Knife River

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site / North Dakota
National Park Service / U.S. Department of the Interior

Hidatsa village on the Knife River, by George Catlin. National Museum of American Art

For centuries the Upper Missouri River Valley was a lifeline winding through a harsh land, drawing Northern Plains Indians to its wooded banks and rich soil. Earthlodge people, like the nomadic tribes, hunted bison and other game but were essentially a farming people living in villages along the Missouri and its tributaries. At the time of their contact with Europeans, these communities were the culmination of 700 years of settlement in the area. Traditional oral histories link the ancestors of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes living on the Knife River with tribal groups east of the Missouri River. Migrating for several hundred years along waterways, they eventually settled along the Upper Missouri. One Mandan story tells of the group's creation along the river. Coming into conflict with other tribes, the Mandans moved northward to the Heart River and adopted an architecture characterized by round earthlodges.

The Hidatsas were originally divided into three distinct sub-tribes. The Awatixa were created on the Missouri River, according to their traditions. Awaxawi and Hidatsa-Proper stories place them along streams to the east. The Hidatsas moved farther north to the mouth of the Knife, settling Awatixa Xi'e Village (Lower Hidatsa Site) around 1525 and Hidatsa Village (Big Hidatsa Site) around 1600. They were never as sedentary as the Mandans, but did borrow from them, learning corn horticulture and adopting some of their pottery patterns. Intermarriage and trade helped cement relations, and eventually the two cultures became almost indistinguishable. With the Arikaras to the south, they formed an economic force that dominated the region.

After contact with Europeans in the early 18th century, the villages began to draw a growing number of traders. Tragically, the prosperity that followed was accompanied by an enemy the Indians could not fight: European disease. When smallpox ravaged the tribes in 1781, the Mandans fled upriver, nearer Hidatsa Village. The people from Awatixa Xi'e abandoned their village, returning to the area in 1796 to build Awatixa Village (Sakakawea Site). The weakened tribes were now easier targets for Sioux raiders, who burned Awatixa village in 1834. After another epidemic in 1837 almost destroyed the Mandans, the villages broke up. Their movements for the next few years are obscure. In 1845, the Mandans and Hidatsas founded Like-A-Fishhook village upriver, where they were joined in 1862 by the Arikaras. The tribes were forced in 1885 to abandon their village and make their final move onto the Fort Berthold Reservation. Today the tribes, now called the Three Affiliated Tribes, continue to practice their traditional ways.

All art by Karl Bodmer courtesy Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha

Western Contact

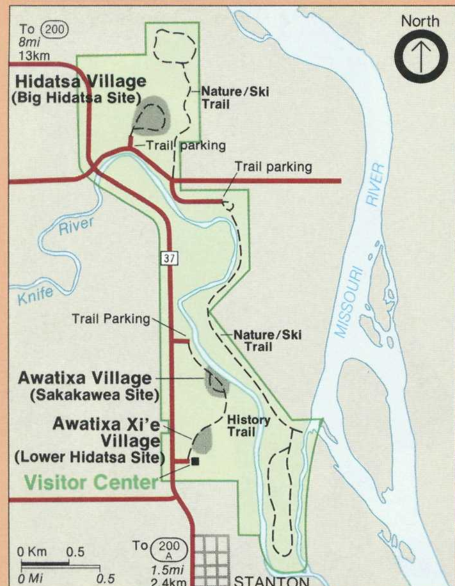
When trader Pierre de la Verendrye walked into a Mandan village in 1738, he found a Native American society at the height of its prosperity. The first recorded European to see the Indians of the upper Missouri, his arrival was the start of a relentless process that within 100 years transformed a culture. At first the three tribes remained relatively isolated, although there were increasing contacts with French, Spanish, English, and American traders. Their culture was still healthy when explorer David Thompson reached the area in 1797, but the pace of change quickened after Lewis and Clark visited the tribes in 1804. Explorers like Prince Maximilian of Wied and artists like Karl Bodmer and George Catlin drew sharp portraits of a society in transition. An influx of fur traders set up new trade patterns that undermined the tribes' traditional position as middlemen. Village people grew more dependent on such European goods as horses, weapons, cloth, and iron pots. Diseases brought by Europeans and overhunting of the bison further weakened the failing cultures. Finally, the Federal Government moved them to individually owned reservation plots and told them to grow wheat. Their societies and rituals were banned. In one generation, the three tribes were forced into radical changes that eroded their ancient relationship with the land and ended a way of life.

The Thomas Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa

***Top:** Artist Karl Bodmer portrayed Prince Maximilian (green jacket) and himself (far right) meeting Hidatsa Indians. Steamboats following in the wake of explorers helped carry the smallpox that devastated the Knife River villages. Painting by William Cary.*

National Museum of American Art

***Above:** Pehriska-Ruhpa, leader of the Hidatsa Dog Society, was portrayed by Bodmer in the society's regalia. Sah-ko-ka, the Mandan girl painted by Catlin, was known for her beauty.*



About Your Visit

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The area is located 60 miles north of Bismarck, ND, and can be reached via U.S. 83 and Hwy. 200A. A visitor center, exhibits, and history and nature trails are available. For more information, write the Superintendent, RR#1, Box 168, Stanton, ND 58571.

Make your visit a safe one. Watch your step when using trails and be careful along the river banks.

Help us preserve this unique record of cultural development by leaving artifacts and site remains undisturbed.

Photo: Richard Alexander Cooke III

Earthlodge depressions at Awatixa village site.

Reading the Past

The story of Knife River is still being written. Long-held theories have been revised by recent archeological research. From 1976 to 1983, Dr. Stanley Ahler of the University of North Dakota directed excavations in the park. Piecing together the story from the remains of earthlodges, 150,000 pottery shards, and 8,400 stone tools, Dr. Ahler now believes that the Hidatsa arrived in the area earlier (around 1300) than had been thought. Evidence from some 50 sites constitutes an unbroken record of 500 years of human inhabitation. Even this period represents a fraction of the time that humans have lived here. Research at Knife River and nearby sites documents 11,000 years of human activity. The earliest known people in the region during the Paleo-Indian period (10,600-6000 BC) were nomads who hunted now-extinct large game. Archaic (6,000 BC-AD1) people, also nomadic, lived by hunting and gathering. The earliest artifacts found at Knife River date from this period. Signs of semisedentary living and rudimentary agriculture occur in the Woodland period (1000 BC-AD 1000). Permanent earthlodge villages and a horticultural economy characterize the Plains Village Period (AD 1000-1885), of which the Knife River sites represent the final and most sophisticated phase.

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Village Life on the Upper Missouri

Mandan community before extensive contact with Europeans.

Painting by H. Tom Hall, courtesy of the National Geographic Society

The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes shared a culture superbly adapted to the conditions of the upper Missouri valley. Their summer villages, located on natural terraces above the river, were ordered communities as large as 120 lodges. These spacious structures (right, above) sheltered families of 10 to 30 people from the region's extreme temperatures. The villages were strategically located for defense, often on a narrow bluff with water on two sides and a palisade on the third. In winter the inhabitants moved into smaller lodges along the bottomlands, where trees provided firewood and protection from the cold wind (right, below).

In this society, men lived in the household of their wives, bringing only their clothes, horses, and weapons. Women built, owned, and maintained the lodges and owned the gardens, gardening tools, food, dogs, and colts. Related lodge families made up clans, whose members were forbidden to marry inside the group. Cutting across village boundaries, a clan expected its members to help and guide each other. Clans were competitive, especially regarding success in war, but it was the age-grade societies, transcending village and clan, that were looked to for personal prestige. Young men purchased membership in the lowest society at 12 or 13, progressing to higher and more expensive levels as they reached the proper age. Besides serving as warrior bands, each group was responsible for a social function: policing the village, scouting, or planning the hunt. Most importantly, the societies were a means of social control, setting standards of behavior and transmitting tribal lore and custom.

The roles of the sexes were strictly defined. Men spent their time seeking spiritual knowledge or hunting and horse raiding, difficult and dangerous but relatively infrequent undertakings. Women performed virtually all of the regular work: gardening, preparing food, maintaining the lodges, and, until the tribes obtained horses, carrying burdens. The lives of these people were not totally devoted to subsistence, however. They made time for play, such as the hoop and spear game shown at right. Honored storytellers passed on oral traditions and moral lessons, focusing on traditional tribal values of respect, humility, and strength. The open area in the center of each Mandan village was often given over to dancing and ritual, which bonded the members of the tribe and reaffirmed their place in the world.

Top: *Inside a Mandan earthlodge.*
Bottom: *A Hidatsa winter village. Karl Bodmer.*

The Village Economy

Agriculture was the economic foundation of the Knife River people, who harvested much of their food from rich floodplain gardens. The land was controlled by women—the size of a family's plot was determined by the number of women who could work it—and passed through the female line. They raised squash, pumpkin, beans, sunflowers, and, most importantly, tough, quick-maturing varieties of corn that thrived in the meager rainfall and short growing season. Summer's first corn was celebrated in the Green Corn ceremony (right). Berries, roots, and fish supplemented their diet. Upland hunting provided buffalo meat, hides, bones, and sinew.

These proficient farmers traded their surplus produce to nomadic tribes for buffalo hides, deer skins, dried meat, and other items in short supply. At the junction of major trade routes, they became middlemen, dealing in goods from a vast network: obsidian from Wyoming, copper from the Great Lakes, shells from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Northwest, and, after the 17th century, guns, horses, and metal items. High quality flint quarried locally found its way to tribes over a large part of the continent through this trade system.

The bison scapula hoe was the basic gardening tool.

National Museum of American Art

Mandan trade proposal offers 30 beaver skins and a rifle for buffalo, weasel, and otter skins.

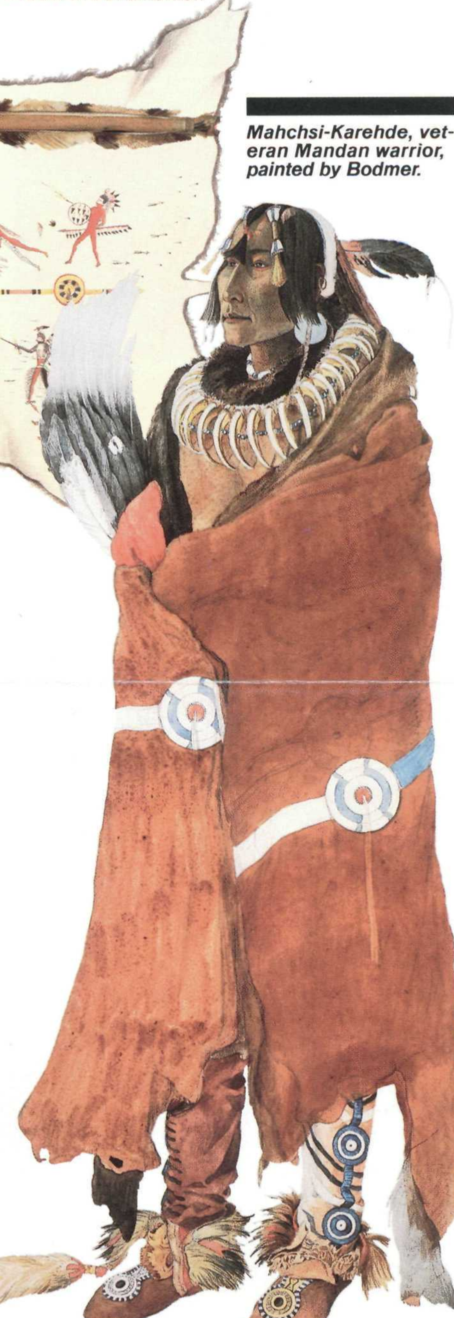
The Battle and the Hunt

In this warrior culture, raiding and hunting were the chief occupations of the men. When conflict was imminent, a war chief assumed leadership of the village. Tangible results—horses and loot—often came from the raids, which were really stages on which warriors could prove themselves. Hunting parties were planned in much the same fashion, with a respected hunter choosing participants and planning the event. Prowess in battle and hunt led to status in the village, both individually and for the societies and clans. Ambitious young men would risk leading a party—highly rewarding if successful, ruinous to a reputation if not. The primary weapon was the bow and arrow, along with clubs, tomahawks, lances, shields, and knives. Even more prestigious than wounding or killing an enemy was "counting coup"—touching him in battle. But ambition did not spur every action: The warriors often had to defend the village against raids by other tribes. When the men prevailed in battle or hunt, the women would celebrate with dance and song throughout the village.

Mahchsi-Karehde, veteran Mandan warrior, painted by Bodmer.

Bodmer's portrait of Mato-Tope, a Mandan warrior and chief, shows the insignia of his battle experience. The notched, tufted, split, and painted feathers indicate respectively: cutting the foe's throat and taking his scalp; first coup; arrow injury; killing the foe. Wooden sticks represent gunshot wounds. Wooden knife symbolizes knife he wrested from a Cheyenne. (See robe at right.) Painted hand shows that he has captured prisoners.

This buffalo robe was painted by Mandan chief Mato-Tope to celebrate his exploits in battle. The most famous deed was the slaying of a Cheyenne in hand-to-hand combat (lower left scene). Karl Bodmer.

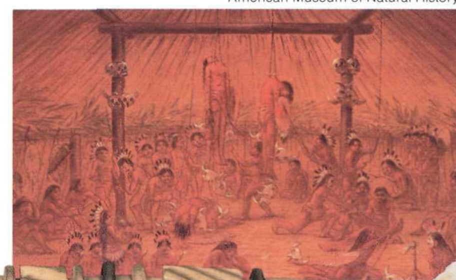


Spirit and Ritual

Spirits guided the events of the material world, and from an early age, tribal members (usually male) sought their help. Fasting in a sacred place, a boy hoped to be visited by a spirit, often in animal form, who would give him "power" and guide him through life. The nature of the vision that he reported to his elders determined his role within the tribe. If directed by his vision, he would as a young man make a greater sacrifice to the spirits, spilling his blood in the Okipa ceremony (below). The Okipa was the most important of a number of ceremonies performed by Mandan clans and age-grade societies to ensure good crops, successful hunts, and victory in battle. Ceremonies could be conducted only by those with "medicine," which was obtained by purchasing from a fellow clan or society member one of the bundles of sacred objects associated with tribal mythology. With bundle ownership came responsibility for knowledge of the songs, stories, prayers, and rituals necessary for spiritual communication. Certain bundle owners were looked upon as respected leaders of the tribe.

The four-day Okipa ceremony re-enacted the Mandan creation story. Society was revitalized, and young men enduring the ordeal might receive visions. George Catlin.

American Museum of Natural History



The ceremonial pipe, or calumet, was smoked in friendship as well as for spiritual rites.