

# THE ARIKARA INDIANS AND THE MISSOURI RIVER TRADE: A QUEST FOR SURVIVAL

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By the time the United States acquired most of the Great Plains through the Louisiana Purchase, many Indians of the upper Missouri River valley had encountered French, British, and Anglo-American fur traders in their homeland. Most Native Americans in that region seem to have welcomed the manufactured goods these intruders brought, but at the same time some objected to the whites' disruption of earlier trade patterns. Nearly all of the Missouri Valley tribes appear to have disliked some aspects of the fur and hide trade, and many violent incidents occurred. As a village-dwelling tribe located along the Missouri River in South Dakota, the Arikara Indians could not avoid participation in the existing trade activities or the violence that seemed to grow out of them.

Although limited in numbers and hemmed in by often hostile neighboring tribes, these

people proved difficult partners for European, American, and Indian traders of the early nineteenth century. Between the 1790s and the smallpox epidemic of 1837 the Arikaras launched sporadic raids and attacks against other Indians as well as white traders who passed their villages. In doing so they were little different from their Sioux or Pawnee neighbors. Nevertheless, because of their actions traders and government officials considered them to be unpredictable and often dangerous. This view became so widespread that nearly every historical discussion of the early Missouri Valley and Rocky Mountain fur trade comments on Arikara hostility. In fact, most modern historians merely echo early nineteenth-century criticism of the Arikaras as capricious and "savage" people, basing this characterization on the fur trade accounts from that era.<sup>1</sup>

Such an interpretation tends to obscure a better understanding of Arikara actions and motivations. Certainly the tribe was uncooperative and, at times, dangerous to the traders. Yet the basis for negative comments about the villagers often grew from other causes. As Lewis Saum has pointed out, white views of particular tribes depended upon psychological

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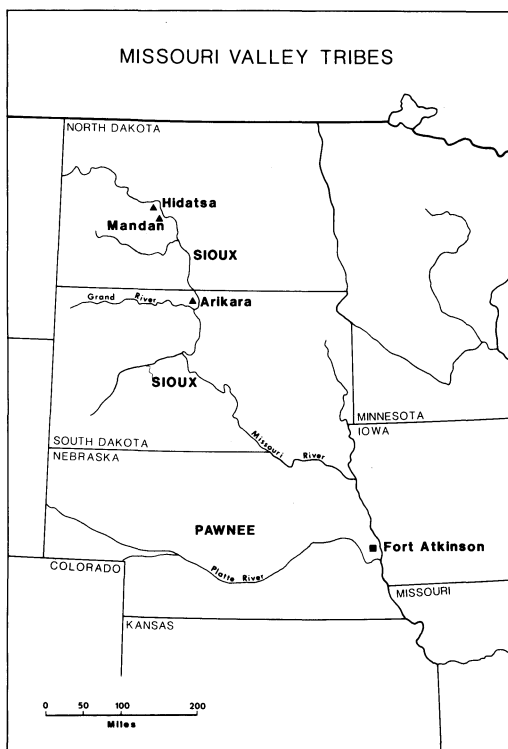


FIG. 1. *The location of tribes in the upper Missouri River valley about 1830.*

and economic factors that might bear only a slight relationship to the Indians' specific actions. For example, he notes that the two tribes with the worst reputations among the traders, the Blackfeet and the Arikaras, contributed almost nothing to the fur trade in general or to the profits of individual traders in particular. Of the two, the Arikaras lived in a region that offered few beaver or other fur-bearing animals. At the same time, the villagers were not particularly ambitious or successful hunters, so they had few pelts or buffalo robes on which the traders could make a profit.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the Arikaras' lack of effective participation in the Missouri River fur and hide trade supports Saum's contention.

Saum offers several other reasons why traders might view an Indian society negatively. Whites tended to consider hunting groups as ambitious and noble, and looked down on

those groups who were farmers or fishermen. Unfortunately for the Arikaras, they were both farmers and fishermen, and did only a little hunting. Related to this issue was the possession of horses. As a nearly sedentary village tribe, the Arikaras never acquired large horse herds. Indians with few horses somehow seemed less impressive than the mounted tribesmen of the plains. The Arikara reputation also suffered because of negative comments about their society that were expressed by lonely, frustrated, and fearful traders living among them.<sup>3</sup> If Saum is correct, and each of these factors played a part in establishing negative images about any tribe, then the Arikaras were indeed damned.

On the other hand, intratribal issues certainly help to explain how and why the Arikaras, a tribe of perhaps only two thousand people, came to exercise a prominent role in upper Missouri Valley affairs. Their experience provides a clear example of the intricate nature of intertribal and Indian-white relations resulting from the fur trade, the destructive impact of white traders upon the tribes, and the actions of people representing the United States government. Much of the occasional Arikara hostility toward whites developed because of misunderstandings by Indians and whites alike. Little specific evidence of the nature and functioning of Arikara village life has survived, so it is difficult, at best, to assign Indian motivations. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Arikaras acted as they did in response to real and perceived grievances, and not merely because they chose to be difficult. The tribe faced serious problems, and the way they dealt with them brought the Indians into direct conflict with the American fur trading community in the Missouri Valley.

#### THE ARIKARAS AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

Archeologists suggest that the predecessors of the Arikaras came from the Central Plains Tradition, which developed in Kansas, Nebraska, and western Iowa. There, living in small,

unfortified villages along the creeks and rivers, they supported themselves through hunting and agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Related to, or a branch of, the Skidi Pawnees, these Caddoan people migrated north and east, settling between the Elkhorn and the Missouri rivers in eastern Nebraska. Although the chronology for their migrations remains uncertain, scholars agree that by the eighteenth century Arikara territory stretched northward from northeastern Nebraska into the region between the Bad and Cheyenne rivers in central South Dakota.<sup>5</sup>

Among the Arikaras the events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought a decrease in numbers and a reduced area of habitation. These events both caused and resulted from basic alterations in the villagers' society and economy. The most important regional development was the Arikaras' increasing participation in the Indian trade network that stretched from Hudson's Bay in Canada south to Santa Fe, and from Iowa and Minnesota west to the Rocky Mountains or even beyond. The earliest discernible trade pattern in the upper Missouri Valley consisted of exchanging surplus aboriginal items. Hunting groups such as the Yankton and Teton Dakotas from the east and the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Kiowa tribes from the plains to the west and south brought their excess meat, hides, and clothing to barter with the agricultural villagers for corn, beans, pumpkins, and tobacco. Gradually the trade encouraged both hunters and farmers to specialize in order to have surplus meats and grains for barter. As the trade developed, the Arikaras and other Missouri Valley tribes came to depend less on their own hunting and more on their neighbors' efforts to meet their needs for meat and hides.<sup>6</sup>

During the late seventeenth century the Arikaras and their neighbors moved into the second stage or pattern of trade, which included the continued exchange of purely Indian goods but also incorporated European trade goods, in particular the horse and the gun. The tribes of the Southern Plains brought horses into the Missouri Valley and traded these animals for guns, ammunition, and manu-

factured goods from Canada, which the villagers got through the Assiniboins and Sioux. Only a few decades after this change occurred, French traders moving south out of Canada ushered in the last stage in the Indian trade—direct commerce with the whites by the Missouri Valley tribes.<sup>7</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, the Arikara economy included several diverse elements. As agricultural people they raised corn, beans, pumpkins, and other food crops—not only for their own use, but for trade with the nearby hunting tribes. In return for acting as partial food suppliers for their neighbors, the Arikaras expected and needed to receive meat, hides, leather goods, and clothing. Their economic efforts were not limited, however, to serving as crop producers and a market for the products of the hunt. In addition, they continued their significant role as middlemen between the Southern Plains tribes, who had access to Spanish trade goods and horses, and the tribes of the region between the Mississippi and Missouri River valleys, who contributed guns and ammunition received from French, and later British, Canada. The Arikaras also competed directly with other northern tribes by hunting the buffalo at least once each year.<sup>8</sup>

Although their combination of agriculture, trade, and hunting gave them a balanced economy, these activities often brought the Arikaras into conflict with other Indians. Of all their neighbors, the Sioux caused the most trouble. Perhaps they objected to giving the village traders any profits. Certainly they disliked having Arikara hunting parties enter their territory. For whatever reasons, the Sioux disliked and looked down on these village dwellers. According to the trader Tabeau, the Sioux acted as if the villagers were "a certain kind of serf, who cultivates for them and who, as they say, takes, for them, the place of women." So domineering were the Sioux that their visits to the Arikara villages might also be described as peaceful raiding expeditions. They went far beyond simple trading. They set the prices for their meat and hides, took what they wanted from the villagers, pillaged Arikara gardens and

fields, stole horses, beat and insulted the Arikara women, and destroyed their grazing fields—all with little fear of reprisal.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Mandan and Hidatsa villagers, living perhaps one hundred miles farther north, were just far enough away to escape most of the intensity and frequency of Sioux molestation that the Arikara experienced every summer. Occasionally they even joined forces to raid the Arikaras themselves when they were not trying to maintain an anti-Sioux alliance among the village peoples.

Indian hostility, however, was only one factor in the series of difficulties the Arikaras faced. Floods, drought, and grasshoppers posed a threat to both their crops and their livelihood as traders. Depleted soil and a nearly continual shortage of wood forced the Indians to move their villages every few years. Sometime after their early contacts with European traders, the villagers suffered as many as three major smallpox epidemics, which nearly destroyed the tribe. Existing sources are unclear, but they differ only on the timing of the epidemics and the size of the Arikara losses. All agree that by the 1790s most of these Indians had died or fled their Missouri Valley homes. The Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Truteau wrote that, although the tribe inhabited only two villages in 1795, "in ancient times the Ricara nation was very large; it counted thirty-two populous villages, now depopulated and almost entirely destroyed by smallpox. . . . A few families only, from each of the villages, escaped; these united and formed the two villages now here."<sup>10</sup> When Lewis and Clark visited the Arikaras in 1804, another French trader, Pierre-Antoine Tabeau, reported that the three villages then inhabited were all that remained of some eighteen villages that had stretched along both sides of the Missouri in South Dakota.<sup>11</sup>

The ravages of smallpox and continuing Sioux raids led the surviving Arikaras to consolidate in two or three villages, but this change brought unforeseen difficulties as well. The remaining towns included people from at least ten identifiable bands with many differences, including linguistic ones. From the abandoned

villages and existing bands, many chiefs seem to have survived. According to the trader Tabeau, there were more than forty-two chiefs in the three towns. Each chief, he reported, "wishes at least to have followers and tolerates no form of dependence" on other leaders in the villages. The many divisions made the Arikaras "infinitely more unhappy" than other tribes in the region.<sup>12</sup> Such internal rivalries and factionalism resulted in bitter quarrels, Tabeau reported. On occasion the chiefs and their followers robbed and even threatened to fight each other.<sup>13</sup> The lack of clearly defined village or tribal leadership created a dangerous instability, which in turn made dealing with outsiders, either Indian or white, difficult. For example, as early as 1805 it was clear that the Arikaras neither could nor would subordinate what seemed to be minor differences for their mutual benefit. Tabeau noted that even though they realized that it was imperative to keep peace with the Mandan villagers to the north if they were to be able to survive the Sioux onslaught, they could not do so. Denouncing their "internal and destructive quarrels," he reported that all efforts to end the fighting with the Mandans had failed. "Individual jealousy," he claimed, disrupted "all of the plans which tend to bring about peace."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the fragmented nature of Arikara society, at least one other important factor affected the villagers' relations with outsiders. Warfare was of substantial importance in gaining local status and wealth, and the nature of Indian raids and campaigns kept the surrounding region in nearly constant turmoil. When an individual decided to go to war or to lead a raiding party, he issued a call for followers. Once his party was organized, they left to raid, rob, or fight. If they had to return home without success, they "cast their robes," as they express it, and vow to kill the first person they meet, provided he be not of their own nation.<sup>15</sup> This practice goes a long way toward explaining incidents that otherwise seem to make little or no sense. Certainly the Arikaras were not the only Indians to make such attacks, but they appear to have focused

their wrath on white travelers and traders more often than some of their neighbors did.

In March, 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark participated in the transfer of Louisiana to the United States. Although the Arikara villagers knew nothing of the event, it would have many consequences for them. In the long run it meant that increasing numbers of American fur traders and trappers moving up the Missouri Valley from Saint Louis would replace French and English traders from the north and east. The resulting shift in trade would change the village tribes' lives permanently, and would put more strain on their relations with the Sioux.

#### RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES, 1804-13

By the time Lewis and Clark reached them on October 8, 1804, the Arikaras dwelt in three villages just above the mouth of the Grand River in northern South Dakota. One of these was on an island some three miles north of the Grand, while the others stood on the west bank of the Missouri another four miles upstream. The explorers reported signs that the Arikaras had only recently abandoned another village farther to the south. To them the settlements seemed calm. In fact the Lewis and Clark visit was one of several during which the tribesmen seemed genuinely pleased to have Americans visit them. The villagers welcomed the Americans pleasantly from the start. Sergeant John Ordway noted their friendly reception and the relaxed atmosphere of the towns repeatedly. He wrote that the Indians "were all friendly & Glad to See us," and reported that the soldiers moved from one of the towns to another, where they received similar welcomes and kind treatment. During their five-day stay among the Arikaras, the exploring party moved about the villages freely, visited and ate in numerous Indian lodges, gave presents and trade goods to some leaders at each of the towns, and apparently had no problems with these Indians whatsoever.<sup>16</sup>

If the Lewis and Clark experience with these

villagers had been the prototype for the reception other Americans experienced later, there would have been little reason to fear Arikara hostility, but that was not the case. The explorers did several things that later made friendly relations with these Indians difficult. First, they pushed their way past the Teton Sioux only a few days before reaching the Arikaras. By doing so they broke the attempted blockade of the upper Missouri by the Sioux. From that time on, men traveling along the Missouri would usually pass or trade with the Sioux rather than fight them. This disrupted the economic patterns among the Indians. Now the Arikaras and other villagers of the upper river valley were considerably less dependent upon the Sioux or Canadians because they could get some goods from Saint Louis. Americans who followed the famous explorers up the river came into direct competition with the Indian traders. This increased the bad feelings between the Sioux and the villagers.

During their brief stop among the Arikaras, Lewis and Clark did two other things that caused trouble within the tribe and between the villagers and the Americans later. First, as was their practice, they recognized one principal chief in each town. Given the splintered leadership among these Indians, that act probably angered village rivals. Second, and probably more important, the explorers convinced the Arikaras that one of their village leaders should accompany a deputation of other Missouri Valley Indians back east to Washington. Chief Ankedoucharo volunteered. The delegation reached Saint Louis in May, 1805, but did not actually travel to Washington until early the next year. There, in April, 1806, several Indians, including Ankedoucharo, died.<sup>17</sup> The chief's continued absence upset the villagers, and they responded angrily to the news of his death, abusing the trader Joseph Gravelines when he reported it to them in early 1807. Obviously the explorers had no idea that their brief five-day stay would set into motion events that would change Arikara history. The shifting trading patterns would have come anyway, just more slowly. However, their presents to

some, but not all, village chiefs undoubtedly stirred existing animosities within the villages and certainly did nothing to ensure continuing peace with these people. In encouraging the chief Ankedoucharo to leave his village and go to Washington, the explorers were simply unlucky. When the chief died, the Indians apparently thought that he had been killed in the United States.

Revenge played an important role in the Arikara culture, and their anger toward the whites was evident in 1807 when the Saint Louis trader Manuel Lisa stopped at their villages. The Indians appeared hostile from the start. Several hundred warriors lined the river banks, and after some shooting, they ordered the traders ashore. Lisa convinced the villagers to trade rather than fight, but the situation was anything but friendly when he pushed on upstream.<sup>18</sup>

The Arikaras were further antagonized by American efforts to help the Mandan chief Shahaka return to his village, located upstream on the Missouri above Arikara territory. Like Ankedoucharo, Shahaka had gone east for a visit to Washington. In May, 1807, Ensign Nathaniel Pryor led the chief up the Missouri with an escort of fourteen soldiers and twenty-three fur traders. When Pryor's party reached the lower Arikara village, the Indians appeared sullen. Nevertheless, after a short speech Pryor and his men left for the upper villages. There the warriors attacked his two boats. The surprised whites exchanged shots with the Arikaras and drifted back downstream out of range. Three of the traders died outright and a fourth died from his wounds later. Rather than try to push upstream immediately, Pryor took his force and Chief Shahaka back downstream to Saint Louis. Two years passed before the Mandan chief returned safely to his village.<sup>19</sup>

There were several reasons for the Arikara attack on Pryor's expedition, and certainly not all of them were clear at the time. The ensign blamed Manuel Lisa for his disaster, charging that Lisa had so much trouble with the Arikaras that summer that the trader sought "to divert the storm which threatened *his own boat*,

by diverting the attention of the Ricaras to ours."<sup>20</sup> He claimed that the trader had provided the Indians with guns and ammunition and that Lisa had persuaded the villagers that Pryor's boats would carry plenty of trade goods, but the latter was not the case. If the Indians thought that Pryor's boats included large amounts of trade goods, they might have seen his move beyond their towns as a plan to bypass them and to trade directly with the tribes of the interior. This would directly affect the Arikara economy.

Even if the villagers did not see the Americans as an economic threat, other factors were important in the attack. American officials appear not to have considered the endemic warfare between the upper Missouri Valley tribes a problem: in this case it was. The Arikaras and Mandans were actively at war with each other during the summer of 1807, when Ensign Pryor's flotilla arrived with the Mandan chief Shahaka aboard. To make matters worse, the Arikaras had learned of Chief Ankedoucharo's death only a few months earlier and had not been appeased. Having stirred Arikara anger by being responsible for the death of one of their chiefs, the Americans now appeared, escorting Mandan chief Shahaka, a leader of their enemies.<sup>21</sup> It should not be surprising that the villagers launched their assault.

The Arikara response to Pryor's 1807 expedition caused American officials to be more careful two years later when they escorted Mandan chief Shahaka back to his village a second time. The government hired the newly formed Missouri Fur Company to provide at least 120 armed men for the task. Such a force was clearly unnecessary for anything except the need to return the Mandan chief and to inhibit attacks by Indians. Just south of the first Arikara village, the escort landed and marched along the river toward the village. The large party of obviously armed men approaching their town frightened the Indians. They met their visitors reluctantly, listened to speeches denouncing their past violence, and promised to remain friendly to the whites in the future. After the meeting, the whites left



FIG. 2. *The main Arikara village on the Missouri as it appeared to George Catlin in 1832.*

men behind to conduct trade on a regular basis and then pushed on up the river to the Mandan villages.<sup>22</sup>

At this point the Arikaras posed no greater threat than did other tribes along the Missouri, and they certainly caused less fear among the traders than did the Sioux. The latter tribe had threatened to prevent Lewis and Clark from passing up the river in 1804, and some bands menaced Manuel Lisa's party in the summer of 1809. Later that same year the Sioux stopped Ramsay Crooks and Robert McClellan, forcing them to build a trading post along the river for the tribe. When the warriors returned to their villages to get furs for trade, the Americans fled back downriver. Reports of Indian depredations reaching Saint Louis in late 1809 indicated that all of the Sioux and most other tribes except the Arikaras and Mandans were hostile to the whites.<sup>23</sup> Whether this report was accurate or not, it indicates that the Arikaras still retained a reputation as being cooperative most of the time.

Little changed during the next year, and by the summer of 1811, when Wilson P. Hunt and Manuel Lisa both led men up the Missouri, they seemed much more worried about the Sioux than the Arikaras. Once again traders traveling downstream had reported that most of the Indians along the Missouri, except "the

Mandans, Arikaras, and one or two small tribes" were hostile to the whites.<sup>24</sup> The continuing rumors of Sioux hostility proved so frightening that they had to be suppressed in order to get the French boatmen to continue as employees of the fur company parties that year. When Hunt's men encountered the Sioux, they feared an all-out battle, but careful talks avoided bloodshed. Manuel Lisa, then racing up the Missouri in pursuit of Hunt's party, also talked his way past the dreaded Sioux, but only with immediate gifts and the promise that he would establish a permanent trading post among them later that same year. A few days later both groups of traders met a party of some three hundred Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan warriors headed south to attack the Sioux. Much to the travelers' relief, these Indians decided to escort them safely upstream to their villages instead.<sup>25</sup> In this case the Arikaras strove to protect the traders from the Sioux because they feared that Sioux attacks might force the whites back downriver in the same manner that Crooks and McClellan had fled just two years earlier. If that happened, the upriver villages would be cut off from their anticipated trade goods.

Once the traders reached their villages in safety, however, the Arikaras strove to manipulate the situation for their own advantage. They

announced that they would not trade with their visitors or even permit them to go farther up the river unless the Americans agreed to leave some trade goods and a resident trader at their villages. Manuel Lisa agreed to meet these terms and even persuaded the Indians to sell horses to Hunt's party, then on its way to the Pacific Northwest. This appears to have satisfied the chiefs, and they said nothing more about trying to prevent the whites from continuing farther north or west.<sup>26</sup>

During the following week, June 12-19, 1811, the members of Lisa's and Hunt's groups camped across the Missouri from the Arikara villages. They traded for horses, bought clothing and food, visited Indian lodges, and lounged around their hosts' settlements. During that time the whites moved about with no hindrance from the Indians and, in fact, were offered the usual Indian-style welcome and hospitality. At no time did there seem to be any danger of hostilities, and the first day Chief Left Hand even provided Indian guards for the whites' camp to keep the villagers away from the traders' camp and to limit the thievery that might occur. By the time their week-long visit ended, Hunt's party had gotten at least thirty horses, and Lisa sent some of his employees north to the Mandan villages to get some more. The traders seem to have had little fear that their Indian hosts might harm them, and apparently enjoyed their stay among the Arikaras that June. According to Henry Brackenridge, the Arikaras had remained "friendly to the whites" since the "unfortunate affair of lieutenant Prior [*sic*]." He claimed that the tribesmen had tried to keep on the good side of the whites after the 1809 show of force against them, and that they expressed "much regret" over the incident. Arikara protestations of innocence and efforts to blame the incident on a "bad chief" who refused to accept the group decision to remain at peace brought little sympathy from Brackenridge.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, given the splintered nature of village society and tribal leadership, they may have been telling the truth.

Regardless of whether a disaffected splinter

group had been responsible for the unprovoked attack in 1807 or not, the whites' peaceful, week-long visit at the Arikara villages shows several things. First, the Indians' hatred and fear of the Sioux to the east and south clearly shaped their relations with the intruding whites. That explains why the Arikaras had escorted the Hunt and Lisa parties the last few miles to their towns. Second, and related to this, was the Arikaras' perceived need for trade goods from the Americans. Despite fears in the United States that British traders from the Red River settlements had made serious inroads in the commerce with the river valley tribes, the Indians considered American trade goods imperative. They wanted the items for their own use and for exchange with neighboring tribes as well. Third, the Arikaras proved here not only that they recognized the need to remain at peace with the traders, but also that they could be gracious hosts to the visiting Americans.

Despite their apparent good will the village Indians resented their dependence on the whites, whose visits and trading posts caused frequent incidents and trouble. This is clear from Indian actions toward the Americans in the summer of 1812. In early August Manuel Lisa led another party of traders to the Arikara towns. Four days before they reached the villages, Le Gauche, the "left-handed chief," met them briefly. Apparently Lisa gave his visitor a present or perhaps several small items before the Indian leader returned home. When the traders arrived, the Arikaras failed to receive them in the same friendly fashion they had shown a year earlier. Two of the three principal chiefs refused to meet with Lisa and people in both villages acted strangely. Fearing trouble, Lisa took some armed men to the trading post and asked the chiefs to explain. In this case intratribal rivalries and divisions helped create the difficulty. When Le Gauche returned from having visited Lisa with a few presents, the other chiefs became jealous because nothing had been sent along for them. As a result, their followers were angry with Lisa. At the same time, however, the Arikaras realized that they



had brought few furs and buffalo robes to barter, and they worried that the whites might want to close the unprofitable trading post. This is exactly what Lisa hoped to do, but to placate the villagers he shifted his operations to a location only a few miles north of their towns. This move appears to have satisfied the chiefs.<sup>28</sup> So once again the whites had no major difficulty with the Arikaras.

The situation was different with the Hidatsas farther to the north, however. They had recently killed one of Lisa's men, detained another, and stolen twenty-six of the fur company's horses, so the trader took a sizable party north to deal with them. After Lisa left, John C. Luttig remained at the trading post near the Arikara villages during the winter of 1812-13. He reported that the Indians frequently came for trade, supplies, and apparently sometimes just to talk. Despite the almost daily contact between whites and Indians, the trader recorded no major and few minor incidents with the Arikaras. In fact, while the traders feared both the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes, they expressed only mild contempt for the Arikaras, describing them as a "sett of lying and good for nothing fellows." Thus, when Lisa abandoned this trading location and took his men, furs, and trade goods south down the Missouri in March, 1813, his company had suffered little at the hands of this tribe—certainly far less than from the Sioux and perhaps other groups.<sup>29</sup>

When the Americans retreated down the Missouri in 1813, they left the Indians of the upper valley dependent upon representatives of the British fur trading companies. The Saint Louis traders had complained of the influence that their competitors from the north exercised over the tribes for years, and with open hostilities between the two nations, their fears of lost markets and sources of furs multiplied. It appeared that some tribes in the region had become hostile to Americans, and by the summer of 1813 the *Missouri Gazette* commented that the "Aricaras, Chyans, Grosventre, Crows, and Aropahays are or may be considered at war with the Americans."<sup>30</sup> There is no way to know if this badly spelled list was

accurate or not, but in view of the traders' experience with the Arikaras since 1809 there seems to have been little basis for such a charge. Certainly the villagers were disappointed and angry at losing their trading post and the goods it represented, but there is little reason to think that they would not have welcomed American traders with enthusiasm had they appeared with a fresh supply of trade goods.

#### WAR WITH THE UNITED STATES, 1823

There is little information about relations with the tribes of the upper Missouri during and immediately after the War of 1812. The Saint Louis traders associated with Manuel Lisa had lost money and withdrawn from the company, which later reorganized as Lisa and Hunt. This group managed to operate one trading post among the Omahas in eastern Nebraska and a second farther upriver among the Sioux. The trading companies shifted partners and names rapidly for several years after the war, but it seems clear that the Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas had no regular contact with Saint Louis traders before at least 1818, and even that year is not certain.<sup>31</sup> All that is clear during those years is that the Missouri traders did not return to the practice of operating year-around, fixed trading posts among the villagers of the upper Missouri.

The lack of a trader living among them or near their villages may well have angered the Arikaras or even deprived them of much-needed goods. What is clear is that by 1820 the Saint Louis traders had moved as far as the Big Bend of the Missouri, perhaps 150 miles south of the Arikaras. However, that year a large war party, reportedly of Arikaras, had attacked and robbed two trading posts in that region. Since the villagers previously had reasonably good relations with Lisa's men, it is not possible to determine with certainty why they would have attacked the traders. Nevertheless, if these traders provided the Sioux with guns and ammunition that they used to rob and harass the Arikaras, while the

latter had no resident traders from whom to get similar goods, it should not be surprising that they might molest and rob the furmen.

The 1820 attack on a Missouri Fur Company post gave Joshua Pilcher, Lisa's successor in the upriver trade, reason to be concerned about problems with the Arikaras in 1822 as he ascended the Missouri. According to his own report several years later, he was surprised when the villagers met him pleasantly. Instead of fighting they assured him that they wanted good relations with the traders, and they promised not to attack the whites in the future. Thus their pattern of response remained similar to their earlier relations with traders. As long as the Americans brought the much-needed goods to their vicinity, and not only to their hated Sioux enemies, they seemed ready to remain at peace and to deal with the whites. Pilcher moved north to the Mandan villages and began work on Fort Vanderburgh, a permanent post in North Dakota. On his way downstream later that year, he eluded what appeared to be an Arikara plot to rob his boat.<sup>32</sup>

That same year, 1822, William Ashley and Andrew Henry moved up the Missouri to open large-scale trapping activities in the northern Rockies, going into direct competition with Indian trappers and threatening the importance of those Indians who had served as the middlemen for decades. Ashley's party reached the Arikaras by early October. There they received a pleasant welcome from tribal leaders, who asked that a trader be left at their villages permanently. Ashley had expected to trade with the Arikaras for horses, but his main goal was to supply trappers in the mountains and so he had neither the goods nor the desire for such a long-term trading venture. Hoping to remain on good terms with the villagers, he promised to send a trading outfit to the Arikaras early the next year. Then, after giving the chiefs a few presents and trading for horses, the trappers moved on up the river.<sup>33</sup> Once again a group of whites had visited the Arikaras in peace and apparently had received reasonable treatment from these Indians. Nevertheless, Ashley's effort to take large numbers of white

trappers to the Rockies may have upset the villagers. They had witnessed small parties of men traveling up the river to the mountains before, but this time dozens of Americans took the place of each single trapper of earlier years. In addition, Ashley's lack of trade goods did little to placate Indian feelings because the Arikara needed such items.

Trouble began in March, 1823, when a war party of Arikaras met some Missouri Fur Company traders accompanying a few Sioux and carrying furs and hides gathered by that tribe. The Arikaras demanded that the whites surrender the hated Sioux to them. When the traders refused, they were beaten and robbed. This action must be understood as primarily anti-Sioux rather than anti-white, because the villagers had been on reasonably good terms with the traders for some years. In this case the whites had interposed themselves between parties of Indians who hated each other. Nevertheless, the incident may also have indicated a growing Arikara anger and frustration with the traders. The closest trading posts stood more than 150 miles to the south in Sioux country and nearly 100 miles north at the Mandan villages, and despite Ashley's promise the preceding autumn, the villagers still had no trading post of their own.

Just a few days after the incident, a larger force of Arikara braves launched an unsuccessful attack against Cedar Fort, the Missouri Fur Company post just north of the White River. In the fighting at least two of the attackers died and several others were wounded. One account reported that the angry warriors swore vengeance against the whites.<sup>34</sup> This would make sense if, as another account suggests, the traders at Cedar Fort provoked the Arikaras in a move calculated to infuriate them and thereby disrupt Ashley's trading visit later that summer.<sup>35</sup> That interpretation seems questionable, however, because the resident traders would have to bear the brunt of local hostilities. Regardless of the causes for Arikara hostility, by the summer of 1823, the villagers were in no mood for trifling.

Ashley's party, consisting of ninety trappers, made their way up the Missouri in two keel-boats and, on May 30, 1823, arrived at the villages. They had been warned of the Arikaras' actions and were prepared for trouble. From the first encounter, divisions in the Indian community were apparent to the trappers. Chiefs Little Soldier and Grey Eyes met Ashley when he landed, but when he invited them to visit the whites' boats, only Grey Eyes agreed. To Ashley this seemed to be a good sign, because the chief's son had been one of those killed in the earlier attack on Cedar Fort. If he bore no grudge, perhaps all was well. After Grey Eyes returned to the villages, he informed the whites that the tribe would meet for trade the next day.<sup>36</sup> During the morning of May 31 trade commenced, but when the whites got about half of the forty horses they needed, the Indians demanded muskets and powder. At this point the barter stopped. The next morning Chief Bear invited Ashley to his lodge for a meeting. The Indians treated the whites pleasantly, but before the visitors returned to their boats, another chief, Little Soldier, warned Ashley that some of the warriors planned to attack his party.<sup>37</sup> Obviously the villagers could not agree whether they should trade or fight. Because their disunity was unclear to the whites, it was difficult for Ashley to understand the extent of danger to his party.

Despite the strained circumstances some of the trappers went into two Arikara villages looking for women that evening. Sometime during the night one of them was killed, and at sunrise the next morning the Arikaras attacked. Within a short time most of the horses had been killed or wounded, and many of the trappers who had camped on the riverbank to guard them had been shot too. In the fighting Ashley's party suffered twenty-four casualties, of whom thirteen died.<sup>38</sup> This was the worst disaster of the fur trade to that time.

While Ashley's defeated party nursed their wounded, some of his men hurried downstream to Fort Atkinson, just north of Omaha. There news of the Arikara victory set efforts to punish the Indians into motion. Colonel Henry



FIG. 3. A typical Arikara brave, *Pah-too-ca-ra* (*He Who Strikes*). By George Catlin, 1832.

Leavenworth mobilized most of the troops under his command at the post, while Joshua Pilcher gathered an auxiliary force of nearly sixty traders and fur company employees to assist him. On June 22, Colonel Leavenworth led his six companies of infantrymen north up the Missouri. As the so-called Missouri Legion moved upstream, both Pilcher and Indian agent Benjamin O'Fallon told Colonel Leavenworth that it was imperative for his force to defeat the Arikaras if the fur trade along the Missouri were to continue.<sup>39</sup>

While the troops marched toward the Arikara villages, Pilcher recruited up to 750 warriors from several Sioux bands along the river. On August 9, the motley assortment of soldiers, trappers, riverboatmen, and Indians reached the Arikara towns. The mounted Sioux preceded the whites and attacked the villagers while Colonel Leavenworth formed

his battle line. Once the Arikara braves saw Leavenworth's troops, they broke off the fight and fled to their villages. The next morning the soldiers attacked with their two artillery pieces, but most of their shots flew harmlessly over the towns and landed in the river. By late afternoon, August 10, it was clear that the whites had to take decisive action. Their Sioux allies had begun to drift away, unimpressed with the white man's warfare. The defenders clung stubbornly to their villages, and the infantry and artillery tactics employed to that time had been completely ineffective.<sup>40</sup>

Colonel Leavenworth decided to launch an infantry attack on the upper village but then changed his mind. He feared that the Sioux might return and attack his worn troops if they failed to breach the Arikara defenses. By this time the Arikaras decided to try negotiating and met the colonel and Pilcher. Once again confusion over village leadership made negotiations difficult. The Indians claimed that Chief Grey Eyes, now dead, had been to blame for the attack on Ashley's party, and they begged for peace. The colonel demanded that they restore Ashley's property, replace the stolen and killed horses, promise to behave in the future, and surrender five hostages. When the Indians agreed, Leavenworth decided to make peace, much to the disgust and anger of the traders. On August 11 Leavenworth wrote a treaty that both sides signed. Joshua Pilcher denounced the effort to achieve peace and threatened the Arikaras with vengeance once the soldiers left. Not surprisingly, the Indians then refused to turn over the horses to Ashley. In fact, they slipped away from their villages on the night of August 12 without meeting any of the whites' demands.<sup>41</sup>

Most white participants in the 1823 campaign viewed it as a failure because it did not punish the Arikaras or regain Ashley's property. On the other hand, from the Indians' perspective it might seem that they had something to celebrate. They had successfully defended themselves against both the United States and their traditional Sioux enemies and then escaped without any major punishment. The

Leavenworth campaign was certainly a military failure; however, a more significant point is that it set into motion currents that nearly destroyed the Arikaras as an independent group. Pilcher's men set some of the buildings in their two villages afire as soon as the soldiers left. The villagers themselves scattered in several directions, thus disrupting the delicate balance of economic activities through which they had supported themselves for several generations.

#### BECOMING HISTORICAL VILLAINS

The 1823 attack on Ashley's party established the Arikaras' reputation for treachery and violence. It was not the first time they had attacked whites, and certainly not the last. Yet news of their battle and the continuing debate among the white participants about what could and should have been done to the villagers kept their name before the public and particularly the fur traders. Prior to the 1823 incident the Arikaras had behaved no worse than most Missouri River tribes, and they had a better record than several. Nevertheless, they could not escape the notoriety of this attack. At the same time they now feared the whites as much as their nearby Indian enemies and could expect punishment rather than trade goods from the Americans. This may be seen clearly in their actions during the months after the Leavenworth campaign against them.

When the bitterly divided party of soldiers and traders began its journey back down the Missouri, some of the villagers moved north up the river to within about ten miles of the Mandan villages in North Dakota. There they remained a threat to whites along the river, and in October, 1823, just a few miles south of the Mandan villages, the Arikaras attacked a boat of traders, killing its crew of four men and plundering the trade goods. A few days later, the villagers attacked the Columbia Fur Company trading post, Tilton's Fort, and later that winter they killed one of the resident traders.<sup>42</sup>

Not all of the Arikaras had fled north up

the Missouri; at least one band of some thirty-eight lodges moved west up the Platte River to its junction with the Laramie, where the Indians apparently hoped to join the Pawnees and avoid American retaliation. In the summer of 1824, these people attacked and killed several fur traders who stopped at their village mistakenly thinking that they were Pawnees. Other Arikaras apparently fled to the Pawnee towns on the Loup River in east central Nebraska, where they remained through 1824. Some bands of the displaced villagers remained near the Missouri, and by early 1824 some of the Indians drifted back to their former villages and began replanting crops.<sup>43</sup>

The continuing uproar over the Arikara attack on Ashley's party and Colonel Leavenworth's ineffective response prompted Congress to create an Indian Peace Commission. General Henry Atkinson and Indian agent Benjamin O'Fallon, the commissioners, were to ascend the Missouri River and conclude treaties of peace and friendship with the tribes along that stream. On Monday, May 16, 1825, the commissioners and an escort of nearly five hundred soldiers began their journey, and after nearly two months, on July 15, they reached the Arikara villages.<sup>44</sup> After brief talks the village leaders signed the treaty that Atkinson and O'Fallon presented them. Because of their past hostility, the Arikaras received only a few twists of tobacco rather than the swords, pistols, ammunition, and trade items given to the chiefs of other Missouri Valley tribes. Even the minimal present of tobacco seemed to satisfy the villagers, however, probably because they feared possible attacks by the soldiers. Later Atkinson noted optimistically that the Indians seemed "impressed with deep and full contrition [*sic*] for their offenses" and that they promised to "behave well" in the future.<sup>45</sup> It is unlikely that this visit had any long-range effect upon the Arikaras because the villagers remained scattered and because, after the subsequent discovery of South Pass, most trade goods moved overland hundreds of miles south of the Arikara home territory.

During the years that followed the Atkinson-

O'Fallon expedition, the Arikaras had no other major conflict with the whites. Nevertheless, they continued to trade and fight with the Sioux, Mandans, and Hidatsas and also raided white trappers and traders along the Missouri. For example, in 1827 the trader James Kipp reported that a part of the tribe planned to attack and rob the first boats coming up the Missouri that year. He thought that they would then flee the river. Despite this prediction no hostilities occurred that year. In 1829, however, the Arikaras killed an American Fur Company employee near one of their villages. The next year they struck again, this time killing three more traders. Later that same year, 1830, they robbed an American Fur Company party under Kenneth McKenzie.<sup>46</sup>

Many of the traders hoped that all the Arikaras would leave the river so they would no longer have to contend with them. This did not happen, however, until after the winter of 1831-32, and only then because of the continuing pressure of attack from their Indian enemies. Roving bands of Sioux as well as the Mandans and Hidatsas raided Arikara villages and corn fields repeatedly. At the same time, by the end of 1831 the Sioux had disrupted Arikara trade with the whites through a virtual blockade of the river. At least as important, however, were the two natural disasters that limited their food supply. First the buffalo failed to come close enough for the villagers to have a successful hunt that year. Another disaster was the failure of their corn crop—the one staple that they and some of the neighboring Indian bands depended upon. When all of these problems are considered, it is apparent that their move to the Loup River of Nebraska during 1832 was no spur-of-the-moment decision based on a desire to escape the vengeance of angry white traders.<sup>47</sup> It was rather the result of a series of major disasters that occurred within a brief time span and from which there was little recourse except to relocate.

By the time most of the tribe had moved away from the Missouri, the Arikaras were reported to have sworn "death and destruction to every white man who comes in their way."

George Catlin, traveling downriver in the summer of 1832, noted that originally the villagers had received most whites kindly and that their hostility resulted from the "system of trade, and the manner in which it has been conducted in their country." The artist seems to have thought that some of the Indians remained in their villages, because he joked about possibly stopping for a brief visit. He did not, and so the only Arikaras he met were a few who lived near the Mandan village where he had stayed and painted for a time.<sup>48</sup>

Whether all of the tribesmen had left the Missouri or not, for the next few years some Arikara bands lived with their relatives the Skidi Pawnees in Nebraska and sometimes farther west in present eastern Wyoming. By 1836 at least a few groups of Arikaras began drifting back toward the Missouri. In September of that year a small party arrived at the Mandan village near Fort Clark in North Dakota and brought news that most of the rest of the tribe was then in the Black Hills. The following spring most of the other bands had moved back; by April, 1837, the fur trader Francis Chardon reported that about 250 lodges—nearly the whole tribe—had arrived at the Mandan village.<sup>49</sup>

For the Arikaras, this move proved disastrous. By roaming on the plains they apparently missed the recurring smallpox attacks that plagued the village tribes along the Missouri. In 1837, however, a major epidemic swept along the river destroying villagers and nomads alike, because passengers on the American Fur Company steamer *St. Peter's* carried the pestilence to the villages and trading posts. The disease ran wild in the crowded villages, and within just a couple of months hundreds of Arikaras and Mandans died or fled. According to the resident fur trader Francis Chardon, nearly one-half of the Arikaras died by September, 1837.<sup>50</sup> This epidemic destroyed most of what remained of Arikara tribal, band, or village cohesion. Although the survivors continued to live near the Mandans in North Dakota, by the late 1830s they played a small role in the trade of the region.

Few nineteenth-century Americans mourned the Arikara's virtual destruction in 1837. As far as the whites were concerned, the villagers deserved both their reputation as treacherous, hostile savages and their fate as well. What seems strange is that, although these people were never as great a threat to the traders as bands of the Teton Sioux, the Pawnees, or the Blackfeet, they served as a kind of focal point for white anger toward their Indian competitors and partners in the fur and hide trade. Such views stemmed from many sources, but all developed because few fur traders or government officials of that era could understand any Indians in nonethnocentric terms. Thus when the Arikaras attacked whites or even other tribesmen, the whites saw no rational patterns or explanations. Nevertheless, the villagers' action stemmed from a very real series of major problems and from assumptions and perceptions that differed fundamentally from those held by the traders.

Whether the Arikaras saw their world crumbling and considered their actions as part of a struggle for tribal or village survival is not clear. Yet in only a generation or two they had witnessed a reduction from eighteen to only two villages by the 1820s. Following the advice of their own chiefs, the survivors disrupted patterns of life, government, and military affairs in the remaining villages. At the same time, as their numbers were shrinking, their influence in the Indian trading patterns declined. Frequently, neighboring Indians chose to raid their corn fields rather than pay for the food with meat and skins. The introduction of manufactured trade goods by white traders and the increasing numbers of American trappers who displaced or competed with Indian hunters and trappers further disrupted Arikara economic life. The spread of epidemic diseases, such as smallpox, and the occasional drought that destroyed the villagers' corn crops must have provided the final impetus for their hostile actions.

All of these problems assailed other tribes along the Missouri and on the fringes of the plains, but only the Arikaras acquired such a

negative reputation. They were the only tribe in the region to fight openly with the United States before the middle of the nineteenth century. Their 1807 attack on the Nathaniel Pryor party laid a foundation for later charges that they were dangerous, although after that incident they treated most whites as friends. The 1823 fight with Ashley's trappers and the resulting Leavenworth campaign later that summer guaranteed that they would be considered unpredictable and treacherous. Because of Ashley's prominence as the former lieutenant governor of Missouri and as a well-known businessman from that state, the news of the Arikara attack spread across the nation, something that rarely happened when other Indians attacked traders or trappers in the West.

Equally significant was the failure of the Leavenworth expedition to punish this tribe. When the army failed to defeat the Arikara villagers, many Missouri River traders raged that they would have to suffer the results of army incompetence for years. Joshua Pilcher, in particular, held that opinion. Because he sometimes served as an Indian agent for the upper Missouri tribes, his words received careful attention both in Washington and in the western press. He missed no opportunity to denounce the Arikaras.

Still, it took more than the events of 1807 and 1823 to give this tribe their bad reputation. Although there were frequent incidents of robbery, beatings, and even occasional killings, the Arikaras' record includes nothing else that was unusual for Indian tribes at the time, so one must look elsewhere for sources of their bad name. In the 1830s many travelers visited the upper Missouri. Of these most praised the Mandans and by contrast denounced the Arikaras. George Catlin, who had little to say about the Arikaras, spoke for many when he wrote of "the kind and hospitable Mandans." He and many others suggested that these people might not have been Indians originally, and he heaped praise upon their society. These positive descriptions of their neighbors made the Arikaras seem particularly hostile by comparison. But a more important factor was the steady

outpouring of anti-Arikara sentiment. Edwin Denig, writing during the mid-1830s, had nothing good to say about these people, and he denounced them continually.<sup>51</sup> With government officials, the army, and fur traders all picturing this tribe in negative ways, it should not be difficult to understand why their bad reputation grew. Actually their record was little different from those of neighboring tribes except for the 1807 and 1823 incidents. Certainly these actions were more destructive and damaging to American influence and commerce on the Missouri than the frequent minor raids and robberies committed by all of the surrounding tribes. Yet in both cases the Arikara attacks represented what the Indians considered a legitimate response to a perceived threat to their existence, not an irrational or "savage" action. It may be that even with these two attacks, the Arikaras deserved their negative reputation no more than some of their Indian neighbors.

## NOTES

1. Richard M. Clokey, *William H. Ashley: Enterprise and Politics in the Trans-Mississippi West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), pp. 70-76; Harrison C. Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829* (Cleveland: Arthur C. Clark, 1918), p. 70; Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (1953; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1964), p. 37; Richard E. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), pp. 189-90; Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 47, 56; and John E. Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher: Fur Trader and Indian Agent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 39, all give evidence of these ideas.

2. Saum, *Fur Trader and Indian*, pp. 46-50.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-68, 116-17. For an extreme example of this, see Edwin T. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed.

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7. Ewers, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri," pp. 436-43; Deetz, *Changes in Arikara Ceramics*, pp. 28-37.

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10. Abraham P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 1:299-300, 303, 305-8.

11. Tabeau, *Narrative*, pp. 123-27.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1:299-300, 303-8.

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19. William Clark to Henry Dearborn, May 18, 1807, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Letters Received, Record Group 107, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Jackson, *Letters of Lewis and Clark*, 1:303-6; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 50-52.

20. Jackson, *Letters of Lewis and Clark*, 2:433.

21. *Ibid.*, 2:432, 437, 482.

22. *Ibid.*, 2:447, 479-82; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 83-84.

23. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 83, 99-100.

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25. John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*, vol. 5 *Early Western Travels*, ed. by Reuben G. Thwaites, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur Clark, 1904-1907), pp. 90-91, 103-9, 113-17; Brackenridge, *Journal*, pp. 97-98.

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30. Quoted in Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, p. 141.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-67.
32. Statement by Joshua Pilcher to Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, March 18, 1824, U.S. Congress, Senate, 18th Cong., 1st sess., *Senate Document* no. 56, pp. 10, 15. An excellent new discussion of problems with the Arikaras is Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 70-115. See also Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher*, pp. 38-39; Saum, *Fur Trader and Indian*, pp. 47, 56.
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51. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:205; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, *passim*.