



# Plains Indian Sign Language

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# *Presentation Outline*

“W” Questions and History

Preservation Efforts

Examples & Video

Questions

“The Whites have had the power given them by the Great Spirit to read and write, and convey information in this way. He gave us the power to talk with our hands and arms, and send information with the mirror, blanket, and pony far away, and when we meet with Indians who have a different spoken language from ours, we can talk to them in signs.”

- Iron Hawk, Lakota chief, 1876

# *What is PISL?*

Language comprised of hand motions

Language for the Deaf  
Lingua franca

Nearly extinct: ~75 known speakers





# History

European question

Gulf Coast origin

Spread to Plains

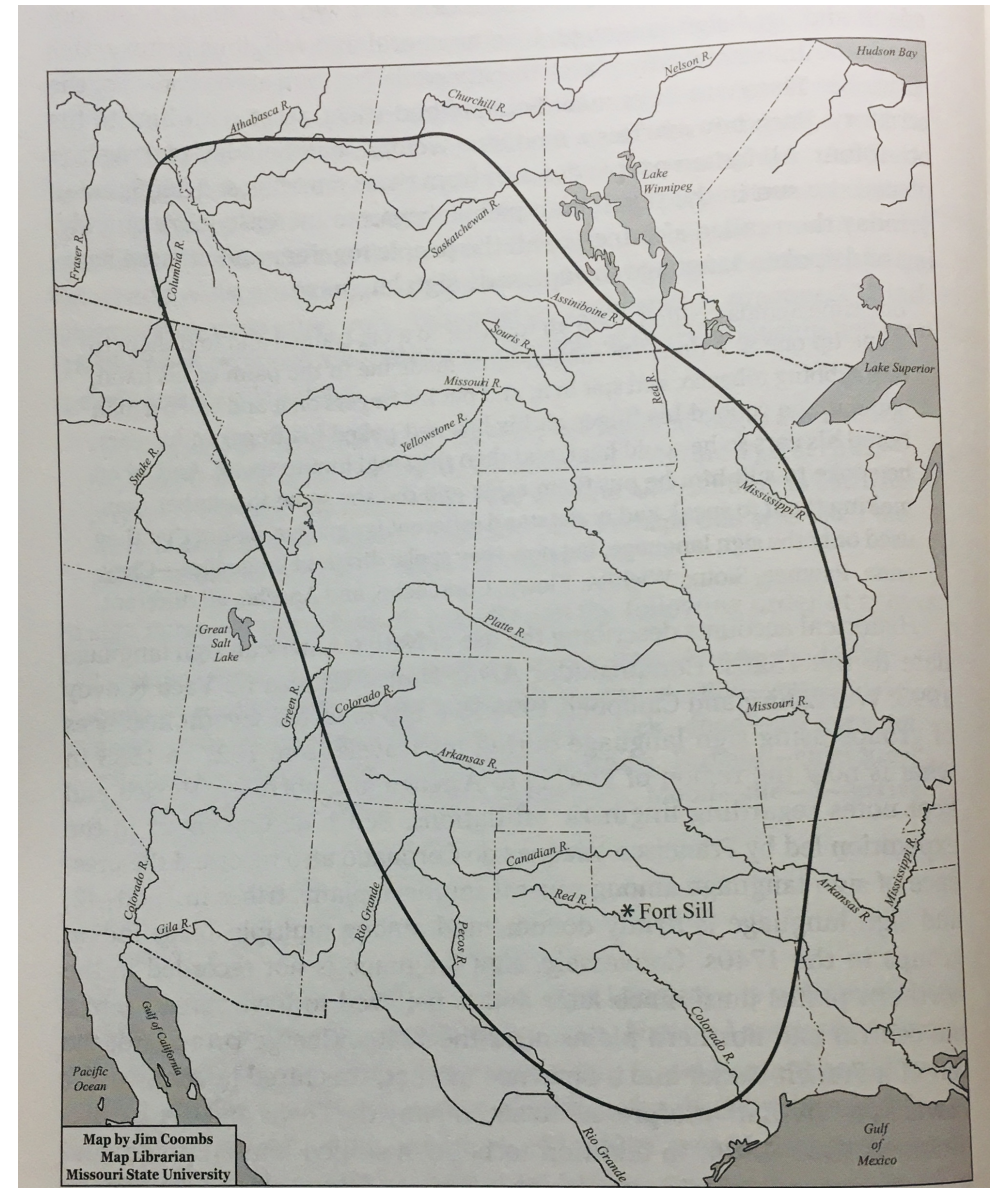
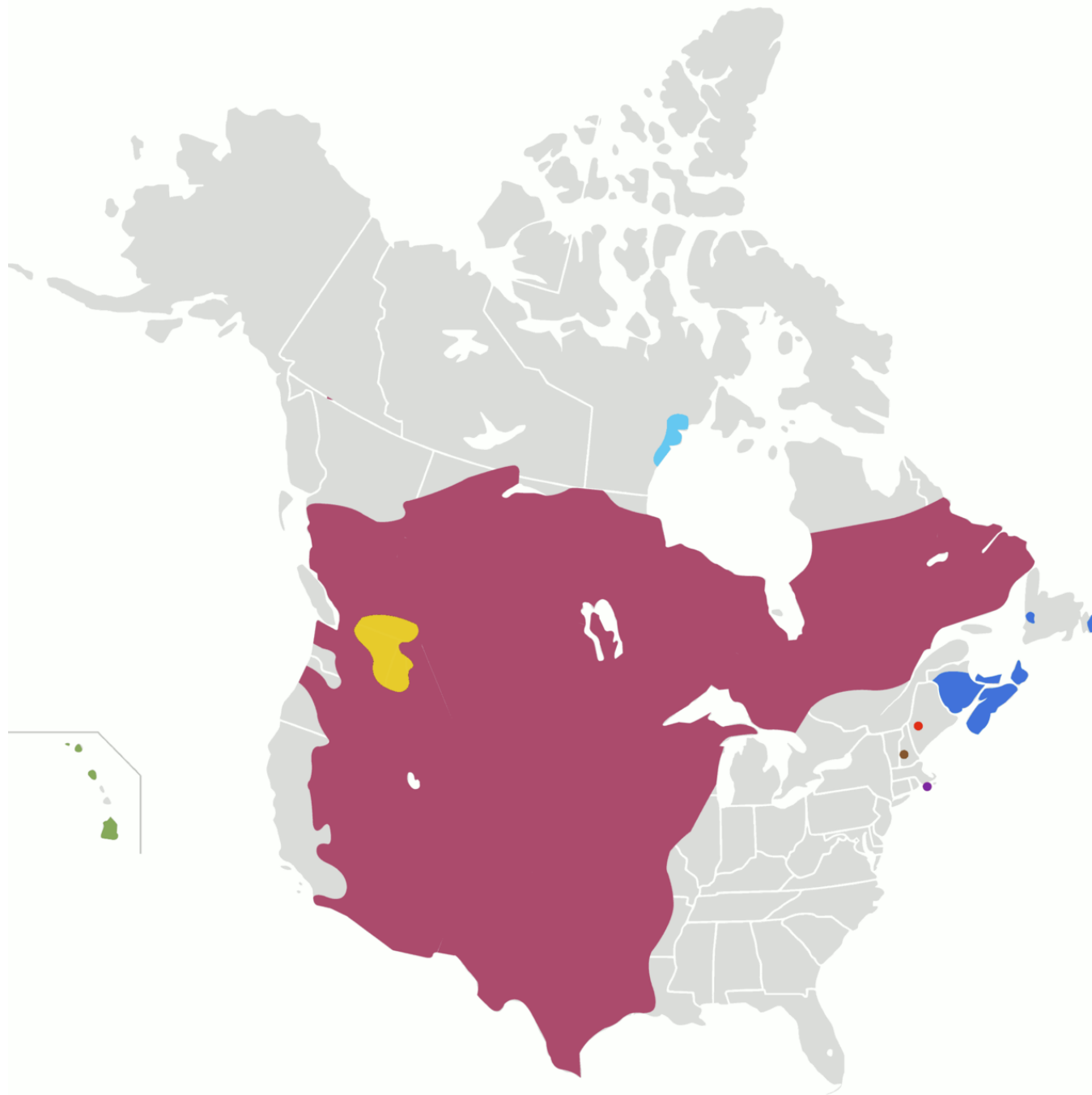
Lack of dominant groups

Nomadic culture

Impact of horses

10,000 - 100,000 speakers in 1890

Subsequent decline



Core area of Plains Indian Sign Language distribution.  
 Map by Jim Coombs, Maps Librarian, Missouri State University.  
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# *State of PISL Today*

Storytelling & Ritual Use

Deaf Native American communities

Fluency on northern reservations

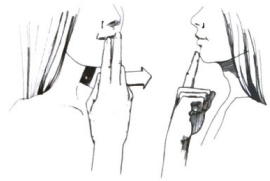
Revitalization efforts

Lanny Real Bird's course



# FAMILY

**SISTER** Sign WOMAN. Then touch lips with right index and middle fingers. Move hand straight ahead.



**BROTHER** Touch lips with index and middle fingers and move hand straight ahead, away from mouth. Then sign MAN.

**MOTHER** Touch left side of chest several times with right hand slightly curved (cupped), fingers close together and thumb concealed.



**FATHER** Touch right side of your chest several times with hand slightly curved, fingers close together and thumb concealed.

# PISL Examples

## Past Tense

In English we can say "I see a mountain" or "I saw a mountain." In American Indian sign language you show an action is finished by adding the sign for DONE OR FINISHED.

Hold out left hand and quickly slide right hand down.



## Examples

I SEE A TREE. Sign I, SEE, TREE.



I SAW A TREE. Sign I, DONE, SEEING, TREE.





# *Indian Sign Language Grand Council ~ 1930*



Table 8.11 *Examples of PISL idioms (Sanderville 1934)*

Signed expression	Sanderville's translation
HIDE TALK	whisper
LITTLE WHILE TAKE, GIVE BACK	borrow
PRAIRIE THINK	believe without cause
PRAIRIE KILLING	accidental killing
PRAIRIE DO TO ME	not my fault
TINY BIT RECOVER	saved by the skin of one's teeth
BURROW UNDER SURFACE	deceive
PUT BLANKET OVER THE HEAD	suppress
SOLDIER DO IT	effect tribal decision
RIBS COLLAPSE	die of old age
GRASS CUT THREE TIMES	alfalfa
CARRY PIPE	to be a leader

Table 8.4 *Comparison of German and PISL compounds*

<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>
Dampf	steam
Dampfschiffahrt	steamship
Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft	steamship company
Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän	steamship company captain
Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitänsmütze	steamship company captain's hat
<b>PISL</b>	<b>English</b>
WHITE-MAN <sup>a</sup>	“white man”
WHITE-MAN^SOLDIER	“white soldier”
WHITE-MAN^SOLDIER^CHIEF	“white officer”
WHITE-MAN	“white man, non-Native American”
WHITE-MAN^BLACK	“black man”
WHITE-MAN^CHIEF^BIG	“president of US”
WHITE-MAN^CHIEF^MEDICINE	“medical doctor”
MAN	“man”
MAN^MARRY	“married man”
MAN^MARRY^NO	“bachelor”

<sup>a</sup> WHITE-MAN is a single sign, rather than a compound. It serves as the head word in this set of PISL compounds. See notational conventions on p. xxviii.

# *Lanny Real Bird's Account of the Battle of Little Bighorn*

- <https://www.voanews.com/arts-culture/native-american-hand-talkers-fight-keep-sign-language-alive>

Questions?



## Sources

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- Liptak, Karen., and Don Berry. *North American Indian Sign Language*. [Scholastic school ed.] New York: Scholastic, 1995.
- “Native American Hand Talkers Fight to Keep Sign Language Alive,” Cecily Hilleary, April 3, 2017, VOA News <https://www.voanews.com/arts-culture/native-american-hand-talkers-fight-keep-sign-language-alive>
- Plains Indian Sign Language. Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2019. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-second edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/psd>.