

# An Introduction to North America's Native People Plains Culture Area

## Introduction

The Great Plains (sometimes called the American prairies) fills the very center of the North American continent, stretching some 1,500 miles north to south (from the north central regions of Texas to the southern prairies of Canada) and more than 1,000 miles east to west (from the Mississippi-Missouri Valley to the Rocky Mountains). And while the Plains landscape appears to many to be a vast unbroken treeless and uniform grassland, it is in fact broken by ranges of hills and wooded river valleys, and consists of two subregions, the more humid eastern plains with tall-grass prairies and the drier western plains or steppe, where short-grass prairies dominate.

The valleys and hills were home to deer, elk, bear, antelope, and beaver, while in the mountains at the western edge lived mountain sheep. In the rivers were fish, and water fowl were seasonally abundant during their annual migrations. But it was the bison who were the principal inhabitants of the grasslands. Up until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than 60 million of them lived in the region. They provided the plains people (both the nomads and the cultivators) with meat for eating, fat for cooking, hides for house covers and winter coats, bones and horns for a variety of tools. Stomachs were made into carrying and sometimes cooking devices; even the tails found a use - as fly swatters.

## Historical Overview

### Before the Europeans

My heart is filled with joy when I see you here, as the brooks fill with water when the snows melt in the spring; and I feel glad, as the ponies do when the fresh grass starts in the beginning of the year. My people have never first drawn a bow or gun against whites. There has been trouble on the line between us, and my young men have danced the war dance. But it was not begun by us. It was you who sent out the first soldier and we who sent out the second. The blue dressed soldiers and the Utes came out from the night when it was dark and still, and for camp fires they lit our lodges. Instead of hunting game, they killed my braves, and the warriors of the tribe cut their hair for the dead. So it was in Texas. They made sorrow come in our camps, and we went out like the buffalo bulls when the cows are attacked. When we found them we killed them and their scalps hang in our lodges. The Comanches are not weak and blind, like pups or a dog when seven sleeps old. They are strong and farsighted, like grown horses. We took their road and we went on it. The white women cried and our women laughed. But there are things which you have said which I do not like. They are not sweet like sugar, but bitter like gourds. You said that you wanted to put us upon a reservation, to build us houses and make us medicine lodges. I do not want them. I was born upon the prairie, where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I lived like my fathers before me, and like them I lived happily.

*Spoken by the great Yamparikas Comanche Paruasemena (Young Bear) at the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty.*

**COMANCHE, CHEYENNE, AND SIOUX** - names well known to millions of fans of westerns (books, TV programs, movies). And for many non-Indians, it was the lifestyle of these and other Plains people that represents the very concept of "Indian-ness": nomadic, tepee-dwelling, horse-mounted buffalo hunters; warriors wearing eagle-

feathered war bonnets and wielding lance and shield while attacking their enemies; young men subjecting themselves to days and days of isolation and starvation in search of a vision. While such features did exist among some Plains nations, neither were they universal, nor in the case of hunting buffalo from horseback, were they of any great time depth. It wasn't until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following the arrival of the European-introduced horse to the Great Plains, that the "stereotypical" Plains culture of books, movies and TV emerged. Before that, the area was nearly empty of human life, with two exceptions:

- Along the river bottoms of the Mississippi-Missouri river drainage system in the eastern and middle plains lived sedentary village dwelling farmers (such as the Hidatsa, Mandan, Omaha, Kansa, Missouri, and others);
- Scattered in various other plains locations lived foot nomads, such as the ancestors of the modern Blackfoot, Comanche, Kiowa, and various Shoshonean speaking nations.

Other Plains hunters, such as the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow and Dakota were latecomers to the Plains, abandoning their settled agricultural way of life for one of nomadic buffalo hunting and, as was the case of the southern Plains dwellers, raiding the towns of the native peoples of the Southwestern Culture Area.

But long before that, the Great Plains region was home to some of the earliest settlers in North America. Archaeological evidence for the first use of the Plains dates to about 12,000 years ago when the Clovis people, broad-spectrum big game hunters of the Paleo-Indian tradition, moved onto the Plains seeking a variety of large game. They hunted gigantic mammoths, a relative of the elephant, and other large game such as the ground sloth, musk-ox, reindeer, elk, brown bear and primitive horses.

By about 9,000-8500 B.C., the broad-spectrum big game hunters had begun to focus on a single animal species - the bison (an early cousin of the buffalo). The earliest known of these bison oriented traditions is Folsom. Folsom people moved around in small family groups for most of the year, returning yearly to the same springs and other favored locations on higher ground. There they would camp for a few days, perhaps erecting a temporary shelter, making and/or repairing some stone tools, or precessing some meat, then moving on.

After 8000 B.C., hunter-gatherers on the Great Plains were not numerous and population densities were quite low. Although some Paleo-Indians continued as open plains bison hunters, hunting traditions became more varied and bison procurement methods more sophisticated. Additionally, some groups took to supplementing bison meat with other food resources (antelope, deer, bearn, small mammals, fish and seasonally available wild vegetable foods).

Between 5500 B.C. and 0 B.C./A.D., regional adaptations became the norm with reliance less on bison and more on a mixed economy of small game and gathered plant foods. In the western plains, groups moved toward the mountain valleys and shifted from nomadic hunting and gathering to more fixed base hunting, while the eastern groups turned to a mixed economy with far more dependence on vegetal foods and small game (deer and rabbits).

Between 1000 B.C. - 1000 A.D. a lifestyle emerged on the edges of the eastern Plains which set the stage for the sedentary horticulturalist tradition which existed at the time of European contact. Farmers from the Eastern Woodlands culture area began moving westward up the valleys of Mississippi tributaries, penetrating the Plains between 250 B.C. and 950 A.D. and bringing with them features new to the Plains:

- cultivation of indigenous plants (such as sunflower, goosefood, pigweed and others) as well as maize and beans (originally introduced to the Eastern Woodlands from Mexico);
- burial of the dead in or under earthen mounds;
- the manufacture of pottery.

The first Plains farming communities may have been inspired by and perhaps derived from Hopewellian cultures. These were up to 3-4 hectares in size, and participated in Hopewell trade networks, perhaps supplying Ohio Hopewellian communities with obsidian from Yellowstone Park and high-quality chalcedony from western North

Dakota. The subsistence system included the cultivation of several species of indigenous plants, perhaps along with primitive strains of maize. In the northeastern Plains, earthen mounds were built, including linear earthworks and conical burial mounds. In many instances, the burial mounds covered log-covered pits containing human burials, often along with bison skeletons and/or skulls, a decidedly Plains addition to typical Hopewellian burial mound patterns. Some anthropologists have suggested that these northeastern Plains mound builders were ancestral to the historically known Dakota, Assiniboine, and Cheyenne people. It was also during this period that the bow and arrow, an Athapascan Subarctic Culture Area weapon, was introduced on the Plains.

The period between 1000 - 1850 A.D. witnessed the introduction of multi-family houses (semi-subterranean earth lodges) grouped into fixed villages. This new wave of eastern influence and colonies had its origins in Mississippian developments. Over time, the smaller villages of earlier times were abandoned in favor of fewer but larger, more consolidated and permanent settlements, usually equipped with numerous underground storage pits. Some of these new communities were fortified for defense purposes with ditches and stockades. Farming was restricted to the alluvial bottomlands of larger rivers and although these new agricultural villagers continued to grow various local plant species, the subsistence system improved with the introduction of advanced strains of maize and beans (possibly introduced from Mexico). When the first European fur trappers and traders moved up the Mississippi-Missouri river system, they found flourishing farming nations with rich and elaborate cultural traditions. These nations were the direct ancestors of modern Plains people - the Mandan, Hidasta, Arikara, Pawnee, Wichita, Omaha, Oto, Ponca and Kansa.

## Historical Overview

### After the Europeans

Given the Great Plains' interior location, its awesome isolation, and its lack of trees, it was much less attractive for European and American exploitation than North America's more accessible regions. Thus European and American explorers, traders, trappers and missionaries had only slight knowledge of the region and it wasn't until after 1800 that the Plains nations had direct contact with the newcomers. Furthermore, because of their relative isolation, and because it was unsafe for non-Indians to venture onto the Plains, the Plains people escaped the influences which peoples in other parts of America had faced. Nonetheless, they were affected by the westward spread of first the Europeans and later the Ameroceans who displaced Eastern Woodlands nations, sending them onto the Great Plains where they met with stiff resistance by the Plains people. The Plains peoples were receptive to certain European and Amerocean items including the horse, which effected changes in their cultures as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Also, comancheros, Iberian traders from the Spanish Rio Grande settlements, ventures onto the Plains to trade and both French and later British and Anglo-American traders had some limited contact with Plains Indians. But it was largely through the Wichitas and other Native American middle persons that guns, knives, hatchets, kettles, cloth, beads, and other goods flowed to the Plains.

What's more important to remember, in fact what is a matter of considerable moment in Native American history, is that the Plains nations were striking exceptions to the general trend of tribal degradation, depopulation, and cultural deprivation following European and Amerocean contact. Largely free of imperial domination, the Plains nations were able to adapt certain European and Amerocean items to their particular needs. As a result, they flourished, became prosperous and powerful and thus were able to offer the most effective resistance of any Native Americans to being conquered by the spreading Amerocean westward advance.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the shock waves of European invasion and expansion in the East began pushing woodland nations west, one against another, forcing some of them onto the plains and creating friction with the nations already living there. The result was an uneasy mix of rooted and uprooted nations. They spoke many dialects of different language families and learned to communicate with each other by a common sign language.

With the influx of guns (traded from Europeans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and horses, the plains could have become the setting of a contest of annihilation. But even bitter enemies saw large-scale killing as wasteful and lacking honor. Instead, the Plains nations developed a complex, ritualized warfare, in which the mere touching of an enemy, known as “counting coup,” brought higher honor than killing.

For decades, the horse cultures of the Plains nations flourished. White explorers and trappers came and went, followed by missionaries, miners, freighters, and settlers, who crossed the Plains on their way to the West. And while the Americans made no critical demands on the tribes for cessions of Great Plains territory, their increasing traffic drove away game, destroyed wild-food gathering grounds, polluted water sources and spread diseases among the Native people. Then in 1858 and 1859, gold discoveries on the South Platte River at the foot of Colorado’s Rockies started a stampede of whites across the buffalo-hunting grounds of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Kiowa and Comanche Indians.

As thousands of fortune hunters flocked into Colorado, the US government attempted unsuccessfully to keep the Native people away from the various routes the emigrants were using. The Lakota Sioux were told to stay north of the Oregon Trail and its South Platte spur that led to Denver. In the southern plains, the US army tried in vain to drive the Kiowas and Comanches below the Arkansas River. And in the region in between, the Cheyennes and Arapahos found themselves caught by a third route from Kansas to Colorado that ran directly through their traditional hunting grounds, which had been guaranteed to them by a treaty in 1851. In 1861, government negotiators tried to break the treaty and force the two nations onto a barren reservation in southeastern Colorado but the Native people refused to go. The stage was set for the infamous Sand Creek massacre. At dawn on November 29, 1864, the Colorado volunteers, commanded by “Colonel” John Chivington, attacked the sleeping Cheyenne village of Black Kettle on the banks of Sand Creek. The village was destroyed, winter food stores and blankets plundered and more than 150 Native American people were killed and savagely mutilated by Chivington and his “soldiers.”

An immediate post-Civil War concern of the federal government was pacifying the Indian nations of the Plains: the Cheyenne and Sioux who dominated the northern Plains; the southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, rulers of the central Plains; and the Kiowa and Comanche, who roamed virtually unopposed over the southern Plains. Although all had fought against the American military during the Civil War Period of tribal conquest and compression, they still controlled vast domains in 1865. Each Nation possessed superb fighting power and a strong will to resist American occupation. Federal officials on their side felt compelled to clear the Plains in order to open a wedge for the advancing transcontinental railroad. Simultaneously, the US government was coming under public pressure from eastern civilians tired of the immoral military actions against the Plains nations, and demanding alternative solutions be found to the “Indian problem.”

On the southern Plains, the US negotiated the Little Arkansas Treaties with the Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne and Arapaho. In return for their agreeing to reduce their hunting ranges and maintain the peace, the US pledged mutual peace and protection of tribal territorial rights. However the US Senate refused to ratify these treaties, federal officials refused to protect tribal territorial rights, the flow of settlers into the southern Plains increased and American buffalo hunters slaughtered the bison by the tens of thousand.

Recognizing that the federal government was not going to protect their rights, the various Nations assumed this function and mounted attacks against the American invaders. In response, the US army launched a series of brutal, constant and intense campaigns against the Native peoples in the summer of 1867. By October of that year, the Native Nations were ready for a truce which came at a ground council on Medicine Lodge Creek in southwestern Kansas. The treaties negotiated during the Council are very important historically, resulting as they did in the assignment to the Kiowa and Comanche a reservation on lands taken from the Choctaws and Chickasaws by the Reconstruction Treaties of 1866. The 1,200 Kiowa and 1,700 Comanche received a 3 million-acre domain. Additionally, 300 Kiowa-Apache joined with the Kiowa and Comanche and agreed to settle on their reservation.

The Cheyenne (numbering about 2,000) and Arapaho (numbering about 1,200) were assigned a reservation containing nearly five million acres. Five years later, the US government removed 600,000 acres from this reservation in order to establish a reservation for the Wichita, Caddoes, absentee Delaware and remnants of Texas Nations.

Despite the fact that many Nations went to reservations, US military officials were convinced that the Native people would remain restive and warlike and would only stay on reservations after the war-making potential had been completely destroyed. A two-pronged assault was launched against the Indians. While agents and missionaries worked on the reservations attempting to force the Indians to assimilate, new military posts were built at strategic points across the Plains.

Meanwhile, the federal government failed to deliver the rations promised by the Medicine Lodge Creek treaty. The Indians claimed that such a failure by the US to keep its pledge freed the Nations from observing the treaties and in 1868 many well-mounted and heavily armed small bands left the reservations to hunt buffalo and occasionally raid American settlements. In response, the federal government launched a series of campaigns against the wandering bands. One of these campaigns, the Washita, was carried by Colonel George Armstrong Custer against the Cheyenne encamped on the banks of the upper Washita. Custer's Seventh Cavalry surrounded the Indian village, caught the sleeping Indians by surprise and massacred 102 Cheyenne.

After Custer's massacre, General Philip Sheridan, field commander of the US Army, ordered all bands to go on the new reservations or face annihilation by the army; most of the bands gradually came in. But the reservations were more like prisons than homelands. Deprived of their hunting lands, fed broken promises by the government and dictatorial reservation officials, and often sick, cold, and starving because of inadequate, spoiled, or shoddy supplies provided by government swindlers, the Indians grew restive and once again bands fled onto the open plains.

By the 1870's, things had changed drastically on the Plains. The buffalo-hunting nations were facing a crisis of major proportions. An eastern tannery had developed a method to produce a superior leather from buffalo hides, creating a huge demand for the hides, and driving the price of bison hides skyward. In response, the southern Plains filled, almost overnight, with hide hunters who killed buffalo by the thousands. In two years, the buffalo hunters, armed with the new, high-powered Sharps repeating rifle, slaughtered four million buffalo, shipping their hides east and leaving the unused carcasses rotting.

In destroying the herds, the whites were wiping out the Indian's food supply, forcing them, if they wished to live, back onto the reservations. The federal government saw what was happening and gave the hide hunters encouragement. In less than 12 years the buffalo population went from some 30 million to less than one thousand. The thousands of years-old spiritual bond between the Native peoples and the buffalo was destroyed.

It was the beginning of the end. Hemmed in by the ever-tightening bonds of ranches, farms, settlements, railroad lines, wagon roads, telegraph lines, and other marks of the white man's possession of what only recently had been buffalo range, the free bands were being strangled to death. One by one the bands finally went on the hated reservations, where the army rounded up the Indian's horses (some ten thousand) and shot them. Finally, the southern Plains nations, stripped of their guns, horses and the buffalo, their prominent leaders dead or in prison, and thoroughly demoralized by the drastic lifestyle changes forced on them, were "pacified."

On the northern Plains, things weren't much better. In 1865, federal commissioners attempted to negotiate a treaty with the Sioux and northern Cheyenne in order to complete railroad construction through the central Plains. Federal negotiators also demanded that the northern Plains nations allow improvements and fortification of the Bozeman Road, an old trader's trail and one which was being increasingly used by Americans traveling from Fort Laramie to the newly discovered Montana mines. Because the road crossed the prime bison hunting range of the Sioux, they refused to negotiate. In response, US troops built three posts along the road, causing the Sioux to attack travelers,

freighters, and miners moving along the trail. So intense was their pressure on travel in this region that on several occasions between 1866 and 1868, they choked off all travel. They also watched the military posts and made it difficult for troops to escort caravans over the road while trying to guard the posts at the same time.

Finally, early in 1868, a federal Peace Commission met with Sioux and Cheyenne leaders at Fort Laramie and negotiated treaties. These provided that the federal government would abandon the Bozeman Road and other travel routes and military posts in the Sioux hunting range while both the Sioux and Cheyenne would accept fixed reservations in the Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming territories ( with a hunting annex in the Big Horn-Powder River region). The northern Plains nations also pledged peace with the US and unimpeded passage for construction of railroads.

Peace was short lived. American activity in the northern Plains increased and inevitably incidents occurred between the Native people and American workmen, immigrants, and soldiers, all of who evidenced a general disregard for the Native people's rights as guaranteed by the Fort Laramie Treaty. The increased activity disturbed the buffalo and made hunting difficult; hunters hired by the railroads killed buffalo to feed the rail construction crews; and hide hunters slaughtered tens of thousands of bison for the skins. As was the case in the southern Plains, federal officials encouraged extermination of the northern Plains buffalo herds, reasoning that as long as there were buffalo, the Indians would always leave the reservations. But once the bison was gone, the Native people would become dependent upon government rations and Anglo farming practices for subsistence.

In the final stages of American conquest of the northern Plains people, several key factors played decisive roles in the ultimate defeat of the Indians:

- the extermination of the buffalo since it destroyed their economic foundation for survival and action;
- the use of rapid-fire weapons by the Indian-fighting army giving them a decided advantage over the single-shot rifles of the Indians;
- the extension of the railroads, which allowed rapid deployment of troops from one area to another in a matter of hours.

Throughout the period between 1868 and 1876, the Sioux and northern Cheyenne brushed with the military. But the end of 1876, however, the northern Plains, like the southern, were quiet and peaceful. The tribes had been subdued, the barrier to settlement and development had been removed and the military conquest of the western tribes was nearly complete. What resistance was offered by the Kickapoo, Nez Perce, Ute, and Modoc was dealt with quickly and decisively by the federal military establishment. Anglo-American victories over the western Apache in 1886 destroyed the last vestige of Native American military power. In the aftermath, and in keeping with a nearly unanimous Anglo-American view that the Native nations should be stripped of their lands and colonized on restricted reservations, the federal government forced nation after nation onto reservations. Once there, federal agents began applying detribalization processes which one observer has called the policy of "kill the Indian and save the person."

For more information about specific tribes or for information about tribal structure, politics, lifestyles, languages, etc. please visit [www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us/~crsmith/anth7\\_plains.html](http://www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us/~crsmith/anth7_plains.html)