

# Actions That Remind Us of Our Heritage

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It is important to teach our children, and to remind ourselves, of our heritage:

- of why and how we became a nation,
- of the basic principles and documents upon which the country was founded,
- of what it took to achieve today's standard of living,
- of the mistakes we've made and,
- of the individuals and events that have played major roles in shaping the country.

Appreciating one's heritage is a prerequisite for taking actions to sustain it. Being aware of our heritage helps us to appreciate what we have and to see our shortcomings so they can be addressed.

## Teach Our Children

Teaching our children about the country's heritage is important because they know no other way of life. They need to appreciate that the life they have in the United States is not a birth right - but rather it is a gift from the culmination of past generations. It took enormous courage, loss of life, pain, mistakes, hard work and risk to get here. Our children need to be made aware that they are going to be the custodians of this country and be taught how to do that well.

## Remind Ourselves

Reminding ourselves of our heritage is important for similar reasons. However it has additional importance because, as we grow up and become involved in the day-to-day pursuit of our own lives, it is easy to forget that what we have isn't the norm and that a free society requires continuous vigilance and substantial energy. It is easy to become complacent. Reminding ourselves also provides the motivation and justification for active citizenship.

Here are some things each of us can do to teach our children about, and to remind ourselves of, where we came from and how we have evolved as a country.

## Citizen Actions

1. [Ask an immigrant about the fears or conditions that drove them from their native country and what hopes led them to ours.](#)
2. [Attend the naturalization ceremony of new citizens.](#)
3. [Discuss the responsibilities of citizenship with your children.](#)

4. [Hang the flag on national holidays and explain their significance to your children.](#)
5. [Interview your grandparents.](#)
6. [Learn what is being taught about America at your child's school .](#)
7. [Read a book or rent a movie that depicts the sacrifices of war or what people have done to escape oppression.](#)
8. [Read the Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence.](#)
9. [Take a car trip across the country.](#)
10. [Take a course on American history.](#)
11. [Teach your children some "Americana-type" songs.](#)
12. [Teach your children the states and their capitals.](#)
13. [Travel to another country.](#)
14. [Visit a national or state park.](#)
15. [Visit an American Indian reservation - after learning about The Trail of Tears.](#)
16. [Visit a war memorial.](#)



**Reader Submitted  
Actions**

# Ask an Immigrant About the Fears or Conditions That Drove Them from Their Native Country and What Hopes Led Them to Ours

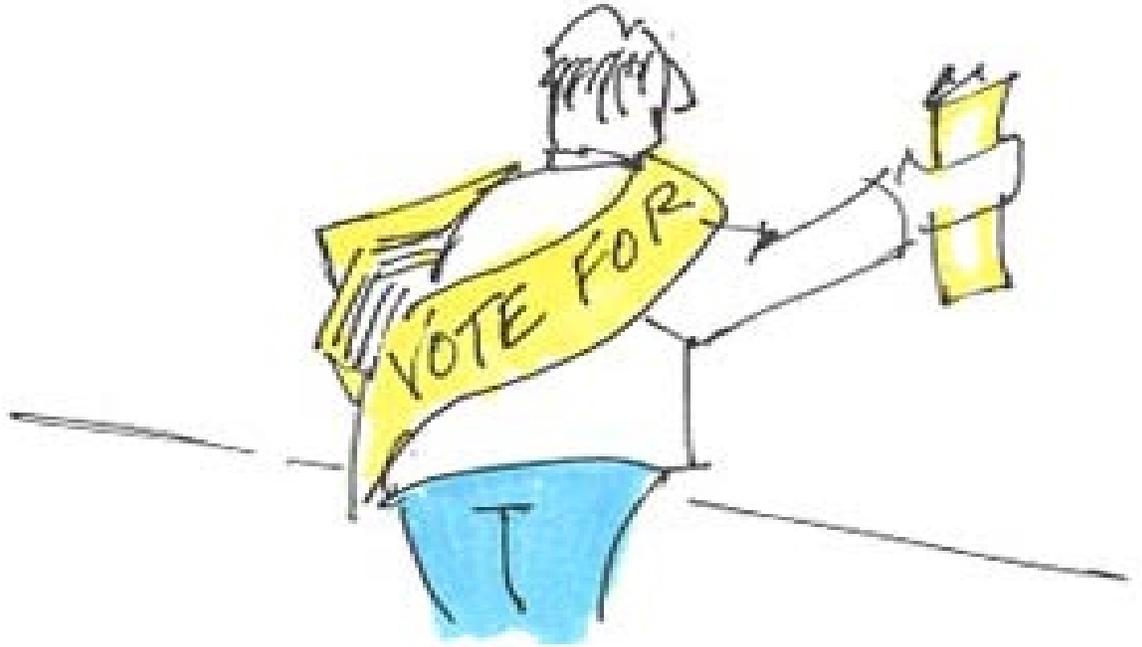


My experience is that, as a group, individuals who have immigrated to the U.S. and their first generation offspring, are more vocal and open about their appreciation for this country than those of us who were born here and whose parents were born here.

In order to get a good perspective on something, it's often necessary to go away from it or to see it from afar. One way to do that is to [travel to another country](#).

Another way to do that is to talk with individuals who have come to the U.S. from other countries.

Talking with an immigrant often gives us a better perspective of ourselves. They see good things about the country we take for granted and let us know how we are viewed by others. Their stories of what life is like in their native country may surprise you. You might want to consider arranging for a group of immigrants to speak at your child's school.



**Sites & Resources**



**Readers' Stories**



There are hundreds of thousands of individuals around the world that would love to live in the United States. Many have done extraordinary things and made extraordinary sacrifices to get to our shores. Our [immigration laws](#) allow a number of individuals to enter the country each year for a variety of reasons and allow individuals who have been permanent residents for 5 years to become naturalized citizens.

Becoming a naturalized citizen is a dream for many of these individuals. The general process includes:

1. confirming that you are eligible using an [on-line worksheet](#).
2. filing an [Application for Naturalization](#) (form N-400), paying the filing fee and being approved by the INS.
3. getting fingerprinted.
4. an interview with the INS
5. passing a Civics Exam which includes U.S. History and government questions and the ability to write basic English - you can take an [online practice test](#).
6. taking the Oath of Allegiance at a ceremony.

The Oath of Allegiance Ceremony is many things. It's the end of a dream and the start of a new life for the person becoming a naturalized citizen, and a very emotional experience for someone who is already a citizen. Your [local INS office](#) will tell you when and where Oath ceremonies are held. Go watch and feel the sense of excitement. It does help us re-appreciate what we have.



**Sites & Resources**



**Readers' Stories**

## Discuss the Responsibilities of Citizenship with Your Children



The Constitution and other founding documents talk mostly about our "inalienable rights". These rights are freedoms that every individual in this country should enjoy. We are in an era where the focus on our rights seems strong - and perhaps a bit out of kilter with what was intended. It seems that special interest groups, as well as individual citizens, have used the phrase "have the right to" in ways intended to serve their best interest and not the country's best interest, as intended by the founding fathers.

However, in order to have and sustain a society where its citizens are free, individuals must also have some obligations or responsibilities to that society. This book is about the *responsibility* part of freedom. Without citizen involvement, freedom is not sustainable; and without freedom, there are no inalienable rights. And while there isn't any "correct" way to be responsible, each of us is responsible for doing and acting in a way that keeps the country strong and thus free.

The best time to learn this message is, of course, when one is young. Discuss citizenship, and the rights and responsibilities that come with it, with your children. Chose a few of the citizen actions in this book that your children can accomplish. You will not only teach them good citizenship skills, but you will let them know how important citizenship is to you.

## Hang the Flag On National Holidays and Explain Their Significance to Your Children



National holidays symbolize events that are significant to the nation. Celebrating them provides us with a chance to better understand, and to reflect on, those nation-changing events that took place on that day.



Unfortunately, we often celebrate national holidays on days that allow for a long weekend rather than on the day that is the anniversary of the event being recognized. This practice dilutes the significance of the holiday. Too often they have become simply a day off from work or school. [Memorial Day](#) is an example of this. It used to be always on May 30th. Then in 1971, Congress adopted the floating date for Memorial Day - the last Monday in May - to satisfy holiday schedules for federal employees.

Explaining the significance of a national holiday to your children not only educates them and shows them you are aware of the history of our country but it provides a good incentive for each of us to better understand the reason for, and events associated with, the holiday.

A nation's flag symbolizes that nation. Hanging the flag on a national holiday expresses a pride in our nation and makes a statement that we recognize the meaning and importance of the holiday. When others see our flag hung, it gives them "permission" to do the same and creates a small sense of community.

### Our National Holidays

The United States Information Agency has a nice site called Portrait of American with a

section called [National Celebrations](#) which lists our national holidays and describes their significance.

## The American Flag

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has a major project underway to restore the original 30-by-42 foot, 186 year old Star-Spangled Banner. A section of their web site entitled "[Star Spangled Banner - The Flag that Inspired the National Anthem](#)" contains most anything one might want to know about the flag - its history, its design, where and how to hang it and educator information on how to incorporate the Flag into a school's curriculum.



Readers' Stories

## Interview Your Grandparents



One of the best and most rewarding ways to understand how we have evolved as a country is to ask those who have lived here longest. They are often our grandparents.

Talking with one's grandparents, or other older Americans, about what the country was like when they grew up gives us:



- an appreciation for what other generations have gone through for the current generation,
- a clearer and more realistic perspective of the country's, and our own, history, and
- an opportunity to form stronger relationships with ones grandparents.

Equally important, grandparents feel good when someone values their views and wants to understand what life was like as they grew up.

Ask them what games they played as children, what their schools were like, how evenings were spent before the advent of television, dating practices, life during the depression, what they feel was the biggest contribution to society in their lifetimes (TV, radio, computers, the space race etc.). It's a unique opportunity to better appreciate the things we all take for granted. Ask them what your mom or dad was like as a child. Take a history of their lives.

A special project, the [Veteran's History Project](#), has been created by Congress to collect the stories and experiences of war veterans while they are still among us. There are 19 million war veterans living in the United States today, but every day we lose 1,500 of them. So if your parents or grandparents are veterans of a war, ask them about their memories. If you record their stories, you can send the tape and any memorabilia they may want to contribute to the Library of Congress and it will be included in the permanent archives!



Readers' Stories



We often take what we have for granted unless we know what is special about this country. Being born in America, a country with freedoms, we are not always aware of how rare, important and fragile freedom is. We sometimes learn about freedom from our parents, but it's also important that we learn about America and other countries in school.

What is taught, if anything, about America, differs from school system to school system. Also, there are pressures from special interest groups to include materials into the school curricula that support their causes - often at the expense of basic information like American history. If parents aren't aware of what's being taught, then they can't have an influence on future curriculum choices. A parent's interest also reinforces to children that education about our country's history is important.

We have a vested interest in ensuring that our children are being taught about our country - both the good and the not so good. It is critical that each generation understand and know the truth about our heritage.

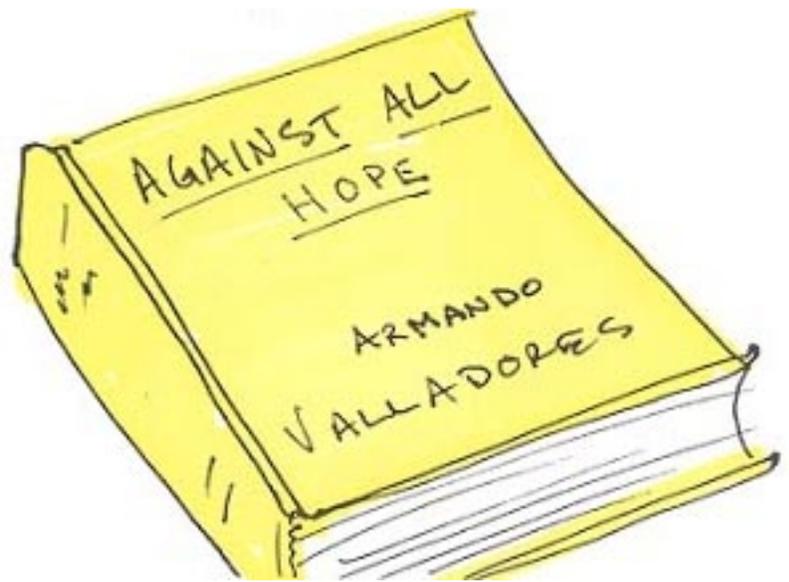


**Readers' Stories**

# Read a Book or Rent a Movie That Depicts the Sacrifices of War or What People Have Done to Escape Oppression



For most of us, war is only a word - fortunately. One can only imagine the killing of other beings - the brutality, the maiming, the rape, the horror of hand-to-hand combat, the fear, the life long memories if one survives. Our country has been involved in .??? armed conflicts. The more each of us understands about the reality of war, the more each of us will:



1) appreciate the sacrifices prior generations have made so that we can be free, and

2) be in a better position to provide input to our country's leaders if or when the U.S. should become involved in an armed conflict.

Here are some books and movies that bring home to us the horror of war and oppression.

## Books

*Against All Hope* - Armando Valladeras

*Greatest Generation* - by Tom Brokaw

*World War II* - A bimonthly magazine dedicated to information and stories about World War II - no web site - 800.829.3340 for subscription information

## Movies

*Dances With Wolves* -

*Glory*

*Saving Private Ryan*

*Schindler's List*

*Night Crossing* - Two men living in East Germany who can no longer tolerate the petty tyrannies of Communist rule. Together, they formulate a daring plan to escape to democratic West Germany in a hot air balloon.

*Black Hawk Down*



**Sites & Resources**



**More Examples**



**Readers' Stories**

## Read the Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence



Having a clear understanding of the basic founding documents gives us the proper perspective upon which to take actions and to believe in the actions we take.

Our heritage formally began on July 4, 1776 when the 13 united States of America declared their independence from the State of Great Britain. The [Declaration of Independence](#) describes why we broke away and suggests the kind of society the founding fathers wanted to establish in America.

The [Constitution](#) and the related [Bill of Rights](#) and other [Amendments](#) describe the laws and principles upon which our country was founded.

The [National Archives and Records Administration](#) is a good resource for finding out about and obtaining copies of important national documents.

# Take a Car Trip Across the Country



Most of us grow up in only one part of the country. 61% of us live in the city area in which we were born. Our view of the rest of the U.S., naturally, is often skewed toward the environment in which we were raised. However, the reality is that the geography, the customs, the weather, the dress, the way of speaking etc. vary all across the country.

Traveling through the country allows one to appreciate the strength we have in our diversity and the country's natural beauty and to see first-hand how varied our cultures are.



**Readers' Stories**



**Sites & Resources**



When I think of this action, I am reminded of how important it is to many adopted children to find out where they came from - to find their birth parents - in an effort to help them understand who they are and how their personal history is composed. Knowing our roots helps put our life in a real perspective, even if the reality isn't what we hoped for.

Understanding the history of this country is important for similar reasons. It has taken so much to get from our colonial status in 1776 to today's modern world - wars, day-to-day hardship, courage, imagination, creativity, going against the norm. Understanding our country's history helps us see things in perspective and helps us avoid making the same mistakes in the future. It makes us aware of what it took to attain our freedoms and reminds us of what we must do to keep them.

If one doesn't appreciate what one has and what it took to attain it, it is easy not to give it the respect and attention it needs. And history has shown that when a country takes what is has for granted and begins to believe that it is entitled to what it has, decline begins. Good things are worth taking care of and what we have in this country is generally quite good.

Taking a course on American History is a good way to understand our history . Attending a course, as opposed to reading a book, gives one an opportunity to discuss historical events with others and hear other perspectives.



**Sites & Resources**

## Teach Your Children Some Americana-type Songs



There are many wonderful songs that reflect our heritage - wonderful not only in their music but wonderful in their words and meaning. These songs, and the circumstances under which they were written, tell stories of our country's struggle for freedom, of our citizens' struggles for equality and, simply of day-to-day living. There are also wonderful renditions of many of these songs which reflect our diversity and the musical culture of our times.

Teaching your children some of these songs does a few things. It:

1. keeps the songs part of our heritage
2. passes on the messages in these songs to a new generation and
3. gives each of us a chance to remember some of these songs or to learn new ones - and in the process to be reminded of important pieces of our country's history.

The Star Spangled Banner, America the Beautiful, I've Been Workin' on the Railroad, and Swing Low Sweet Chariot are a few I remember growing up - but there are many more. What are your favorites?



**More Examples**



Spending time teaching our children about their rich heritage, the struggles to form their country, and the ways to be a good citizen builds a background of respect for freedom and caring about its preservation.

Here are some fun ways to teach your children about their country:

- Buy a puzzle of the U.S. It reinforces the concept that our country is diverse and large.
- Have fun at dinner quizzing your children on the states. It gives them much-needed attention as well as a head start in school. Ask them:
  - to name the cities they know in a particular state
  - what the state is known for
  - what the capital is
  - what states border that state
  - what the state, tree, flower and bird are for the state you live in
- Play the license plate game in the car. See how many license plates from other states you can spot.



**Sites & Resources**



**Readers' Stories**



No, this is not suggesting that you "love it or leave it". Sometimes the best way to get a true perspective on a place is to go away and get some distance from it. It's been said that there is nothing more special than touching down in the U.S. after having been abroad. Because most of us were born in the U.S., we often take our way of life for granted. While visiting other countries is often educational, fun and culturally interesting, it also often allows us to see how special the United States is, as well as to see the aspects that need attention.



**Readers' Stories**



**Sites & Resources**



The U.S. is a gorgeous and diverse country in terms of its geography and natural resources. There are magnificent mountains, canyons, waterfalls, lakes, rivers, deserts, caves, bayous, outcroppings, plains, marshes and on and on. While one doesn't have to visit a national park to see or appreciate the beauty of this country, many of the most spectacular of the country's natural resources have been preserved as national or state parks.

Visiting national and/or state parks gives us an appreciation for the beauty of our country, resulting in a stronger belief that it is worth taking time from our busy lives to do the simple things, that when done by all of us when the opportunities arise, keep the country strong and thus free.



**Sites & Resources**



**Readers' Stories**

# Visit an American Indian Reservation - After Learning About the Trail of Tears



"In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue"...and landed on the shores of Massachusetts. Almost three hundred years later, a group of English citizens who had settled on the American eastern shores, fed up with unfair taxation, declared their independence from England and became the United States of America.

The history of our country is not always pretty, and this is a case in point. In expanding its territory and becoming a nation of 50 states, the United States encountered Indians - or Native Americans as they are often called. Many tribes were driven from their land, many were slaughtered and, for the most part, they were treated in a way that was unfair and unjust. But getting to know our country includes both its inspiring history and its less desirable one.

## The Trail of Tears

One of the worst examples of our treatment of Native Americans occurred as a result of the "Indian Removal Act" passed in 1830. In the late 1830s, the U.S. Army forced the men, women and children of the Cherokee Nation from western Georgia to Oklahoma. This thousand mile forced march, with minimal food and facilities, resulted in enormous loss of life and come known as [The Trail of Tears](#).

## Why Visit a Native American reservation?

The [American Indian Heritage Foundation](#) is a good resource for finding the locations of Native American settlements. Visiting a reservation let's "our predecessors" know that we have an interest in understanding their heritage which is part of ours and gives us an appreciation of their rich cultural, spiritual and natural beliefs. It can also give us a real perspective of what democracy can do when its citizens don't stand up for what is right.

## Status of Native Americans

In the early years of the United States, Indian affairs were governed by the Continental Congress, which in 1775 created a Committee on Indian Affairs headed by Benjamin Franklin. Fifty years later, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was established under the War Department, and eventually moved to the Interior Department in 1949.



**Sites & Resources**

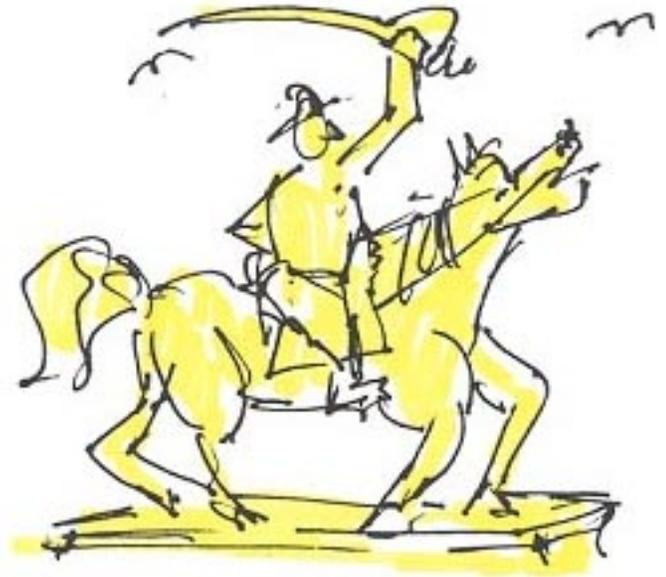


**Readers' Stories**



Visiting a war memorial helps to personalize the horror and effects of war. I have been to several, and they moved and impressed me more than I imagined.

**Arlington National Cemetery** - Located just outside Washington, DC, on 612 acres of rolling and pastoral grounds, are the gravesites of John F. Kennedy and 200,000 other Americans who died in wars such as Vietnam, World Wars I and II, the Korean War and more recently the Gulf War. It also houses the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier which is guarded 24 hours a day. To be in this peaceful and beautiful setting and to see row after row after row of grave stones creates quite a solemn and reverent mood.



**The Vietnam Veterans and Korean War Memorials** - Both are located on the Mall in Washington, DC - and a few minutes walk from each other. Both are quite unique and moving but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has special meaning to me because a high school friend of mine, [John Corr](#), has his name etched into that impersonal yet moving marble wall. I have never had an experience like my first visit to Wall! It is an experience of:

slowly walking along a black marble wall and seeing over 58,000 names inscribed on it representing the Americans who died during that conflict - fifty eight thousand!;

seeing the effect the wall has on other visitors - searching for someone they used to know, rubbing their fingers across the name when they find it and wondering what it all means;

seeing people "rubbing" a name onto a piece of paper to create a keepsake they can take away with them;

seeing the flowers, the letters, the poems and other mementos that were left close to the name of a fallen loved one.

An event like visiting The Wall can cause us to reflect on the dreadfulness of war and commit to ensure such horror never happens again. One can only shake one's head and commit to do what one can to ensure such horror never happens again. Here are a few sites that can give one a sense of the Wall from afar.

- [sc94.ameslab.gov/tour/vetmem.html](http://sc94.ameslab.gov/tour/vetmem.html) is a site that shows the wall, gives a brief history

of how the wall came to be and provides directions to it.

- [www.geocities.com/pentagon/quarters/4800/thewall.htm](http://www.geocities.com/pentagon/quarters/4800/thewall.htm) is a site where one can search a Vietnam Memorial Database for individuals who died in that conflict - by name, by city etc.
- [www.virtualwall.org](http://www.virtualwall.org) is a site that allows one to search for a veteran's name and then to leave a personal remembrances about them or to view remembrances previously left. The emotion in these remembrances is both raw and wonderful.
- The [Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall Page](#) is dedicated to honoring those who died in the Vietnam War. Since it first went on line in 1996 it has evolved into something more. It is now also a place of healing for those affected by one of the most divisive wars in our nation's history. It has hundreds of links to Vietnam-related educational, events, memorial and POW/MIA web sites.

**The Holocaust Museum** - My first thought after having visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC was that those who were exterminated during World War II would be very proud of the museum. The creators of the Museum did an incredible job of conveying the history, happenings and horrors of The Holocaust. The museum's news articles, film clips, voices of the survivors, and physical remnants from extermination camps helped to illustrate the horror of it.

If you go to DC and do nothing else, go to the Holocaust Museum. Hopefully you won't come out the same. And please, if you have children, take them to this museum if they are old enough so that they can begin to understand what happened and to think about it as they grow up. As horrific as it was/is, it happened and more important than scaring a child is to prevent anything even close to this from ever happening again.

[Click here](#) to go to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website.



**More Examples**



**Readers' Stories**

## Additional Actions That Support Our Heritage

**BACK**