



Stories of the Plains People

ARIKARA

Once all living things were in the womb of Mother Earth. Corn Mother caused all things to have life and to start to move toward the surface of the earth. With Corn Mother's help, the people were born onto the surface of the earth, but because the people did not know how to care for themselves, they started to wander. As the Arikara people migrated west, obstacles were put in their way.

One obstacle was a great body of water. A bird made a path through the water for the people, but before everyone had made it through, the water closed over them. These people became the fish and other creatures of the water.

Another obstacle was a tall cliff. Again a bird made a passageway for the people. Those people who did not proceed through the cliff became the birds.

A great dense forest was the third obstacle. An owl found a way and led some of the people through, but again not all made it through the forest. Those who stayed in the forest became the deer, moose, bears, and other animals.

Finally the Arikara came to a beautiful land where they found everything they needed to live. A woman of great beauty came to them, and the Arikara people recognized her as Corn Mother. She stayed with them for many years and taught them how to live and work on the earth and how to pray. When she died, Corn Mother left the people the corn plant as a reminder that her spirit would always guide and care for them.

HIDATSA

The Hidatsa were originally divided into three subtribes: the Awatixa, the Awaxawi, and the Hidatsa-proper. These villages recognized a common alliance for protection, but lived and worked as separate units. Each of these groups had its own story.

The Awatixa believed that they had descended from the sky under the guidance of the great leader, Charred Body, to live along the Missouri River.

The Awaxawi believed that they once lived underground and climbed up a vine to the surface of the earth, which had been created by two of their cultural heroes, First Creator and Only Man. They then lived along the streams to the east of the Awatixa as farmers and eventually moved to the Missouri River.

TRACKING THE BUFFALO

Stories from a Buffalo Hide Painting



Smithsonian
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HIDATSA, CONT.

The Hidatsa-proper believed they began under the earth near a great lake to the east, thought to be Devils Lake, North Dakota. According to tradition, the Hidatsa-proper came to the earth by climbing up a vine that had penetrated their underground home. Before everyone had emerged, a pregnant woman became stuck in the exit hole, and there are still Hidatsa living in the underworld. The Hidatsa-proper moved around on the plains until they came to a great river, where they met the Mandan on the other side. The Mandan, who called them “Mini-taree” or “Cross the Water,” invited them to cross over to the other side and settle. Since they had never had a permanent home, the Hidatsa-proper had no knowledge of corn growing and had to be taught the techniques by the people living on the Missouri River.

MANDAN

The Mandan story tells of the creation of the world, plants, animals, and man by First Creator and Lone Man. The Missouri River, the site of their creation, divided the land into two parts. First Creator took the south side and made hills, mountains, springs, valleys, and timbered areas. He made buffalo, sheep, deer, antelope, and snakes. Lone Man created flat land with lakes and ponds and a few trees. He made cattle, sheep, water animals, and birds.

First Creator criticized Lone Man’s creations, especially the cattle, because they were not strong enough to last through the winter. The cattle were sent back to the east, where Lone Man also created white people. Lone Man created more humans, who grew and flourished. The first people he created were the Mandan. One group of the Mandan, who first lived below the ground, brought corn and squash with them when they were born onto the surface of the earth.

Lone Man was reborn as a Mandan and lived with the people. After many years, he decided to return to his home, the south wind. Before leaving, he promised the Mandan they would always have his help and that some day he would return. Each spring he sends the warm south wind so that the people will know that he still cares for them.

NOTE: Heather Paisley-Jones, educator at the National Museum of American History, developed these stories based on existing versions. These stories relate to the following images on the buffalo hide painting key: Arikara: K, Hidatsa: J, Mandan: F. **FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES,** see the materials listed on the “Read More About It” page. See also: “White Buffalo Woman,” in *American Indian Myths and Legends*, pages 47-52, selected and edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz and published by Pantheon Books, 1984.