Knife River Indian Villages

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
North Dakota

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 peoples, 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 more than 500 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. The Hidatsa did borrow from the Mandan, 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.

These three tribes shared a culture superbly adapted to the conditions of the Upper Missouri River Valley. Their summer villages, located on natural terraces above the river, included as many as 120 lodges. These circular structures 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 river bottomlands, where trees provided firewood and protection from the wind.

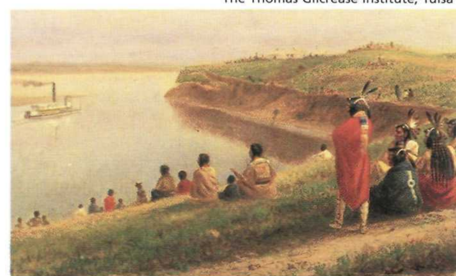
The 1837 smallpox epidemic greatly reduced the populations of the sedentary Indian nations. By 1845, the Mandan and Hidatsa moved up the Missouri River about 40 miles to form a new village, Like-A-Fishhook. For mutual defense, the Arikara joined them in 1862. In 1885 the U.S. Government forced the tribes to abandon Like-A-Fishhook and make a final move to the Fort Berthold Reservation as part of the Fort Laramie Treaty. Today their nation is known as the Three Affiliated Tribes.

All art by Karl Bodmer courtesy Josslyn Art Museum, Omaha

Western Contact

When trader Pierre de la Verendrye walked into a Mandan village in 1738—the first recorded European to see the Indians of the upper Missouri—he found an American Indian society at the height of its prosperity. 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 European goods such 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.

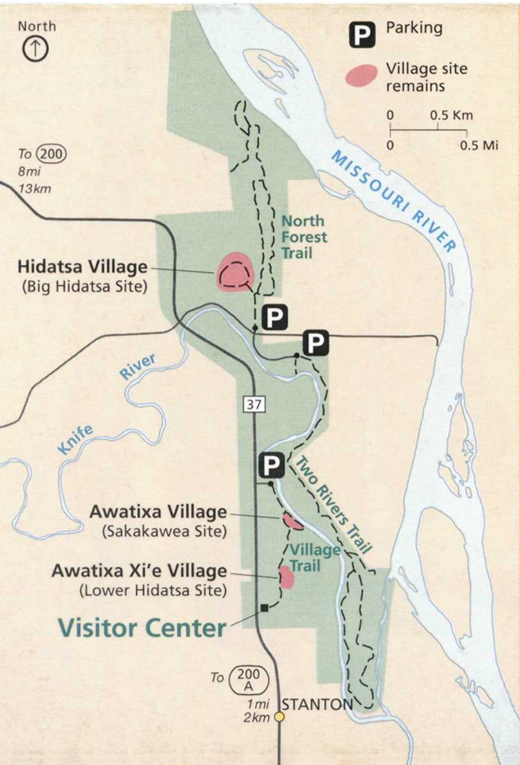
The Thomas Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa



***Top:** Artist Karl Bodmer portrayed Prince Maximilian* (second from right, with rifle) *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.*

***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.*

National Museum of American Art



About Your Visit

The area is located 60 miles north of Bismarck, N.D. A visitor center, a reconstructed earthlodge, (furnished with replica artifacts during summer), a 15-minute orientation film, exhibits, the remains of three village sites, nature trails, and ski trails are featured.

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, during which more than 800,000 artifacts were recovered. After piecing together the story from these artifacts, Dr. Ahler believes that the Hidatsa arrived in this area around 1300, earlier than once thought. Evidence from the village sites provides an unbroken record of more than 500 years of human habitation. However, this period represents only a fraction of the time that humans have lived here. Evidence from 50 archeological sites in the area shows that the Knife River area has been occupied for more than 11,000 years. The earliest known people in the region were the Paleo-Indians (11,000-6000 B.C.E. [Before the Common Era]). The earliest artifacts from Knife River date from this period. These nomadic tribes hunted now-extinct large game. Archaic people came next (6000 B.C.E.–1 C.E.). These people were also nomadic and lived by hunting and gathering. Signs of semi-sedentary living and rudimentary agriculture occur in the Woodland period (1000 B.C.E.–1000). Permanent earthlodge villages and a horticultural economy characterized the Plains Village Period (1000-1885), of which the Knife River sites represent one of the final phases.

Photo: Richard Alexander Cooke III

Earthlodge depressions at Awatixa village site

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

For More Information

Knife River Indian Villages
National Historic Site
P.O. Box 9
Stanton, ND 58571-0009
701-745-3309
www.nps.gov/knri

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.

☆ GPO:2002—491-282/40255 Reprint 2002
Printed on recycled paper.

Village Life on the Upper Missouri

Mandan community before extensive contact with Europeans.

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

Lewis and Clark Encounter Village Life

Members of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804–06) experienced upper Missouri village life first hand. With orders from President Thomas Jefferson, Captains William Clark and Meriwether Lewis embarked on the adventure of their lives—locate the Northwest Passage across the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. After departing St. Louis on May 14, 1804 and traveling 1,600 miles against the Missouri River current, they arrived at what is now designated Knife River Indian Villages. With winter quickly approaching, the Corps of Discovery built a fort and spent the 1804-05 winter among the Mandan and Hidatsa. Lewis notes in his journal, "This place we have named Fort Mandan in honour of our Neighbors."

Throughout the course of the winter, the Mandan and Hidatsa people visited the fort to trade their corn, beans, and squash and share information with the expedition party. Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian trader who had been living with the Hidatsa, came to the fort to ask about being hired as an interpreter. Along with Charbonneau came his Shoshone wife, Sakakawea (Sacagewea). Lewis and Clark knew that her translations of the tribal languages to the west would be invaluable to the expedition. Charbonneau was hired, and the couple spent much of the winter at the fort. There Sakakawea gave birth to her first child, Jean Baptiste, who was nicknamed "Pomp" by Clark.

On April 7, 1805, the Corps left the fort, and after many hardships finally reached the Pacific Ocean. To their great disappointment they had discovered no waterway to the Pacific from St. Louis. The co-captains had hoped to reach the west coast in time to catch a boat back to St. Louis, but were too late, so the expedition was forced to spend the winter of 1805-06 there, in a structure they named Fort Clatsop (now a part of the National Park System). It was a rainy and discouraging season. Anxious to return home, the Corps set out prematurely for St. Louis on March 23. On reaching the Rocky Mountains on June 15, they realized they would have to wait, as the snow in the mountains was still too deep. A couple of weeks later they set out again and this time were able to make it over the mountains. By August 17 the expedition had returned to the confluence of the Knife and Missouri rivers. Here they bade farewell to Charbonneau, Sakakawea, and Pomp to live with their Hidatsa relatives. As Lewis and Clark headed downstream they noted in their journals that most of Fort Mandan had been washed away by the river and another part had burned. Five weeks later, on September 23, they reached St. Louis amidst cheers for their safe return.

Top: ***Inside a Mandan earthlodge.***
Bottom: ***A Hidatsa winter village, by Karl Bodmer.***
All art by Karl Bodmer courtesy Josslyn Art Museum, Omaha

Village Economy

Agriculture underlay the economy of the Hidatsa and Mandan, who harvested much of their food from rich floodplain gardens. These gardens, like the earthlodges, were passed down through the female line. Women tended the gardens, raising corn, squash, beans, and sunflowers. The size of the family and the number of women who could work in the garden determined the size of the plot. Summer's first green corn was celebrated in the Green Corn ceremony *(right)*. Berries, roots, and fish supplemented the tribes' diet. Upland hunting provided buffalo, deer, and small game animals for meat, hides, bones, and sinew.

These proficient farmers traded their surplus produce and Knife River flint to nomadic tribes for buffalo hides, deerskins, dried meat, catlinite (pipestone), and other items in short supply. Knife River flint is one of the best materials for making stone tools. It was quarried locally and traded throughout North America. Because of their location at the junction of major trade routes, the Hidatsa and Mandan became middlemen in the trade. Items brought into the villages for trade with other tribes included obsidian from Wyoming, copper from the Great Lakes region, dentalium shell from the coast, and during the 1800s, guns, horses, and metal items from the Europeans.

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.

Battle and 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. Hunting parties were planned in much the same fashion as raids, 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. Ambition did not spur every action, however. 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.