.

Though he was indeed the last of his small specific band, his cremation was not the end of his story or that of his people. Against his express wishes, Ishi’s brain was removed and sent to the Smithsonian where it was stored in a jar in a basement. The Smithsonian denied possessing it for decades. Finally, under the auspices of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the Smithsonian was forced to admit that it had Ishi’s brain and set about finding his closest lineal descendants to whom to return it.

Interviewing Floyd Buckskin, a member of a closely related band who reunited Ishi’s brain with the rest of his cremated remains, was the most exciting and moving part of making this film for me. Ishi was not the last of his people. He had descendants who cared enough about him to take on the Smithsonian and win. They interred the united remains in an undisclosed location using their still practiced tribal religious traditions. In this instance, as in so many others, modern Native people stood up and proved that they are very much still here.
Discussion Questions

1. Prior to the Gold Rush of 1848, California was a natural "supermarket" for the Native people of the area. They hunted, fished, grew and gathered all they needed. Explore and discuss the impact on the California Natives and on the environment of the sudden crush of people that arrived in search of gold.

2. Ishi experienced the horrific loss of his people and his family and fled to the wilderness. Spend a moment really imagining what that would have been like for him. Imagine your life suddenly changed in this dramatic way. What would you do? How would you live or go forward? What would you miss the most? Explore and discuss each question.

3. Now spend a moment wondering how ordinary people could dehumanize another race in such a way that extermination actions or bounties on scalps or heads seem legally and morally sound. Explore and discuss the ways that human beings justify unimaginable actions under certain conditions. Are there other places in the world where similar events have happened or are happening now? How do you think this kind of cruelty and violence can be avoided?

4. Since NAGPRA was passed in 1990, the remains of 50,000 Native Americans have been returned to their families or tribes. Examine the significance of this both for the people connected to the missing ones and for America as a whole. Do you feel this widespread repatriation was an important moment in American history? Do you think that non-Native Americans also can benefit from a renewed relationship between the U.S. and Native Americans? Why or why not?

5. In the film, Rayna Green talks about America’s need to make monuments and build museums for the “vanishing Indians.” Even Ishi, when he was taken in by Kroeber, was sometimes treated as a specimen or museum display. Explore and discuss how early immigrants in America were both fascinated with the disappearing Indian and determined to exterminate their way of life.

Suggested Activities

1. On the Internet or in the library, trace the history of how NAGPRA came into being. How did NAGPRA originate? What were the significant moments on the time line? Who were the important figures of this national movement? What criteria are used to determine where articles or remains should go?

2. The public was fascinated with the idea that Ishi was the last member of his tribe—perhaps the last “Indian.” Is this the truth—what indicators are there that Ishi was not the “last Yahi”? What historical or current information can you find to support or dispute this claim?

3. Ishi died of tuberculosis five years after coming into San Francisco and being a part of Kroeber’s life and work. The effects of tuberculosis and other unfamiliar diseases on Native people is a significant and sometimes little known part of American history. Explore and conduct research into the effects of European diseases on Native communities. What was it that made the Native people susceptible to these diseases? How many Native people were affected? What changed in Native communities as the death toll increased?

4. Ishi’s people, as well as over 500 Native Nations, are alive and thriving today despite the efforts to remove or exterminate them. Conduct research on the Internet and identify three to five projects or programs that provide strong examples of the resourcefulness and resilience of Native People in California. What are the common elements between these projects or programs? How are Native people finding a way to both exist in the the modern world and maintain their culture?

5. Using the Internet or resources listed below, trace the exact steps taken to have Ishi’s brain returned to the Redding Rancheria and Pit River Tribe. Who initiated the action? What steps did they need to take? How long did it take?
About the film
www.katahdin.org

History
http://history.library.ucsf.edu/ishi.html

Print


Online
Anniversary edition of *Ishi in Two Worlds*

James Luna has been doing performance art based on Ishi
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/q-and-a-james-luna-74252076/

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Educational resources for this film are available at http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educations/ishis-return © 2016 Vision Maker Media. All rights reserved.