



What are Winter Counts?

This background essay, adapted from a Smithsonian Institution online exhibit, provides information about the Winter Count calendars kept by many Lakota Indian bands.

Winter counts are histories or calendars in which events are recorded by pictures, with one picture for each year. The Lakota call them *waniyetu wowapi*.

Waniyetu is the word for year, which is measured from first snowfall to first snowfall. It is often translated as 'a winter.'



Wowapi means anything that is marked on a flat surface and can be read or counted, such as a book, a letter, or a drawing.

Winter counts are physical records that were used in conjunction with a more extensive oral history. Each year was named for an event and the pictures referring to the year names served as a reference source that could be consulted regarding the order of the years. People knew the name of the year in which other important events occurred, and could place these in time by

referring to the winter count.

The events used to name the years were not necessarily the most important things that happened but ones that were memorable and widely known within the community.

Winter Count Keepers

Each Lakota band, or *tiyospaye*, had a designated winter count keeper who served as the community historian. The keeper was responsible for recounting the band's history at various events throughout the year and for adding a new image to the winter count each year. Events for which years were named were selected in consultation with a council of band elders. Traditionally only men served as winter count keepers, and the role often was passed down from one family member to another. In the 20th century some counts were passed on to women. The Smithsonian winter counts are named for the last keeper, whenever that is known.

Source: Smithsonian Institution/National Anthropological Archives, "What were Winter Counts?," *Lakota Winter Counts Online Exhibit*, <http://wintercounts.si.edu>; additional information is available in *Lakota Winter Counts: The Teacher's Guide* (Washington, DC) which is available as a free PDF download under the Learning Resources section of the website.