

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, 1810. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

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 farmers living in villages along the Missouri and its tributaries. At the time of 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 Mandan moved north to the Heart River and adopted architecture using round earthlodges.

The Hidatsa 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 Hidatsa 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) about 1600. The Hidatsa borrowed from the Mandan, learning corn horticulture and adopting some of their pottery patterns. Inter-

marriage and trade helped cement relations, and eventually the two cultures became almost indistinguishable. With the Arikara 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 up to 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, where trees provided firewood and protection from the wind.

The 1837 smallpox epidemic greatly reduced the populations of the Indian nations. By 1845 the Mandan and Hidatsa moved about 40 miles up the Missouri River to form a new village, Like-A-Fish-hook. For mutual defense the Arikara joined them in 1862. In 1885 the U.S. Government forced the tribes to abandon Like-A-Fish-hook 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.

Western Contact

When trader Pierre de la Verendrye walked into a Mandan village in 1738—the first recorded European to see Indians of the upper Missouri—he found an American Indian society at the height of 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 in 1804. Explorers such as Prince Maximilian of Wied and artists such as 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. The 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 the tribes to individually owned reservation plots and told them to grow wheat. Their societies and rituals were banned. Within one generation the three tribes were forced into radical changes that eroded their ancient relationship with the land and ended a way of life.



GILCREASE MUSEUM, TULSA



GILCREASE MUSEUM, TULSA

Prince Maximilian (second from right, with rifle) and artist Karl Bodmer (far right) are portrayed meeting Hidatsa Indians (above top).

AFTER A KARL BODMER PAINTING
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

Steamboats following explorers carried the smallpox that devastated the Knife River villages (above).

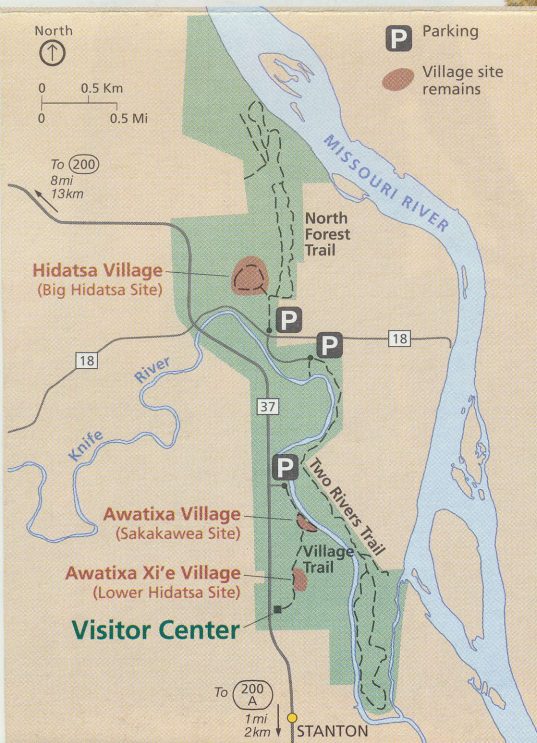
WILLIAM DE LA MONTAGNE CARY
GILCREASE MUSEUM, TULSA

Péhriska-Rúhpa (Two Ravens), leader of the Hidatsa Dog Society, was painted by Karl Bodmer in the society's regalia (far right).

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

Sah-ko-ka, a Mandan girl, was known for her beauty (right).

GEORGE CATLIN, 1832
SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM



Reading the Past The story of Knife River is still being written. Long-held theories have been revised by recent archaeological research. From 1976 to 1983 Dr. Stanley Ahler of the University of North Dakota directed excavations here, recovering more than 800,000 artifacts. After piecing the story together from these artifacts, Dr. Ahler believes that the Hidatsa arrived here around 1300, earlier than once thought. Evidence from village sites provides an unbroken record of more than 500 years of habitation. This period, however, represents only a fraction of the time that humans lived here. Evidence from 50 archaeological sites shows that the Knife River area has been occupied for more than 11,000 years. The earliest known people were the Paleo-Indians



Knife River along Sakakawea site.

(11,000-6000 B.C.E. [Before 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 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); the Knife River sites represent one of the final phases.

Help us preserve this unique record of cultural development by leaving artifacts and site remains undisturbed. All natural and cultural resources in the park are protected by federal law.

About Your Visit

The area is 60 miles north of Bismarck, N.D. The park has a visitor center, reconstructed earthlodge, (furnished with replica artifacts in summer), a film, exhibits, remains of three village sites, and trails.

More Information

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Village Life on the Upper Missouri



Mandan community before extensive contact with Europeans.

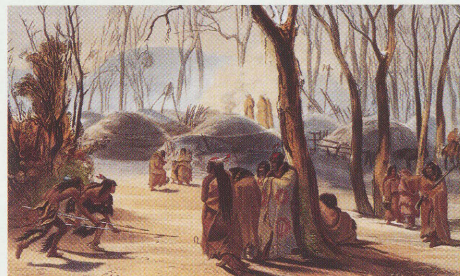
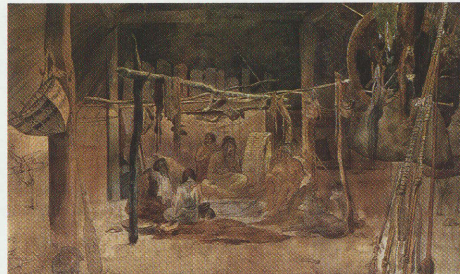
Lewis and Clark Encounter Indian Village Life

In 1804–05 Lewis and Clark's expedition, the Corps of Discovery, experienced upper Missouri village life firsthand. With orders from President Thomas Jefferson, Captains William Clark and Meriwether Lewis embarked on the adventure of their lives—to locate the Northwest Passage across the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. After leaving St. Louis on May 14, 1804, and traveling 1,600 miles up the Missouri River, they arrived at what is now the Knife River Indian Villages. With cold weather approaching, the Corps built a fort and spent the winter among the Mandan and Hidatsa. Lewis noted in his journal, "This place we have named Fort Mandan in honour of our Neighbors."

Throughout the winter Mandan and Hidatsa people visited the fort to trade 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 (Sagagewea). Lewis and Clark knew that her translations of the tribal languages to the west would be invaluable. 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 Clark nicknamed "Pomp."

On April 7, 1805, the Corps left the fort, and after many hardships reached the Pacific Ocean. To their disappointment they had discovered no waterway from St. Louis to the Pacific. The 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 1805-06 winter in a structure they named Fort Clatsop. Anxious to return home, the Corps set out prematurely for St. Louis on March 23, 1806. On reaching the Rocky Mountains on June 15, they realized they would have to wait, as snow in the mountains was too deep. A couple of weeks later they made it over the mountains. By August 17, 1806, the expedition had returned to the confluence of the Knife and Missouri rivers. They bade farewell to Charbonneau, Sakakawea, and Pomp, who left the expedition to live with 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. On September 23 Lewis and Clark reached St. Louis amidst cheers for their safe return.



*Inside a Mandan earthlodge (above top).
A Hidatsa winter village (above).*

KARL BODMER, BOTH PAINTINGS
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

Village Economy

Agriculture underlay the economy of the Hidatsa and Mandan, who harvested much of their food from the rich floodplain gardens. Gardens, like earthlodges, were passed down through the female line. Women tended gardens, raising corn, beans, squash, 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. Berries, roots, and fish supplemented their diet. Upland hunting provided bison, deer, and small game animals for meat, hides, bones, and sinew.

These proficient farmers traded their produce and Knife River flint to nomadic tribes for buffalo hides, deerskins, dried meat, catlinite (red pipestone), and



Hidatsa woman hoeing squash with bone hoe, 1912.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

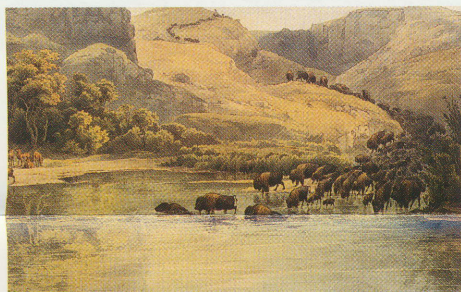
Bison scapula hoe.

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, N.DAK.

region, dentalium shell from the West coast, and during the 1800s, guns, horses, and metal items from the Europeans.



Battle and Hunt



Bison and elk on the Upper Missouri River.

KARL BODMER
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

Mato-Topé, 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. Painted hand shows that he has captured prisoners (see his sketches on buffalo robe, right).

KARL BODMER
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

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. 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,

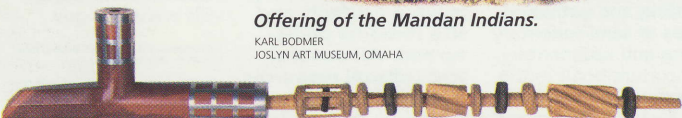
and victory in battle. Ceremonies could be conducted only by those with "medicine," which was obtained by purchasing from a fellow clan or society member one of the bundles of sacred objects associated with tribal mythology.



Offering of the Mandan Indians.

KARL BODMER
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

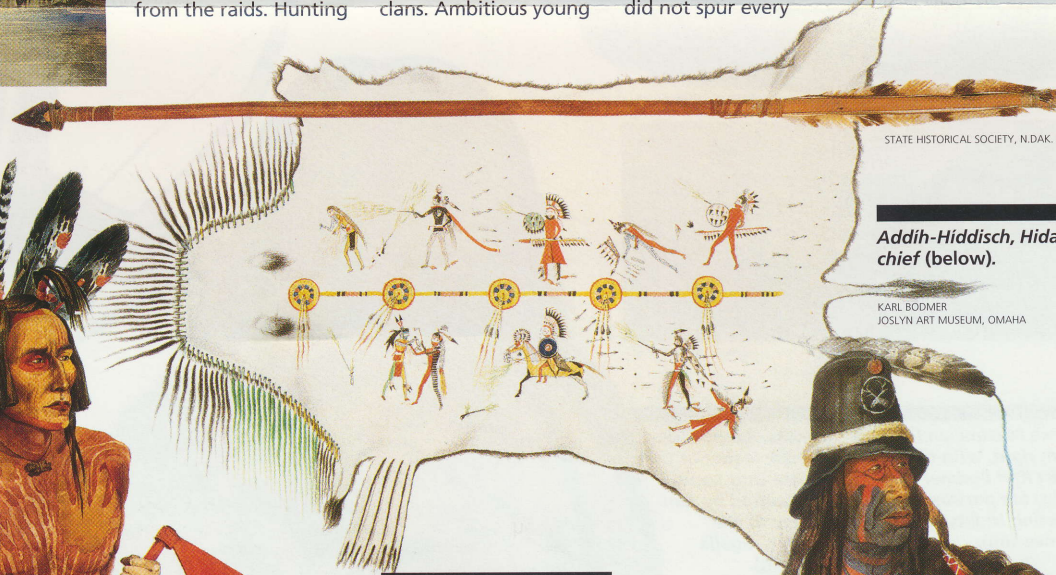
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, N.DAK.



parties were also scheduled, 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. Warriors often had to defend the village against raids by other tribes. When the men prevailed in battle or hunt, women celebrated with dance and song throughout the village.



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, N.DAK.

Addih-Hiddisch, Hidatsa chief (below).

KARL BODMER
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

Chief Mato-Topé painted this buffalo robe to celebrate his exploits in battle. The most famous deed was slaying a Cheyenne in hand-to-hand combat (see lower left scene).

KARL BODMER
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA

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.

