

THE HARD LUCK TRIBES:

THE MANDANS, HIDATSAS, AND ARIKARAS



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Along the upper Missouri in what is now North Dakota reside three Native American tribes which are today known as the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold. They live very near their ancestral lands, although much of it now lies beneath the water of the Garrison Dam.¹

In many ways their history parallels that of most Indian tribes in the nineteenth century - their land was stolen, their resources exploited, and their lifestyle destroyed. But there is one big difference: they never resisted.

The Mandans and Hidatsas (and to a lesser extent, the Arikaras) are the "nice guys" of Native American history. Aside from individual skirmishes, they never fought the white man, cooperated to the fullest extent in the reservation and acculturation process, and as a reward, were the first tribes to receive U.S. citizenship with full voting privileges in 1891, unlike the limited citizenship granted to the remainder of the first Americans in 1924.²

Why they peacefully submitted to these major upheavals can be traced back to a number of factors. There are clues throughout their history which indicate an inclination toward cooperation rather than confrontation.

The three tribes, who lived together on and off through most of their known history,³ were originally as much a warrior society as any other Plains tribes.⁴ However, the development of a prosperous agricultural lifestyle and their increasing dependence on trade goods over the centuries, created an atmosphere conducive to conciliation, not aggression.

The Village Indians had more to lose than their nomadic counterparts, and they therefore began a slow process of drawing back, becoming more conservative as the years went by, and taking fewer chances. These were semi-sedentary peoples who lived in permanent earth lodges, tilled the soil, and augmented their diets with game, wild fruits and vegetables.⁵

The Mandans and Hidatsas had a physical culture so similar that archeologists are unable to distinguish their excavated village sites.⁶ For many centuries they "borrowed" from each other cultural characteristics, although even Hidatsas admit that the Mandans were the dominant influence.⁷

Catlin, who visited the upper Missouri tribes in 1832, opined that the Mandans enjoyed a completely carefree life dedicated to gambling, sports and amusements.⁸ In his sweeping statements he neglected to acknowledge that hunting, defending the villages

and observing an intricately superstitious religion involved labor of any kind. Nor did he, in his nineteenth century chauvinism, regard the cultivation, harvest, storage, and eventual cooking of the crops (which were strictly the women's domain) as worthy of comment.⁹

The hundreds of village sites uncovered along the Missouri River testify not so much to their numerous population as to their frequent moves upstream in search of undepleted soil and timber. Even more important, the moves were necessary to avoid conflict with enemies.¹⁰

One indication that the Mandans and Hidatasas would rather "switch than fight" is the fact that the earliest and southernmost village sites excavated lack fortifications of any kind. Those located further upstream are progressively barricaded with trenches and tall log "piquets" and are situated on high bluffs overlooking the river.¹¹ These precautions are of a defensive nature, which also suggests that the earlier people were of sufficient strength to avoid attack out of sheer numbers while their successors were growing progressively more vulnerable through a gradual loss of population.¹²

The Mandans and Hidatsas adopted their prisoners rather than executing them, another sign of "softness". The most famous example of this was the Shoshone maiden, Sakakawea, Lewis & Clark's knowledgeable guide who was discovered living in a Mandan village in 1804.¹³

Who were these pursuers who managed to displace the tribes so regularly? For one, they were the Arikaras the same tribe which later joined the Mandans and Hidatsas at Like-A-Fishhook Village near Fort Berthold.¹⁴ But that was after they too had been conquered by enemies and disease. In their heyday the Arikaras were a belligerent bunch who migrated frequently as their presence became unwelcome and nearby tribes evicted them.

Primarily though, the enemy was the Sioux.¹⁶ Beginning with their arrival west of the Mississippi in the early eighteenth century and continuing through the 1880's, the Sioux conducted continual raids on the hapless villages for food, horses, and anything else they could carry off.¹⁷

For many years these raids were merely troublesome to the Village Indians. They enjoyed a prosperous agricultural economy and operated a vast trade network exchanging produce and furs for horses and a wide variety of European goods.¹⁸ They could well afford to spare some trade goods now and then in exchange for the safety of their people. As long as their economy flourished and their population was substantial, they were relatively safe.

But the smallpox epidemics of 1780 to '81, and 1837 decimated both. The Hidatsas, who had counted nearly 2,000 people in 1832 during Catlin's visit, were reduced to 500. The Mandans, even harder hit, dropped from 1,500 to 150.

The Arikaras, being less sedentary, escaped such drastic reductions, but they too suffered sizeable losses.¹⁹

Prior to this time the tribes had each resided in separate villages and had, in fact, been sufficiently numerous that they felt much stronger fealty to their particular village than to the overall tribe to which they belonged.²⁰ The villages were friendly and located in close proximity for protection but they retained their distinctions. In the wake of the smallpox epidemics, however, there were only enough people remaining from all-three tribes to make up one village.

Like-A-Fishhook Village was built in 1845 by the survivors of the Mandans and Hidatsas.²¹ They were joined by the Arikaras in 1862 - a result of the Sioux uprisings to the east.²²

These survivors were understandably demoralized. Beset by enemy tribes on one side and the necessity of eking out a living after their economy had been destroyed, there is little wonder that the tribes accepted the dominance of the white culture willingly. Even a warlike people could not be expected to resist after such a catastrophe.

The village was located just below Fort Berthold on the Missouri. The fort, however, was a fur trading post, not a military installation, and afforded little protection from enemy attacks, which were frequent.

In December of 1862, Fort Berthold and most of the village were burned to the ground by the Sioux.²³ The Sioux regularly commandeered shipments of supplies, ran off horses, pillaged unharvested crops and set fire to the prairies to drive off wild game.²⁴ By this time, of course, much of the timber and game were exhausted anyway, and these losses reduced the three tribes to a pitiable state.

The Sioux had been known to harass the Village Indians for centuries, even on so-called friendly trading expeditions. Why then were these raids intensified just when the three tribes were at their lowest ebb?

One theory, advanced by Roy W. Meyer in his book, "The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri", is that the Sioux were furious with the three tribes' willing submission to white authority. In their convoluted way, they were understandably, only succeeded in driving the two groups closer together.²⁵

There is a pattern discernable in the events which followed the near decimation of the tribes. It is an inexorable downward spiral beginning with the destruction of the economy. The tribes simply lacked the manpower to carry on their trading activities at the level they had previously maintained. In addition, fur trading posts were springing up all over the West, largely eliminating the need for these middlemen.²⁶

The lack of this income, coupled with the Sioux assaults which prevented hunting,

created a greater dependence on agriculture. Again, the reduced workforce - this time the women - was a factor. But more important was a heavier reliance on the weather. Grasshoppers, hail and drought produced hunger, which led to a poor resistance to both disease and attack.²⁷

Begging became commonplace on Fort Berthold and the Indians' plight so apparent that even agents who had dispensed moldy crackers and condemned salt pork as regular rations took pity on them and organized a soup line.²⁸

The cycle continued even after the Sioux were more or less confined to southern Dakota late in the '70's, because by then the alternative of hunting when crops failed had been all but eliminated. If the Great White Father was exasperated with the capricious behavior of the likes of Geronimo and Crazy Horse, he should have been delighted with the total dependence of the Fort Berthold Indians.

But if he was, he showed little evidence of it. Rations continued to be late and inadequate, agents corrupt, and recognition of the Indians' consistent record of cooperation nil.²⁹

The destitution of the three tribes during the decades of the '60's, '70's and '80's is best described in a letter from Captain Clifford to Governor John Burbank of Dakota Territory written from Fort Berthold in 1869. After declaring that the three tribes were the only friends the whites had on the upper Missouri, he deplored the fact that they had been

"most outrageously abused, cheated and swindled in every conceivable manner, starved, their women prostituted, insults and abuse heaped upon them until they have sunk very low indeed. God help them, they have little cause to be thankful for either the friendship or the teachings of the white man."³⁰

A reservation had been roughed out for the tribes by the first Treaty of Laramie in 1851, but the promised rations and an agent to distribute them appeared only sporadically until 1868.³¹

In that year, when the reservation was formally established, it had become apparent to the federal government that the negotiators in Laramie had been far too generous, and the boundaries were reduced considerably,³² a process which continued until the twelve million acre reserve was only one-tenth its original size.³³

The final death knell to the three tribes' traditional way of life came in the 1880's when they were induced to leave Like-A-Fishhook Village, where they had miraculously maintained a semblance of their former life for some forty years.³⁴ The most recent entry in the never-ending parade of policy changes implemented by the Bureau of Indian Affairs was allotment, or the division of tribally held lands into individual acreages

with the "surplus" sold to eager whites.³⁵

In their infinite wisdom, the BIA and the U.S. Congress had decided that the way to solve the "Indian problem" was to turn them into farmers.³⁶ Today the inherent foolishness of trying to persuade the Plains nomads to break their Mother Earth is quite apparent. It seems reasonable, however to assume that the agricultural Village Indians would adapt to such a familiar lifestyle with ease.

Such was not the case. Throughout their history they lived on the rich bottomlands. Each family had its own plot of land but the plots were all adjoining, and were often worked severally.³⁷ The tribes were not accustomed to the concept of individual ownership, nor did they desire to live on isolated plots of land away from family and friends.

What is more, the fields were traditionally cultivated by the women. The new order called for the introduction of heavy machinery and the assumption that the men would do the work. This reversal of roles was a devastating blow to the traditional family structure.³⁸

Nevertheless, the members of the three tribes were pressured into moving north and west to their allotted land and Like-A-Fishhook Village was gradually abandoned.³⁹ Just to make sure, though, each earth lodge was burned as its occupants departed. In 1891, Fort Berthold too was relocated closer to the center of the new reservation,⁴⁰ and the last vestiges of this former civilization disappeared.

Fort Berthold had long since ceased operation as a fur trading post. The name was perpetuated first by the Government agency (which administered the primary instrument of acculturation, the schools) and then by the reservation itself.⁴¹

The abandonment of Like-A-Fishhook Village, although one step in the gradual disintegration of a people. It began with the first smallpox epidemic way back in 1780, and it continued long after the turn of the last century. But this final, irrevocable step ended the centuries-old Village Indian lifestyle which had developed, flourished, and declined like so many civilizations before it.

The ancient Greeks and Romans, the Renaissance Italians, the Elizabethan Britons each represented the height of its particular civilization. Each is ended, yet the twenty-first century world population still includes Greeks, Italians, and Englishmen. And so it is with the Village Tribes of the Upper Missouri.

The population of the three tribes, though now mixed from frequent intermarriage, has actually grown in the past half century.⁴² Federal attempts to destroy the native culture and produce imitation white men have been an admitted and universal failure.⁴³

Despite the Three Tribes' total cooperation in the acculturation process, native customs, language and folklore are still practiced on the reservation.⁴⁴ The strong, sense of

community has survived not only the forced evacuation of Like-A-Fishhook Village, but the more recent displacement caused by the building of the Garrison Dam in 1954, which flooded 150,000 acres of the best bottomland on the reservation where 90% of the population then lived.⁴⁵ "Hard Luck Tribes" does indeed seem to be an apt description. But it may be too soon to declare that the tribes have proved that nice guys really do finish last.

The tribal members residing at Fort Berthold today are sitting on vast quantities of the most sought-after commodity in the free world - energy. Within its borders Fort Berthold contains uranium, coal, natural gas, oil, and water resources⁴⁶ - largely undeveloped and their true potential unknown. Also present are the promising possibilities of solar, thermal, and wind power development.⁴⁷ The labor force, as on most Indian reservations, constitutes an additional untapped resource.

This incredible storehouse makes the Fort Berthold reservation potentially the richest in the country, yet its poverty level, rate of unemployment and rate of alcoholism are comparable to those on the Pine Ridge Reservation, which is virtually devoid of natural and economic resources.⁴⁸

The cause for this discrepancy lies in the people themselves. Their long and profitable association with white fur traders was the beginning not only of a dependency on the white man, but a trust which was, regrettably, rarely justified. Their weakened condition after the epidemics merely reinforced a tendency already established.

The early reservation period produced a dependence approaching slavery, thus cementing the subordinate relationship. Calls for self-sufficiency and self-control by modern-day tribal leaders are often accepted intellectually, but the Big Brother/Little Brother relationship is too deeply ingrained to be overcome without heart-wrenching trauma.

The twentieth century economic pattern was the leasing of lands and mineral exploration rights not only to whites, but to large, multi-national corporations. This practice insured that the people realized no profit from their own resources, and also risked the further destruction of their land base and environment.⁴⁹ A more logical continuation of the tribes' history would be hard to imagine.

It is sad that the more warlike Plains tribes, and especially the Three Tribes' most dreaded enemy, the Sioux, have maintained their fierce pride and self-respect throughout a most disgraceful period of Native American history, while the cooperative and friendly Village Indians have suffered a tragic erosion of their self-esteem.⁵⁰ But like all of us, they are influenced by their past, and their history has prepared them only for a passive role in the events which affect them. For two hundred years the Three Tribes have been mere bystanders in their own history, unable because of their accommodating nature, to regain control of their destiny.

Today the tribes are grappling with a long list of alternatives concerning the utilization of their resources which are designed to break this cycle of dependence and subjugation.⁵¹

An analogy could be drawn here between these tribes and the newly freed slaves of 1865. Each group was ill-equipped to cope with its new opportunities and responsibilities. Given the circumstances, mistakes and setbacks were inevitable. Yet the example of the earlier group can only bring encouragement to one whose circumstances are alarmingly similar over one hundred years later. Let us hope that the economic and emotional enfranchisement of the Hard Luck Tribes will be achieved on a much more abbreviated timetable.

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