**Introduction: Regions and Cultures**

Before European explorers came to North America in the 15th century, over 500 different societies or tribes lived on the continent. Society is a large group of people who live in a particular place, speak a common language, and share interests, relationships, basic beliefs and social identity.

Tribes that lived in similar environments had similar cultures. Culture is a shared system of behaviors, attitudes, and understandings. A society’s culture includes all activities and beliefs that people teach one another, including ways of worshiping, of making art, of getting food and of decorating their houses and clothes. People within the same culture ate similar foods, made similar houses, created similar art designs, and wore similar kinds of clothing. For instance, desert tribes wore lightweight clothing whereas tribes living in very cold climates wore clothing made out of heavy animal fur. Soft-soled moccasins were good for stalking animals for tribes that hunted in the forest. Conversely, in the Plains hard soled moccasins protected the feet from prairie cactus needles and sharp stones in the Plains. Furthermore, tribes constructed their homes from the materials available in their climate region. For example, American Indians inhabiting forests lived in homes of wood or bark, and tribes located in the arctic region of North America lived in homes made out of ice and snow. In the same way, climate regions influenced American Indian culture throughout North America, the topography and climate influenced Upper Missouri Plains Indians in North Dakota.

**Source 1: Topography of North Dakota**

The state of North Dakota is large grassland. Scientists believe that a million years ago, the climate grew colder and the ice age began. A series of continental ice sheets or glaciers moved south, retreated and moved south again creating the landscape of North Dakota. The copious amounts of water produced by the melting glaciers also helped shape the terrain. The rivers furnished water for drinking; brushy cover along their banks attracted game and supplied firewood and their moist bottomlands provided tillable soil.

The vast prairie of North Dakota has smaller regions with climates based on altitude (the height of an object or point in relation to sea level or ground level) and amount of annual rainfall. North Dakota is split into two main areas: The Central Lowlands and the Great Plains.

The Central Lowlands is separated from the Great Plains by the Missouri Escarpment. An Escarpment is a long cliff or steep slope separating two comparatively level or more gently sloping surfaces and resulting from erosion or faulting. There is an elevation change from 300 to 400 feet along the Missouri Escarpment. The Missouri Plateau spreads west towards the Rocky Mountains from the escarpment, while the Central Lowlands spread east.

While the escarpment divided North Dakota in half, the land actually rises from east to west in three broad steps: the Red River Valley, the Drift Prairie, and the Missouri Plateau. The Missouri Plateau spreads west towards the Rocky Mountains from the escarpment. In the most South-Western part of the Missouri Plateau, a large, dry basin exists that was carved out by glaciers during the ice age and is now called the Upper Missouri River Basin. The Central Lowlands spread east from the escarpment. The Central Lowlands are divided into two steps: the Drift Prairie and the Red River Valley.

**Source 2: Climate of North Dakota**

The different steps of North Dakota differ in climate, surface features, soil and native vegetation. The Red River Valley gets the most rainfall whereas the Missouri Plateau receives the least. As rainfall decreased to the west, the tall grasses dropped out, except in the wetter places and the medium grasses became shorter. Light rainfall, autumn drought, and prairie fires discourage tree growth, so prairie grass adapted into a drought-enduring flora and became the dominant vegetation. North Dakota’s grasses, especially small and medium varieties, are hardy enough to withstand extremes of heat and cold, flood and drought. Small and medium sized grasses protect the soil from wind and water erosion and provide shelter and food for wildlife. They are not only palatable to livestock, but nutritious as well.

In one way or another, all living things had to adapt to conditions on the vast, open plain, with its drought and bitter winter cold. Buffalo and antelope traveled far and wide in large herds. Fleet-footed wolves, coyotes, and jack rabbits could cover extensive areas in search of food, travel far for water and even migrate to avoid summer drought or winter frost.

**Source 3: East to West Migration**

Extreme weather changes such as drought or heavy rains and tribal conflict caused American Indian tribes to migrate (move from one area to a new area, region, or habitat). Introduction of horses to North America made travel easier and eased their ability to travel farther.

Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow, Cheyenne, Cree, Assiniboine and Yanktonai Dakota, Teton Dakota, and Chippewa moved westward from Minnesota or the Great Lakes area. Their new location forced them to adapt to their surroundings in order to survive. Instead of living a sedentary lifestyle, they became nomadic or semi-nomadic.

When tribes moved to a new area, they adapted to their new environment in order to survive. Semi-Nomadic people perform seasonal migrations hunting buffalo but returned to the same area to cultivate crops. Nomadic people have no permanent home but move from place to place, as in hunters who follow buffalo herds. Instead of boiling maple sap into sugar, they needed to make sugar from box elder sap. Bows were modified from long bows to shorter ones making it easier to ride a horse and shoot at the same time. Their diet changed due to the resources available in the area. They ate buffalo meat and tipsin roots instead of fish and wild rice.

Their home structures in the Minnesota and Great Lakes areas built bark covered wigwams because of the plentiful trees in their region. When tribes migrated into the Plains, they used hides to construct tipis because bison were plentiful. Tipis are transportable shelters made out of buffalo hides or canvas. American Indians dragged their belongings and tipis on travois attached to a horses as they followed buffalo migrations. Travois were two large poles attached together at one end creating an acute angle (an angle that is less than 90 degrees). This end was latched to a dog or horse. A laced circular platform (like a snowshoe) between the two long poles held tipi furnishings or the tipi. American Indians used dogs to drag travois before the introduction of horses to the Plains. Horses were able to drag travois farther, faster, and carry more weight than dogs.

**Source 4: Regions and Tribes**

**Central Lowlands: Red River Valley**

The Red River Valley of eastern North Dakota is flat, windy grassland with enough rainfall to grow tall grasses with shrubs and trees along the river. This region was home to the Yanktonai Dakota, one of the buffalo-hunting American Indian tribes which roamed the Plains. Like other divisions of the Dakota, the Yanktonai were tipi-dwellers. They followed the buffalo herds in order to hunt them, and they used travois to carry their goods. In 1642, The Yanktonai and Teton Dakotas were living in the Minnesota woods, in villages of bark houses. Later they moved west to the headwaters of the Big Sioux, James and Red rivers, that is, on the Drift Prairie of North and South Dakota.

The Chippewa called themselves Anishanabe (AH-nish-ah-Nah-beh), meaning “original people.” The word “Ojibwa” refers to “something puckered up.” One theory is that it comes from the way in which the people made their moccasins. The term “Ojibway” is used when referring to the tribe’s early history. The term “Chippewa” is used after European contact. By the end of 1642, the Chippewa were living on both shores of Lake Huron and Lake Superior and at Sault Ste. Marie when French Jesuits first visited them. By the end of the 18th century the westernmost band, the latest American Indians to enter the North Dakota grassland from the east, was moving out of the Minnesota woods onto the Great Plains in northeastern North Dakota and southern Manitoba near Pembina. The Plains Chippewas, or Plains Ojibways, became a distinct tribe and later moved on to the Turtle Mountains, to northeastern Montana, and eastern Saskatchewan. The Assiniboine allied with the Chippewa against many bands of Sioux, Arikara, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Gros Ventre.

The Cheyenne ventured west from their Minnesota and North Dakota homelands. They adapted to Plains life. The name Cheyenne comes from the Sioux form the Sioux word sha-hi’ye-na (SHAH-hee-lee-yah), which means “people who speak a foreign language.” The Cheyenne call themselves Tsetsehesta’hese (Tse-TSES-tas), which means “people like us.” The Cheyenne were living by means of agriculture and hunting in south-central Minnesota in the seventeenth century when the Chippewa and Dakotas, armed through trade with the French, pushed them out.

The Cree living in the Red River Valley area, according to Fort Union’ Bourgeois Denig, was “Indeed the country presents many good features.” He went on to write, “The poorest kind of horse will fatten if let run twenty-five or thirty days among these rushes.” The Cree’s principal source of sustenance is derived from hunting buffalo and selling meat and skins to traders. The remainder was consumed by their families. The Cree hunted and traveled throughout North Dakota. Their people called one another Ne hiyawak (neh-high-Yoe) meaning those who speak the same language. The Cree were originally part of the Chippewa nation. The Chippewa spread out towards Lake Superior, Lake of the Woods, and even as low as Lake Michigan and Prairie du Chien. According to Denig, the Crees may have separated from the Chippewa because of a family feud that was so frequent in their mode of government. Or the division occurred because they wanted to move to the superior hunting area in the north where the rivers and lakes provided beaver, fish and wildfowl.

In 1760 the Cree were found along the banks of the Saskatchewan and Red Rivers and around the shores of Lake Winnipeg. The Assiniboine became their allies and they fought with all the surrounding tribes except the Chippewa. Near 1800, the Assiniboine left for the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. The Cree frequently hunted in the country of the Assiniboine especially when buffalo was scarce in their country.

**Great Plains: Missouri Plateau**

A trace of the Rocky Mountain forest (western yellow pine, red cedar, and dwarf juniper) invaded the warmer and drier south western section of North Dakota, especially the Badlands. Where trees could not survive, a great variety of shrubs grew (wolfberry, buffalo berry, dwarf sage and creeping cedar) The Teton Dakota, or Western Sioux, Teton from Titonwana meaning “dwellers on the prairies” made their home west of the Missouri. Dakota, Chippewa for “lesser enemies” were also called Sioux. The Tetons despised fish as unclean food, rarely had gardens, and depended mainly on the buffalo for food. The Teton Dakota lived to the south in the 1850s, in the Badlands area where Theodore Roosevelt National Park is located.

The Crow people are relatives of the Hidatsa. Their ancestors lived in the woodlands near the Great Lakes. In the early 1600s, they broke away from the Hidatsa and their relatives called these people Apsaalooke (ab-SAH-lah-gah) which means “children of the large beaked bird.” Later Europeans interpreted this to mean “crow.” The Crows moved to the Missouri with the Hidatsa, but quarreled with them over the division of some game and went farther west. They settled in eastern Montana, became buffalo-hunting nomads, and roved the western portion of North Dakota.

The Central Plains of North Dakota are prairie, covered by grasses with a network of rivers. This region was home to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara who settled in earth lodge villages. They grew corn, beans, and squash and traded with tribes who specialized in hunting buffalo. They hunted when they could, but they supplemented their economy by trading for meats and hides.

The Mandan raised beans, squash, and sunflowers but especially corn in their gardens. They also gathered seeds, wild fruit, and roots: chokecherries, buffalo berries, June berries, wild grapes and plums, ground beans, the starchy roots of the tipsin, or Indian bread root, and wild artichoke. They hunted buffalo, elk, deer and antelope with arrows tipped with Knife River flint or gray chert picked up on the prairie. They also hunted small game, rabbits and such, and caught fish in the river with bone hooks.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the Mandan had become well-adjusted to their environment. They had learned to resist the bitter cold of winter and endure the heat and drought of summer. By drawing together in villages, or even clusters of villages, they could enjoy both the amenities of group living and a stout defense against enemies. And by locating their villages along the Missouri, they had easy access to wood for fuel and building purposes, plus rich bottom land on which to raise crops. Each group had villages, one near the gardens for summer living and the other in the woods for maximum protection against winter weather. For food to supplement domestic crops, they used many of the plants native to the region, but the great bounty of the grassland was buffalo, which provided not only meat and fat, but hides for robes and bones for implements. They also made sugar from the sap of the box elder.

Sometime in the 17th century, the Hidatsa, driven out by the Chippewa or Dakota, moved from their home in western Minnesota and northeastern North Dakota to the Missouri River. The Hidatsa moved from central Minnesota to the eastern part of what is now North Dakota near Devils Lake, and moved to join the Mandan at the Missouri River about 1600. According to Mandan and Hidatsa oral tradition, the Mandan and Hidatsa were created in this area and have always lived here.

The Arikara, often called the Rees, approached North Dakota by coming up the Missouri River from Nebraska. They planted corn and made pottery. In American Indian sign language, they were the “corn eaters” fingers simulated the gnawing of kernels from a cob. The Arikara and Mandan bartered corn with the Cheyenne and other tribes for buffalo robes and meat. Oral and written history says the names “Arikara, Arickara, Ricarees and Rees” were given to them by the Pawnee and other informants to describe the way they wore their hair. The Arikara refer to themselves by the name “Sahnish” which means “the original people from whom all other tribes sprang.”

**Upper River Basin: Home of Assiniboine**

The dry Upper Missouri River Basin of western North Dakota is a large basin that was carved out by glaciers during the Ice Age. The Missouri River now carves winding hillsides, little valleys, and natural grasslands which were once home to the buffalo and the tipi-dwelling Assiniboine (uh-Sin-uh-boin). “Assiniboine” is a Chippewa word meaning “stone cookers.” This refers to stone boiling, the practice of heating stones directly in a fire and then placing them in water for cooking. The Assiniboine call themselves Nakota (NAH-ko-da), meaning “generous people.” The Assiniboine originated from the Yanktonai Dakota and broke off from them before 1640. Their oral tradition holds that they broke with the Yanktonais while living in the Upper Mississippi and then moved north to join the Crees.

The first recorded Euro-American’s contact with the Assiniboine appears in 1640, and places them as a distinct group in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg. Eighteen years later mentions they occupied the territory between Lake Superior and Hudson Bay. It appears almost certain that they separated from the Sioux in the vicinity of the headwaters of the Mississippi River, in present day Minnesota. Assiniboine was a name applied by the earliest Canadian Jesuits; the Assiniboine had, for a considerable time, been in contact with the Chippewas.