Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 8:
That Brunch in the Forest

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

HS: A couple weeks ago, I saw an animated video about Thanksgiving. It had a stop-motion vibe to it. It showed images of historic documents and corny holiday decorations flying across the screen. The narrator was Smithsonian curator and author Paul Chaat Smith. And he's Native American himself — from the Comanche nation. Here's what he said at the start of the video:

Paul Chaat Smith: "Thanksgiving is insane. It's this huge, incredible disaster of highways and airports, and it's crowded and the weather's awful. A meal that takes days, sometimes weeks of preparation. Emotional turmoil. Fights."

HS: I mean, yeah, traffic is terrible, but I guess I didn't expect a Smithsonian curator to talk about travel options in the first 40 seconds of a video about Thanksgiving. So, obviously, I wanted to know more. Turns out, the video is part of an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian called "Americans," which Smith helped create.

HS: I had never met Smith before, but since he's my Smithsonian neighbor, I thought I'd just drop him an email…

[SFX]

HS: He responded.

[SFX]

HS: And we decided to meet at the exhibition to talk. I went over with Sidedoor producer Justin O'Neill.

HS (on tape): "There he is!"

Justin O'Neill (on tape): "Where?"

HS (on tape): "On the back couch, where he said he'd be."

HS: Smith has a really fun and also dry sense of humor that might make some wonder if he's kidding, or being serious.

PCS: Testing 1, 2, 3. Hello, Cleveland, hello Cleveland. This is my normal talking voice, I guess more or less.

HS: It was a busy day in the museum, and it's no surprise. The whole exhibition is stunning. And it wants you to get this: when it comes to Native Americans, a lot of stories told about them in the U.S, are wrong.

HS: So, this time on Sidedoor, we'll sit down with Paul Chaat Smith and talk Thanksgiving, and why we talk about Native Americans the way we do.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: This is what November in America looks like in my head. Given to you in haiku: Tumbling red, brown leaves. Halloween candy coma. Cold, pumpkin spiced rain. And a holiday whose popularity is only surpassed by Christmas. For real, we checked: polls say that Thanksgiving is America's second favorite holiday.

[1951 A DAY OF THANKSGIVING CLIP:
"Tomorrow's Thanksgiving!"
"Mmm, Turkey, and dressing, and pie, and cake."
"Gee! I can hardly wait."
"Me too!"]

HS: For a lot of people, Thanksgiving centers around a large meal and a story about two groups of people who came together hundreds of years ago. And those people were pilgrims and Native Americans.

HS: By the way, if you're wondering about the term "Native" versus "Indian" you're not alone. Paul Chaat Smith said he gets that question a lot. For the museum, either is acceptable, and you'll hear Smith using both interchangeably. A lot of people also like to name a specific nation's name whenever possible.

HS: So, back to Thanksgiving. Since the holiday is so prominent in the U.S. the museum uses it as way to get people thinking about their relationship with Native Americans.

HS: And for most people, that relationship is kind of a paradox. Most people don't know any Native Americans. But they're such a big part of our lives: from childhood games, to books and movies, to a starring role in the Thanksgiving story.

HS: And that idea is at the heart of the "Americans" exhibition. So, after we found a quieter place to talk, Smith told me why the museum made an entire exhibit about other people's fascination with Native Americans.

Paul Chaat Smith: For most of the country, you never actually see or think about Indians ever. There are no A-list celebrities in the United States, there are no national politicians that dominate the news, there are no captains of industry. The Indians are basically invisible, one percent of the country. From your earliest memories, Indians surround you in the pantry, place names, highways, cars, weapon systems. Indians are the wallpaper of American life.

HS: And the exhibition back at the museum literally makes Native Americans part of the wallpaper. The walls of an enormous hall are covered in ads, photography, sports jerseys, and comics that depict Native Americans.

PCS: We felt that should be the basis for building an exhibition, that lets our public see their own relationship to this. Let's talk about how freaking weird it is that this one percent of the country — imagery of Indians is used from the beginning of the United States up to the present in a zillion different ways. And it's normalized, so we don't think about it.

HS: The exhibition has has four other mini-exhibitions inside of it and it poses a key question: how is it that Indians are both present and absent from American life?

HS (on tape): Each component kind of showcases the myth or the story that connects the average American to Indians. And one of them is the Battle of Little Bighorn, the Trail of Tears, the story of Pocahontas, and Thanksgiving. How does Thanksgiving fit in with all of those other things?

PCS: It fits in in [an] inconvenient way. Thanksgiving was always an outlier and it was irresistible for us because what we really focused on was how this is different than other holidays. It's a non-negotiable holiday. So let's say you're a vegan anarchist who hates thanksgiving, who sees it as a celebration of genocide. You still have to account for the fact everybody you know is off that day, pretty much. You have to know most things are closed. You have to know people are visiting their families. There’s probably pressure on you to visit your family.

PCS: Somehow this is a uniquely American holiday that involves everybody in a way. Whether you like it or not doesn't matter. You have to plan around it. And Indians are at the center of that holiday.

HS (on tape): So why are Indians there?

PCS: It's sort of mysterious. Because what was new to us when we researched this for the exhibition is that that first Thanksgiving, what we call “a brunch in the forest” between English and local Indians, it actually did happen. There's records of that. And, it was a complete non-event.

HS: OK, I know what you’re thinking: the first Thanksgiving was a “complete non-event?” That is not what they told us in elementary school. In school, the story went something like this: some English colonists who had settled in New England seeking religious freedom and prosperity,

better known as The Pilgrims, were having a really tough time in the new world. They were struggling, hungry, cold, helpless.

HS: But then, Native Americans came to their rescue. They taught the pilgrims to grow crops that would thrive in America — I remember corn being one of them — and the pilgrims survived thanks to the neighborly Native Americans.

HS: And, in 1621, to celebrate their successful fall harvest, the two groups got together and shared a multicultural meal in a show of goodwill. And that's basically the school play version of the first Thanksgiving.

HS: But look deeper into history and something else becomes apparent.

PCS: The English were like obsessive recorders of everything that happened. They had their own blogs, they had their own diaries, they had all these records of everything — meticulously. And they reference, yes, some folks came by, and we grilled up the barbecue and you know, whatever. It wasn't special. It was forgotten for hundreds of years.

HS: So, that first Thanksgiving wasn't that big of a deal. In fact, it wasn't all that original of an event to begin with.

HS: Native Americans had held celebrations and dances around a harvest long before 1621. And Europeans in America had church-style services to give thanks since the 1500s.

HS: So, how did Thanksgiving become the holiday about "a brunch in the forest?"

HS: There were multiple efforts to create a national day of thanks in the country's early days. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln called for a holiday. And the idea also shows up a lot in women's magazines from that era.

HS: In the mid-1800s, just after the Civil War, the push to make Thanksgiving a holiday picked up steam. And it was then that popular culture gave Native Americans a permanent seat at the Thanksgiving table.

HS: That's because, around that time, an almost 200-year-old account of life on Plymouth Plantation was recovered. And the account mentioned both Pilgrims and Natives, who also became the subjects of really popular poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

HS: So, think of Pilgrims and Native Americans as, like, the stars of the mid-19th Century's Netflix period pieces.

PCS: And over time, we get to where we are now in the 21st Century, where Thanksgiving is always on some level about Indians. So, what we thought was interesting is to look at how and why that happens. Why is it important for the United States to feel like this is where our country

begins? It's a very generous view to say, “the first thing we're going to commemorate is when these proto-Americans welcomed people already there, the Native Americans, to have a meal. We're friendly, we want to be friends.” And I think that's a really, really important idea for Americans even if it seems corny.

PCS: And the great, sort of, “Thanksgiving moment” is when you bring in new neighbors, for certain demographics it would be... the prize is the Nigerian exchange student, right? Coming to your country, sitting at your table right? There are all these things that are quintessentially American, that shows a certain generosity of the American spirit.

PCS: It’s this very unsatisfying way to deal with this hard truth.

HS: Paul, and many others will tell you that the hard truth is this: the United States is a national project that came at an enormous cost to Native people. The U.S. government removed Native Americans from their lands, and authorized more than 1,500 wars, attacks, and raids on them.[1] Before Europeans started to colonize there were millions of Native Americans living here. By the end of the 1800s? Just a few hundred thousand.

HS (on tape): What did it do for the holiday or even for America to start putting Indians in that picture, in that image of this holiday about giving thanks?

PCS: I think it's a way of sort of processing how to think about the country, you know, what's different about the United States. Beginning in the 17th Century through the Boston Tea Party, for example, in the 1770s, you find this fascination with Indians by the rebels, by the revolutionists.

HS: That’s another flashback to U.S. history class for me. I remember drawings of men protesting Britain’s “taxation without representation.” They dumped chests of tea into the harbor and were dressed as Native Americans. And historians say the revolutionaries knew that they would be easily identified — even in Native American dress. They did it anyway to separate themselves from the English.

PCS: When I first heard about the Boston Tea Party, I assumed it was kind of a one off or it was just a disguise yourself, it was kind of a joke, it was halloween. But there was this incredible fascination with Native Americans by the American revolutionaries, and people basically saying “we're different, we are in this new place, and part of what makes us different is that in some ways we're like American Indians.”

PCS: If you take Indians out of the equation in the history of this country, you know, basically the English, it’s just like a really long, terrible camping trip. Right? What's different about it if it's about recreating what existed in England?

[1] https://www.history.com/news/native-americans-genocide-united-states

HS: Smith mentioned something a few times during our conversation. Whether it was the colonial era, the American Revolution, or the mid-19th Century — Americans have been fascinated with Native Americans and their lifestyles. Their clothing, and weapons — even as they stripped Native peoples of their lands and their rights.

HS: And that interest holds to the present day. Sports teams still use Native Americans as logos. And the advertising industry has long slapped their images onto products that have nothing to do with Native Americans.

HS (on tape): We're talking about things like brake fluid, Land O'Lakes butter — stuff that's pretty old that has Indian imagery on it. Could you ever imagine a startup today taking Indian imagery and putting it on their brand?

PCS: Yeah, clearly not. And it would be a great sensitivity. I think the high point of where you see that imagery, particularly products and advertising, is really the mid 20th Century.

[MAD MEN CLIP:
"Mohawk Airlines, 'there's a new chief in the sky.
"So, it's about an airline that's flown by Indians? Maybe a plane with some arrows stuck in the cargo door? That's funny. What else you got?"
"Several more Indian puns."]

HS: So, nobody would do that now. And so, when we built our great hall of Indian stuff, some of it looks like, you know, Grandpa's attic. But you'll also see a Kanye West poster from his Yeezus tour in which he uses an Indian skull with a feathered headdress, which interestingly enough, Lynyrd Skynyrd, used. So, he's actually referencing Lynyrd Skynyrd.

HS: Native American imagery is everywhere in America. And if you were a kid in the 90s like me, they were even in popular Disney movies. How could you forget Pocahontas?!

[POCAHONTAS CLIP]

PCS: So, one of the things that I think is compelling about when you look at all this material together: what you find is it reaches every demographic. It reaches, every political persuasion. It reaches every age group.

HS: So, the U.S. is a little obsessed with Native Americans. We want them as our logos, icons, and even as key players in our second-biggest holiday. And coming up, we'll talk about the changing ways in which we portray them in our national narrative.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: In the "Americans" exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, one thing is pretty clear — our culture is fascinated with Native Americans.

HS: Paul Chaat Smith helped curate the exhibition and he told me that Native Americans are a really important part of America's story because the country exists at their expense.

HS: So, for the rest of our conversation, Paul and I talked about how the United States deals with the darker chapters of its history.

HS (on tape): You've said that the history of slavery and dispossession of Native people kind of throws a wrench into the American narrative, and the story that the country wants to believe about itself. How do they disrupt the story of our country?

Paul Chaat Smith: I think it's this very particular thing about the United States, which is: the ambition of the American project is so extraordinary, almost utopian. And yet, in the moment people know it's nothing like that. Because, of course you can't say all men are created equal because of course slavery exists. Of course you're actively dispossessing Native Americans even as you, sort of, romanticize Native Americans. So, I think a lot of these things are about how to manage those contradictions.

HS (on tape): There's a really striking quote at the start of the exhibition and it says, "history keeps changing because Americans keep changing it." I feel like you're getting at that right now. Why do we keep changing history?

PCS: Well, I think because what historians have had trouble explaining to civilians is that history is always a narrative. [It] always has a level of fiction in it. As soon as you name something, you know, the Rodney King was it a riot or rebellion? You're giving a narrative. You know, that's why the term "revisionist" never really works because all history's revisionist, all history changes over time.

PCS: One of the things Americans should be proud of — that I'm proud of — is that we are willing to look at really negative chapters of our history in a way that I think all countries do not. So, removal was something in the 1830s. There were politicians who voted against it who said "we're going to really regret this one day, this will be a moment of shame." You know, and that's how it's regarded now. Very few people in 2018 say, "that was great. Let's do that again."

HS: And we don't just change our opinion about historic events. We change how our opinion about historic actors, too.

PCS: George Custer was always a controversial military leader, but for most of the narrative of Little Bighorn, he was maybe erratic but heroic.

PCS: In the 1970s, Hollywood puts out anti-Vietnam Westerns and he's a villain. The Smithsonian, since we're at Sidedoor, was partners in a big movie franchise called "Night at the Museum." And so, in the "Battle of the Smithsonian Exhibit," Custer was actually a character in

the movie. And so who was Custer then? He's not a villain, he's not a hero, he's just kind of inept. He's not good at anything. People don't take him very seriously. He's a bit clueless.

PCS: So, again, the basic facts about Custer don't change. The country is always revising its idea about these events, which is a good thing, and I think [what] we don't have at this time is, you know, very much market for nuance and complexity.

HS (on tape): We're in this moment now where we're really interrogating our history with American Indians. We have active conversations about Columbus Day, cultural appropriation — the list goes on. Today, in this moment, why do we still need Thanksgiving? Why is the U.S. still holding onto it?

PCS: I think countries, nations need to have a larger purpose. What do you want to believe about your country? And, you want to believe we come out of a very friendly, welcoming spirit. And, that's a positive idea and when people teach Thanksgiving in elementary school, you know, they're teaching values. And those are good values. You should be open to people different than you. You should share what you have. How the Indians fit in into that story: I think… to me there's a deeper subtext to it, which is, sort of, inoculating yourself in thinking about, "okay, but what else really happened?"

HS: Smith said that acknowledging that people have contradictions, is key to understanding history.

PCS: And this country is really, really complicated. You know, we have this part of the exhibit about Indian removal and we have this big display of all the paperwork required once the Indian Removal Act passed. And it's hundreds and hundreds of pages of people who worked in offices in Washington, DC, who wore badges like I do, I guess, and did things like the rental car receipts or whatever of the time. They're, like, managing this because that's their job. What I'm saying is, I personally don't believe human beings have changed that much in tens of thousands of years. Confused, ambivalent, absolutely sure of themselves and then thinking they were wrong.

PCS: And I think it's very easy to look at people from the past and not appreciate that moment and make these sweeping judgements about what that was like. It doesn't mean ignoring what happens, but these are human beings, you know, who are making political choices.

HS: In the "Americans" exhibition, there are constant reminders that all people make political choices. People like John Ross, the long-time chief of the Cherokee Nation.

PCS: One of the things we felt that was really important to talk about is that the five civilized tribes were actually slave states. The key leaders like John Ross — who was a brilliant leader, fought removal — he owned slaves, he believed in slavery. And once people got to Indian territory, they immediately reestablished slavery. They fought for the Confederacy up until the last bullet.

HS: In other words, with time, we realize that history's heroes and villains aren't always clear-cut. They are usually much more complicated than what popular narratives might lead us to believe.

PCS: So, my radical idea coming out of this project is that: I believe Indians are fully human. And that sounds comical, but I think when you have this idea — Indians are not political actors, Indians do not have contradictions, Indians do not make choices — then then you're pretending Indians are abstractions. And all of those objects and images you see in that hall there abstractions.

HS: And if you look more closely at history, and all the complex people in it, the two groups of people that came together for that first Thanksgiving, are pretty over-simplified, too.

PCS: So, I think it's a murkier picture. I think it doesn't have the clean lines of what people want to say. And I think if people want to boycott thanksgiving, that's cool. But I think, you know, people ask, "do you wish all that imagery was gone?" And I say, "no" because I think there's some presence there. There's some visibility. And because most Americans have no direct contact with actual living Native Americans, it's a start. It's kind of a crappy start in a certain way. But it's something, and I'm not interested in Native Americans being invisible.

[MUSIC]

HS: That was Paul Chaat Smith, he's a Comanche author and curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, where he helped create the "Americans" exhibition.

HS: In today's episode, we could only give you a taste of how Native Americans have been embedded in U.S. history, pop culture, and identity. If you want to see more, Paul and his team have set up a stunning, interactive website that lets you experience the exhibition wherever you are. Find it at si.edu/sidedoor. We'll have a link posted on our website. And, if you're in DC, go visit the exhibition in person.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

HS: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian's National Board. And thanks to listeners like you. Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

HS: Our podcast team is Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Our producer and haiku writer is Justin O'Neill. Extra support comes from John Barth, and

Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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HS: I’m your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.