

An Archeological Overview of the People of the Upper Missouri

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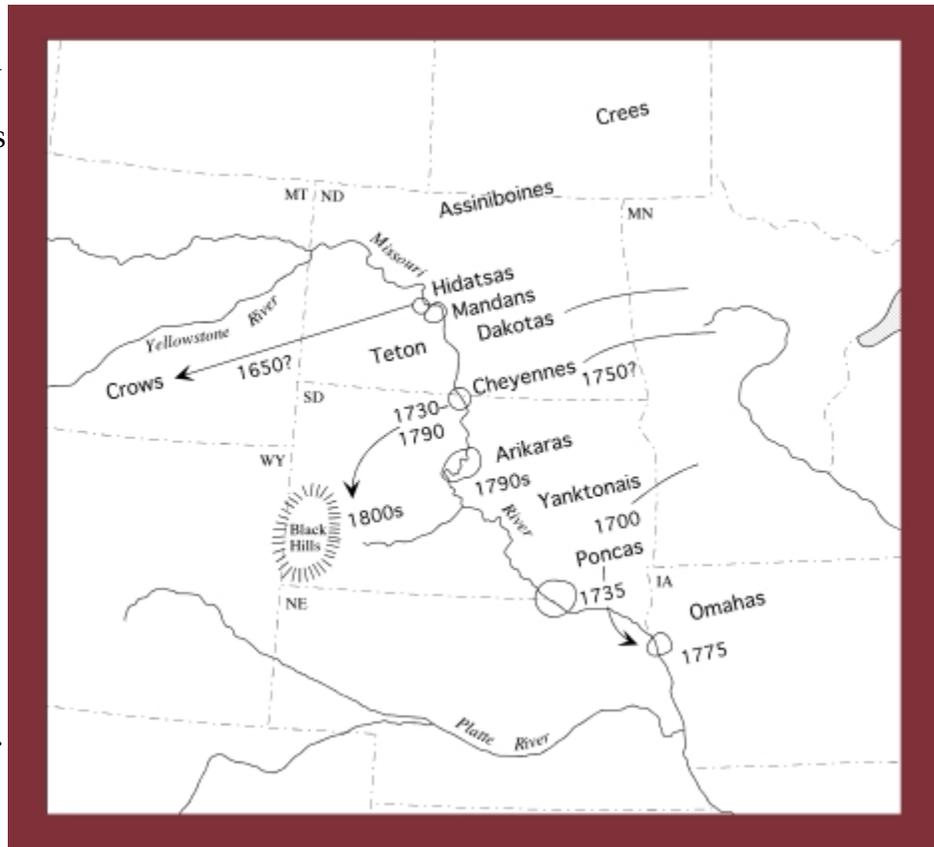
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By the time of the Louisiana Purchase a great deal was known in St. Louis about the tribes that lived along the lower Missouri River and its tributaries. Marquette and Jolliet had charted the positions of tribes in that area relative to the river's course in 1673, and later French explorations had filled in many of the details of their customs and intertribal relations. But comparable knowledge of the tribes of the upper Missouri River- that is, above the mouth of the Platte River in Nebraska- was not obtained for more than a century after Marquette and Jolliet; indeed, not until the last decade of the 1700s.

This archaeological overview will focus on the tribes that lived along the banks of the upper Missouri River in sedentary communities of earth-covered lodges. This choice is dictated by the fact that the archaeology of their nomadic neighbors is simply unknown. The reason? These nomadic tipi-dwellers did not remain very long in one location, and they left little behind them in their abandoned camps to tell us of their lives. The ruins and extensive refuse middens left at earth lodge communities, on the other hand, provide a rich record of how these people lived. The Great Plains tribes of history and stereotype consist of the nomadic tribes, but an equally dramatic way of life took place in the Missouri valley.

The Missouri valley cuts diagonally across the Northern Great Plains, and six distinctive village groups lived along its forested floodplains between the mouths of the Platte River in Nebraska and the Yellowstone River in Montana. In the decades before Lewis and Clark, the Omahas and Poncas lived in present-day northeastern Nebraska; the Arikaras, in north-central South Dakota; the Cheyennes, just above the North Dakota-South Dakota boundary; and the Mandans and Hidatsas, north of present-day Bismarck, North Dakota.

At the time of our story, each of these tribes lived in villages consisting of earth-covered lodges. Their towns, often fortified by deep encircling ditches, generally were set on high, flood-free terraces along the Missouri River, usually overlooking either the river channel or the river bottomlands.



Their circular homes were built on a four-post foundation surrounding a central hearth. The structure was covered with rafters, willow branches, and sod to make a cozy earth home - warm in winter, and cool in summer. A covered entry opened on one side, and a smoke hole pierced the center of the roof. Earth lodges all over the Plains mirrored this general style, with only minor architectural differences between groups. Each lodge housed an extended family in comfort: there were beds along the walls, storage spaces, and even room in some of them for their prized horses.

These lodges were substantial dwellings, usually 30 to 40 feet in diameter. It took months of preparation to obtain the building material, and several weeks to build. They lasted ten years or more before they had to be rebuilt. Some of their community buildings, or ceremonial lodges, were as much as 100 feet in diameter. When the villages were abandoned the lodges fell into ruin, and often were destroyed by fire. But their remains left conspicuous evidence of their size and shape on the ground surface. These large, donut-shaped depressions are features that are easily found and identified unless they have been leveled by cultivation. Aerial photographs of these villages reveal how readily many of them can (or once could) be seen from the air. Such prehistoric to historic villages once lined

the banks of the Missouri River in the Dakotas, nearly one for every river mile, denoting a very large population.

Historically, lodges were placed in no particular order in the villages. Between them were drying racks for curing corn and drying jerky. You had to know your way around these towns to avoid becoming lost or confused. Outside the villages were stages on which they placed their dead. Well-traveled, hard-packed roads joined nearby villages, often passing along the terrace edge and overlooking their garden plots. Small watch towers were maintained in them to help keep birds from the crops.

Smallpox and other introduced diseases began to reduce their numbers before any significant records were made by European traders. It was a fast-killing and repulsive disease. There was a massive epidemic in the mid 1700s, reducing the Arikaras from some 30village to perhaps five or so. The other villagers also were devastated. Another smallpox epidemic struck in 1781, and yet another one in 1837. It is estimated that before the 1781 epidemic there may have been as many as 12,000 Mandans; after 1781 only about 1,500of them remained. The 1837 epidemic further reduced the Mandans to no more than about 125 people, or so - an overall reduction of about 96 percent.

The villagers depended for their food equally on hunting by the men (principally bison) and on gardening in the river floodplain by the women. Corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers were staples. They stored the harvest from these crops in bell-shaped, underground storage pits both inside and outside of their homes. Some of them were more than six feet deep and could hold a year's harvest.

Bison were all important in their diet, just as they were to their nomadic neighbors. Animals were stalked individually, and they often were driven in large numbers over cliffs or into corrals to be killed. Historically, bison were hunted on horseback. Collectively, these village dwellers are known as the "Plains Village Tradition," a group that also includes a few other tribes that lie outside our immediate area of interest- the Pawnees, Otos, Ioways, and Kansas of the lower Missouri River.

The Plains Village Tradition peoples shared more than village life, architecture, and heavy reliance on garden crops. Their inventory of stone, bone, and antler tools and weapons were remarkably similar, although they varied greatly in style from tribe to tribe. Well made, globular pottery jars were used for storage and cooking, and were often elaborately decorated by incised lines or cord-impressed

designs. Fragments of these vessels are found by the thousands in their villages. Most tribal styles were distinctive.

Their extensive use of bone for tools is equally characteristic. Hoes made from the shoulder blades of bison were used for digging and for tilling their gardens. The women in each family might cultivate up to five acres of bottomland, where the soil was easily tilled by these tools. The tough sod on the grassy uplands made gardens there impractical. Bone was raw material for many of their tools that did not require a sharp cutting edge. Bones were split and shaped into many varieties of needles, awls and punches, fishhooks, and handles for stone knives. Elaborate tools such as serrated fleshers were made from bison leg bones, and used to strip flesh from hides. In short, their technology was rich and complex, and it tells us a great deal about their way of life.

The Plains villagers were, however, surrounded on all sides by nomadic hunters and gatherers, living in tipis the year round. Some of them were friendly, and some not. But friend or foe, all of them temporarily set aside their differences to carry on an intertribal trade. The Mandan-Hidatsa and the Arikara villages were major centers of trade. Every fall, nomadic hunters and gatherers came to their villages to exchange products of the hunt for the villager's garden produce. The Assiniboines and Crees came down from the north; the Crows, from the southwest; and the Cheyennes and others from the southwest.

By means of these rendezvous, goods from great distances- such as dentalium sea shells from the Pacific Coast - reached the very heart of the Plains. Other goods came north from the Gulf of Mexico and the American southeast. The villagers profited greatly from this exchange, in historic times exacting a 100% markup on goods they obtained from one nomadic group and passed on to another. Trade was sufficiently important to their Plains tribes that they declared a "market peace" while exchange took place. This trade bound the Plains tribes together in a mutually advantageous social and economic network- one that was facilitated by the universal use there of Plains Indian sign language, one of the most effective means of nonverbal communication ever devised. This, then, was the social and economic context of the tribes of the Northern Plains.

We begin our story about 1700. By this date the Northern Plains had emerged from the shadows of prehistory into an era that was to set the stage for the dynamic tribal movements of the historic period. French traders were moving up the Missouri River from its mouth as far as the Pawnees in central Nebraska, though few of them reached as far north as the Arikaras until the mid-1700s. European traders were also actively reaching out from posts in the Great Lakes

area toward the upper Mississippi valley, and European trade goods from both north and south were trickling into the villages along the Missouri, initially through intertribal trade.

Things were to change rapidly in the next half-century, in large part because of the acquisition of horses by Shoshonean groups in the central Rocky Mountains. Horses, originating in the Spanish southwest, were obtained through trade or raids on Spanish settlements and on other tribes. By 1700 the Shoshones were skilled raiders, and with the acquisition of horses in the mid-1700s, their raids escalated into missions far from their former haunts in Wyoming and Montana. The Shoshone came to dominate much of the High Plains as far north as the South Saskatchewan River in central Canada. Fifty years later all of the village Indians and their neighbors were using horses obtained through intertribal trade.

Let us now focus on the history and archaeology of the six village tribes of the upper Missouri River in the decade prior to Lewis and Clark.

The Omahas and Poncas

The Omahas and Poncas are historically indivisible. In the early 1700s the two groups - then a single tribe - were living in central Minnesota, but over the next half-century they moved south and west, eventually settling along the Missouri River and taking up a village way of life, many elements of which, they say, they borrowed from the Arikaras. Early in the century the Poncas broke away from the Omahas to form a separate tribe. The Omahas moved downstream to a village south of present-day Sioux City, known as Big Village. The Poncas remained near the mouth of the Niobrara River, where one of their principal settlements was a village today called Ponca Fort. The two groups are known archaeologically principally by these two earthlodge villages.

Big Village village was on the Missouri River bottomland near the base of the river bluffs. It was occupied from about 1775 to 1819, and was visited by a succession of traders in the years before and after Lewis and Clark. In the late 1700s it was under the sway of the famous but despotic chief, Blackbird. Today the site is bisected by Highway 77, where a monument exists at a roadside turnout just north of the little town of Homer, Nebraska.

Ponca Fort was a hilltop redoubt near the mouth of Ponca Creek, a few miles above the mouth of the Niobrara. It was surrounded by a fortification ditch, built for defense against the Arikaras, Cheyennes, or Apaches. Well known in Ponca lore, it contained earthlodges and was surrounded by several cemeteries, probably created during episodes of disease. The village was visited by a variety of traders in the last decade of the 1700s, although its full span of its occupation is not known. Today it lies on private property.

Intertribal trade was an important component of Native American life, and every Plains tribe traded with one or more neighboring groups, villagers normally exchanging goods with the nomads. They wanted to continue this trade on their own after the arrival of Europeans. It is for this reason that the Omahas and Poncas tried to intercept European traders out of St. Louis, often taking their goods from them, and stopping them from going upriver to the Tetons and Arikaras. The Arikaras and Tetons, in turn, wanted for themselves the trade goods intended for the Mandans and Hidatsas.

But whether by intertribal trade, or trade with Europeans, goods were flowing into Native American hands that drastically changed their technology. Metal arrow points and knives rapidly replaced those of chipped stone, and metal containers quickly supplanted their hand-made pottery. The Omahas' Bad Village and the Ponca Fort are both late enough in time that most native crafts had been displaced by European trade goods, making it impossible to compare their native goods with those of pre-European times. For this reason neither group can be convincingly associated with a specific prehistoric culture.

The Arikaras

In the early 1700s the Arikaras lived in numerous and often immense villages central South Dakota above and below the mouth of the Bad River, in the vicinity of Pierre. Epidemics reduced their numbers drastically in the mid-1700s. Originally living in some thirty villages, the Sioux drove them north, and in the years before Lewis and Clark they were living in a handful of villages near the mouth of the Grand River - three of them on islands in the Missouri. Their principal village at the time of Lewis and Clark, however, was the Leavenworth site - a twin village north of present-day Mobridge, occupied from about 1798 to 1823. It obtained its name in 1823 after its occupants attacked a fur trading party led by William Ashley, and Colonel Leavenworth in turn attacked it and drove the Arikaras away. The Arikaras became nomads, even living on the Platte River in Nebraska, and did not permanently return to the Missouri until the mid 1830s, when they confiscated the Mandan village in North Dakota adjoining Fort Clark after the Mandans were nearly destroyed by the great smallpox epidemic of 1837. Most of the Arikara villages in South Dakota were flooded by the Oahe Reservoir, and the few remaining ones are on federal or on private property.

The Cheyennes

The Cheyennes began their historic migrations onto the Plains from somewhere in southeastern Minnesota. They appear to have moved westward, not as a tribe, but band by band, until they reached and crossed the Missouri River. For a time,

some of them lived in a fortified earthlodge village on the Sheyenne River in southeastern North Dakota known today as the Biesterfeldt site. Here they were horticultural, bison-hunting villagers whose life way was essentially the same as that of their Arikara neighbors on the Missouri River. Their four-post earthlodges, for example, clearly mirror Arikara architecture. Biesterfeldt today is on private property.

The Cheyennes apparently abandoned Biesterfeldt after attacks by the Chippewas in the late 1700s, and moved on to the Missouri River. Cheyenne traditions, and those of their Sioux neighbors, as well as accounts by Lewis and Clark, suggest that between about 1730 and 1795 they lived in no less than six villages on the Missouri, and in two others on the middle reaches of the Grand River west of the Missouri. Archaeologists can find no evidence of earthlodge villages on the Missouri that they occupied, and it is likely that here they were living in communities consisting of tipis. By Lewis and Clark's time the Cheyennes had abandoned life on the Missouri, moved into the High Plains near the Black Hills, and become fully-nomadic bison hunters. All of their village sites along the Missouri River are today flooded by the Oahe Reservoir.

The Mandans and Hidatsas

In the late prehistoric period the Mandans were living in numerous villages near the mouth of the Heart River (the "heart" of their universe), and the Hidatsas were living upstream near the mouth of the Knife River. These very successful gardeners were the northwesternmost effective horticulturists in North America, and their villages were centers for a vast intertribal trade network. Historically, tribes from as far distant as southern Canada and the American southwest came to their villages to trade. After the disastrous smallpox epidemic of 1781, the Mandans abandoned their villages near Heart River, moved upriver, and built two new communities just downstream from those of the Hidatsas. Even before this time, the two groups shared so many elements in architecture and in pottery, tools, and weapons that it is almost impossible to differentiate between them without having historical records.

Two important Mandan villages today are open to the public. Both of them predate the Mandan move upriver to live near the Hidatsas. On-a-Slant village, just south of Mandan, North Dakota, is within Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, better known for being General Custer's departure point for the Little Big Horn. Restored lodges at this fortified site give the visitor a graphic idea of their village layout and of their homes. Ongoing archaeological work there will tell us more about this time in Mandan history. The other Mandan village, twelve miles north of Bismarck, is Double Ditch State Historic Site. The ruins of this community, consisting of nearly 200 lodge depressions, is surrounded by two concentric

fortification ditches. The village is one of the most impressive archaeological sites in the Great Plains and, indeed, in the United States.

The three Hidatsa and the two Mandan villages at the mouth of the Knife River - known as the "Five Villages" - were visited and described by a long roster of traders, and in 1804 Lewis and Clark built Fort Mandan just downstream from the two Mandan communities. Both of these Mandan villages have vanished. One of them (Black Cat's village) either fell into the Missouri River, or is deeply buried in river sediment. The other community (Big White's village) was destroyed by a gravel pit over which a power plant was later built near present-day Stanton, North Dakota.

One of the Hidatsa villages today lies under the town of Stanton, though one lodge depression remains in the county courthouse lawn. Fortunately, however, two of their historic villages remain nearly intact, and are the focal point of the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, maintained by the National Park Service. This air view of what is known as Big Hidatsa Village illustrates the size and degree of preservation of them. Lodge depressions, the fortification ditch, and even native roads leading out of the village may be seen in aerial photographs. A restored and fully-furnished earthlodge has been built on the site, providing visitors with a view of the comfort of these earthlodge homes. Although there are state historic sites, Knife River National Historic Site is the only such federal site to celebrate the lives of the Plains villagers. It graphically illustrates a way of life that has been largely flooded and that is now lost under the waters of the Garrison, Oahe, Big Bend, and Fort Randall reservoirs.

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