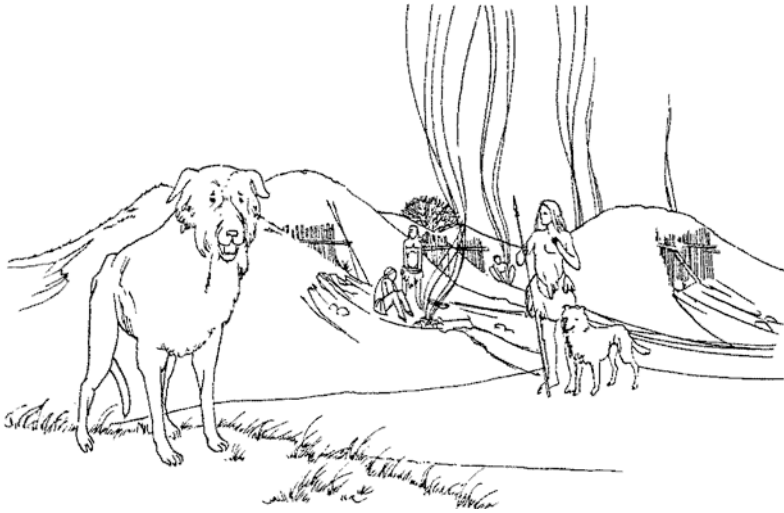


## **CHAPTER 2**



### ***Indians of the Plains and Prairies***

BEFORE THE ADVENT of recorded history, the region that was to become North Dakota had many changes of climate and consequently many human migrations. Moist times attracted new occupants; periods of drought drove them out. These prehistoric peoples had to adapt themselves to the nature of the country or, if that proved impossible, to leave. Later the area was occupied by Indian tribes who moved in from humid lands to the east and south and adapted their ways of life to the semiarid grassland. Thus the culture of the North Dakota Indians was much like that of the Plains and Prairie Indians farther south. The horse came to play a leading role where vast distances made mobility important. Even before the first white men saw North Dakota, white trade goods were beginning to make the Indians of the region dependent and to

change their way of life. Soon the white man's diseases would drastically reduce their numbers.

## **PREHISTORIC PEOPLE**

About twenty thousand years ago, late in the Ice Age, wandering, hungry Paleo-Indians of Mongoloid and other racial stocks crossed a land or ice bridge from Asia to Alaska. The migrants were familiar with fire and with the manufacture of clothing and shelter. They were big-game hunters, using spears and butchering tools. Eventually they turned south. Following an ice-free lane east of the Rocky Mountains, they entered the Great Plains region approximately fifteen thousand years ago. These first men in the Missouri Basin lived south of the line of farthest penetration by the Wisconsin Glacier. They traveled in small bands, hunting prehistoric mammoths, mastodons, and bison and gathering certain types of plants for food. They made no pottery, raised no crops. They carried their meager possessions on their backs as they drifted from one campsite to another on the banks of shallow, marshy lakes.

The climate was humid; wet winds from the melting ice sheet dropped much rain. Lakes and marshes were abundant, and the open plain was a hunter's paradise. In addition to mammoths, mastodons, and bison, these early big-game hunters killed prehistoric horses, camels, saber-toothed cats, and musk oxen. They chipped spear points from flint and fashioned knives, scrapers, choppers, drills, awls, needles, and other implements from rock and bone. Archaeological remains of their culture are widely scattered over the Plains; some have been found in the western Dakotas.

With the advances and retreats of the Wisconsin Glacier, the climate changed, sometimes growing colder and wetter, sometimes warmer and drier. The vegetation also changed, and Ice Age mammoths, mastodons, and other animals disappeared, giving way to bison, or, as they are more commonly known, buffalo. In all probability, long droughts drove the human population from the Great Plains as lakes dried up and game became scarce, for there was a warm, dry interval of two thousand years or more from about 4000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. Later, increased moisture attracted these early people to the Plains again.

It is impossible to chart climatic changes and migrations with

any exactness; dates can only be informed guesses. Perhaps two thousand years ago, Indians with a Woodland culture moved from the forests of Minnesota and Wisconsin to the grasslands of the eastern Dakotas. They roamed about in small bands, hunting and gathering as the earlier inhabitants had done, but they also made pottery, and by A.D. 1300 some of them may have had small gardens of squash and gourds. They grew no corn. About this same time, other migrations brought in cultural traits from the Lower Mississippi River.

In the centuries just before the discovery and settlement of North America by Europeans, Indians were living along the rivers of eastern North Dakota. Shunning the lonely, open plain, they made small camps or short-lived villages on the Red and Forest rivers, on the terraces along the Sheyenne and James. They apparently preferred the Red River Valley and the Drift Prairie to the drier Missouri Plateau. The rivers furnished water for drinking; brushy cover along their banks attracted game and supplied firewood, and their moist bottom lands provided tillable soil. These people left flint chips, sherds of pottery, scrapers and knives, and grooved mauls on campsites which have been buried by wind-blown soil, suggesting a long drought and probably abandonment.

Little is known about their way of life. Some of them dug a smoky, dark-brown flint from quarries or bowl-like depressions along the Knife River (the name is a translation of an Indian word). They pounded wet clay with cord-wrapped paddles to make rough but strong pottery. They used bone for awls, fleshers, and beads, and occasionally they shaped a hard stone into a grooved maul. They adorned themselves with pendants of mussel shell, with gorgets of whelk shells from the Gulf of Mexico (polished and incised with animal pictures), and with neckbands of thin elk horn.<sup>1</sup>

There are many mysteries. These people or earlier ones probably made both the circles of stone called "tipi rings" and the "writing rocks," or petroglyphs, such as that discovered near Alkabo in Divide County. And someone made boulder effigies of turtles; one composed of 183 stones was found west of Sanger in Oliver County.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse D. Jennings, *Plainsmen of the Past: A Review of the Prehistory of the Plains*, National Park Service, Region Two (Mimeographed; [Omaha], 1948), pp. 8, 11-35.

The Indians of eastern North Dakota placed their dead on scaffolds or in trees. Now and then they would gather the bones of a few skeletons into bundles and put them, along with a few artifacts (a bit of pottery, some fragments of flint, a pipe), into a burial pit. Often the pit was on a high bluff overlooking a river. Sometimes the bones were smeared with red ocher. Above the pit was built a commemorative mound, either round, oval, or linear. The Drift Prairie was the western fringe of the mound-building cultural area embracing the woodlands of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa and lay about one thousand miles from its center in southern Ohio. There are many mounds—much less elaborate than the Ohio ones—in the valleys of the Red, Sheyenne, and James rivers and around Devils Lake, but they thin out toward the Missouri. Mound building virtually stopped at the Missouri Plateau, although there is one on Apple Creek near Bismarck. None have been found west of the Missouri River.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE MANDANS**

The cultural roots of the mound-building Woodland people of the Red River Valley and the Drift Prairie sprang from the east, not the west, so their culture was marginal in the Great Plains region. The distinctive culture of western North Dakota was that of the agricultural villages along the Missouri River. This began about A.D. 1300 when the ancestors of the Mandans, the first historic tribe in the state, moved west from the Mississippi Valley and then up the Missouri, bringing with them a rather sedentary culture much like that of tribes living in earth lodges from Kansas to South Dakota. They constructed most of their small, unfortified villages on the west bank of the Missouri, scattering them from the Grand River in South Dakota to the Knife River in North Dakota. They fished, hunted, and raised corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash on the Missouri River bottoms. Although they lived in twenty-odd villages of twenty to forty lodges each, there are fifty or more of these early sites, indicating that now and then a village would

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<sup>2</sup>Walter N. Hlady, "Mound C, Fordville Mound Group, Walsh County, North Dakota; Its Excavation and Archaeology," [\*North Dakota History\*](#), XVII (October 1950), 253-260; Gordon W. Hewes, "Burial Mounds in the Baldhill Area, North Dakota," [\*American Antiquity\*](#), XIV (April 1949), 322-328.

be abandoned and a new one built.

Mandan lodges were rectangular (about twenty-eight by forty feet), widely spaced, and placed in regular rows. They were frames of heavy poles and posts covered with brush, hay, and earth. From the outside they looked like dome-shaped mounds of earth. The Mandans worked their gardens with bison-scapula hoes and stored their surplus corn in bell-shaped cache pits. They made coarse cord-marked gray pots, decorating the rims with simple designs. These were used for cooking, their owners scooping out hollows in the fire pits so that the round-bottomed pots would sit upright. Besides pottery, the Mandans made bone tools, incised bone ornaments, circular shell beads, scrapers, projectile points, knives, choppers, scapula hoes, and bison-rib reamers.

The Mandans may have moved to the lakes and woods of Minnesota and Wisconsin during a long drought, for they possessed cultural traits common to both the people living farther down the Missouri and those living in Wisconsin and Minnesota. George F. Will's 1946 study of growth rings from a great oak cut near Bismarck reveals that there were forty dry years out of forty-seven from 1471 to 1518.

About 1450 the Mandans began to fortify their villages with ditches and palisades. At first they fortified old sites, sometimes palisading only a portion of the circumference and leaving part of it protected by a bluff dropping down to the river. But in the old villages the lodges were too widely spaced, the palisades and ditches too long for warriors to defend. The Mandans still lived in about twenty places along the Missouri, all but two or three of them on the west bank, extending from the mouth of the Cannonball to the mouth of the Knife.

They raised beans, squash, and sunflowers but especially corn in their gardens. They also gathered seeds, wild fruit, and roots: astringent chokecherries, buffalo berries, June berries, wild grapes and plums, ground beans, the starchy roots of the tipsin, or Indian bread-root, and the tubers of the wild artichoke. They hunted buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope with arrows tipped with Knife River flint or gray chert picked up on the prairie. They also knocked down small game, rabbits and such, and caught fish in the river with bone hooks. With time and prosperity, they put more decoration on their pottery, cord-pressed patterns and punched or incised designs, and made light-tan,

gray, brown, and red pots of good quality with ears, lugs, and knobs.<sup>3</sup>

About 1600 the Mandans came under attack, apparently from some nomadic foe, although no tribe on the Northern Plains then had horses. They began to draw together in larger villages, concentrated near the mouth of the Heart River. There were seven rather large ones, but probably only six were occupied at any one time. Three were on the east bank of the Missouri and four on the west side. The most famous was Slant Village, located in what is now Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, five miles south of Mandan. By comparing growth rings, George F. Will has dated the earliest and latest timbers recovered from Slant Village as cut in 1652 and 1735, respectively.<sup>4</sup> To get as many dwellings as possible inside the protecting ditch and palisade, the Mandans began to build oval and, later, round lodges, about forty feet in diameter, instead of rectangular ones. To shorten the perimeter to be defended, they no longer put the lodges in streets but crowded them together.

Mandan culture showed traits from the southeastern Mississippian cultures: peace and war chiefs, clan and moiety divisions, village squares and ceremonial centers, and confederacies with other tribes. But by 1700 these traits were overlain by recent borrowings from the eastern Woodland culture (pottery and certain ceremonial practices) and the Plains culture (the vision quest and buffalo hunting). The six or eight thousand Mandans living near the mouth of the Heart were probably one of the major concentrations of population on the Upper Missouri.

Their way of life continued to change. They made better pottery. They had dogs but as yet no horses, although some of their neighbors to the south had them soon after 1700. They carried on a profitable trade in corn with the Cheyennes, who came from the Black Hills with horses, the first seen by the Mandans. They began to hear about white men—the Spanish in the Southwest, the English on Hudson Bay, and the French

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<sup>3</sup> George F. Will and Thad C. Hecker, "Upper Missouri River Valley Aboriginal Culture in North Dakota," [\*North Dakota Historical Quarterly\*](#), XI (January-April 1944), 5-126.

<sup>4</sup> George F. Will, [\*Tree Ring Studies in North Dakota\*](#), North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 338 (Fargo, 1946), pp. 7, 11-16.

around Lake Superior. About 1700 they began to get some white trade goods from the English through the Assiniboins, who acted as middlemen.

Thus by the beginning of the eighteenth century the Mandans had become well adjusted to their environment. A hardy people, they had learned to resist the bitter cold of winter and to endure the heat and drought of summer. By drawing together in villages, or even clusters of villages, they could enjoy both the amenities of group living and a stout defense against enemies. And by locating their villages along the Missouri, they had easy access to wood for fuel and building purposes, plus rich bottom land on which to raise crops. As a matter of fact, each group had two villages, one near the gardens for summer living and the other in the woods for maximum protection against winter weather. In their quest for food to supplement domestic crops, they used many of the plants native to the region, but the great bounty of the grassland was buffalo, which provided not only meat and fat but hides for robes and bones for implements. To this abundance the Mandans added a luxury: they made sugar from the sap of the box elder.<sup>5</sup>

## THE COMING OF EASTERN TRIBES

After the Mandans and before the first white men, other tribes came to North Dakota. All but the Mandans and Arikaras were from humid, forested eastern regions. Perhaps they were half-driven out of their old homes by enemies, half-enticed to the new by the countless herds of buffalo, a rich food supply. Whatever the reason, eight tribes—the Hidatsas, Crows, Cheyennes, Crees, Assiniboins, Yanktonai Dakotas, Teton Dakotas, and Chippewas—moved westward from Minnesota or the Great Lakes area.<sup>6</sup> Not many of these tribes

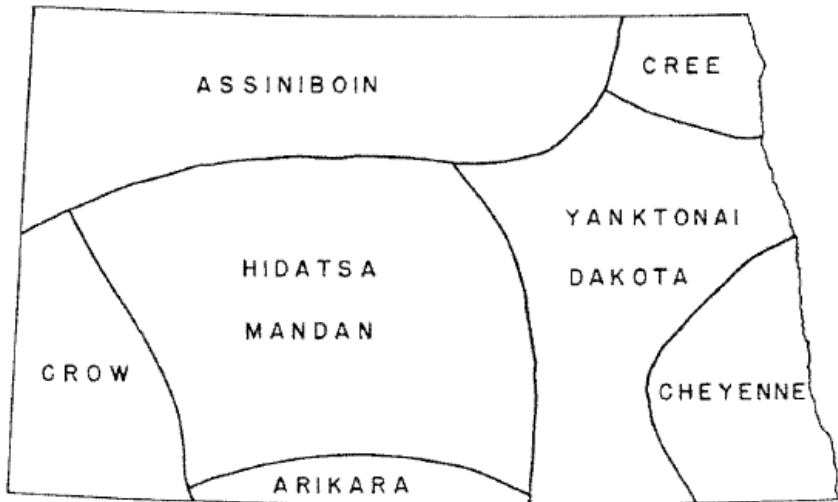
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<sup>5</sup> Melvin R. Gilmore, "[Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region](#)," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Thirty-third Annual Report, 1911-12* (Washington; Government Printing Office, 1919), pp. 56, 88, 92, 100; H. E. Ederstrom, "The Cold-and Physiological Fact," *North Dakota Quarterly*, XXIV (Winter 1956), 21-25; Alfred W. Bowers, "[A History of the Mandan and Hidatsa](#)" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> See articles on the tribes in Frederick W. Hodge (ed.), *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology

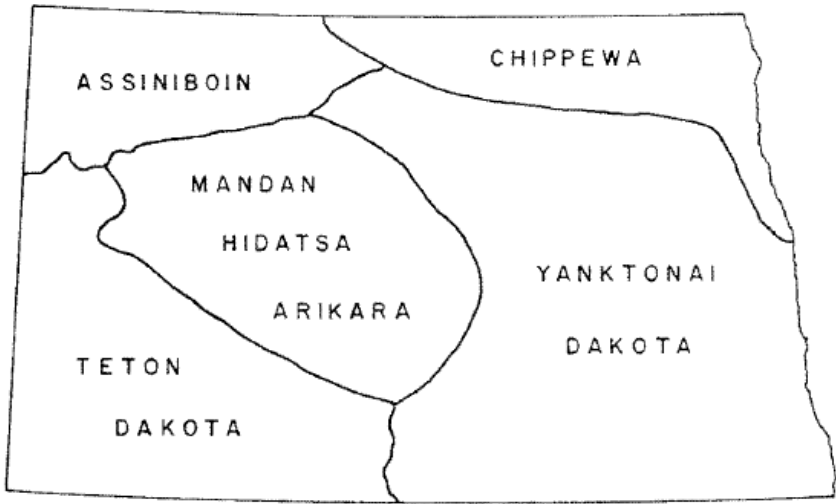
made their principal home in North Dakota. They merely visited the region, or perhaps left a remnant of the tribe there.

Sometime in the seventeenth century, the Hidatsas, driven out by the Chippewas or Dakotas, moved from their old home in western Minnesota and northeastern North Dakota to the Missouri River. There some of them settled near the Mandans, built earth-lodge villages at the mouth of the Knife River and at Painted Woods, and learned river-bottom agriculture from their new neighbors. They became close allies of the Mandans—both were Siouan-speaking peoples—and the two tribes held the country on both sides of the Missouri roughly from the mouth of the Cannonball to the Little Missouri. But one band of Hidatsas, although they had a large earth-lodge village on the north bank of the Knife and raised corn, generally lived as wandering hunters, ranging about the Missouri above the Knife and in the Mouse River country and the Turtle Mountains.



INDIAN TRIBES IN 1750





INDIAN TRIBES IN 1850

The Crows, a closely related people, had moved to the Missouri with the Hidatsas, but quarreled with them over the division of some game and went farther west. They settled in eastern Montana, became buffalo-hunting nomads, and roved the western portion of North Dakota.

The Cheyennes, an Algonquian-speaking people, also moved west and changed their culture. They were living by means of agriculture and hunting in south-central Minnesota in the seventeenth century when the Chippewas and Dakotas, armed through trade with the French, pushed them out. One band of Cheyennes built an earth-lodge village of some seventy lodges, protected by a ditch, about twelve miles southeast of Lisbon, North Dakota, on the Sheyenne River. There they made pottery, farmed with bison-scapula hoes, fished in the Sheyenne, and hunted buffalo and other game. They had both dogs and horses and traded for white goods through Indian middlemen. Their culture was much like that of the Mandans, with whom they were doubtless in contact, but they differed from their Missouri River neighbors in their northeastern type of pottery, their use of birch bark, and their shell knives. About 1770 (the date is quite uncertain) the Chippewas attacked and burned the village. Some of the Cheyennes were already living in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and by 1800 the rest of the tribe had moved there. They soon became typical nomadic buffalo hunters without pottery, gardens, or earth-lodges.

In the seventeenth century two Dakota tribes (more commonly called Sioux-Chippewa for "lesser enemies") were driven out of Minnesota by the Chippewas. In 1642 the Yanktonai and Teton Dakotas were living in the Minnesota woods, probably in villages of bark houses. Later they moved west, but few crossed the Missouri River before 1750. Eventually the Tetons (from *Títowàna*, meaning "dwellers on the prairies") made their home in the country west of the Missouri from the Platte in northern Nebraska to the Cannonball in North Dakota. The Yanktonai Dakotas, moving west from Mille Lacs about 1700, made their home on the headwaters of the Big Sioux, James, and Red rivers, that is, on the Drift Prairie of North and South

Dakota. The warlike temper of the Dakotas constantly menaced the other tribes, restricted their hunting, and forced them out of their homes.

Close relatives of the Yanktonai Dakotas, the Assiniboins broke off with them before 1640. The name is Algonquian for "stone people," meaning people who cooked by boiling

water with hot stones. The Assiniboinns called themselves *Nakota*, a dialect form of *Dakota*. Their tradition holds that they broke with the Yanktonais while living on the Upper Mississippi and then moved north to join the Crees. In 1658 they were living between Lake Superior and Hudson Bay, but before 1738 they had moved west and were living at least part of the time in northern North Dakota as well as west of Lake Winnipeg and on the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan rivers. A large tribe, the Assiniboinns had both forest and prairie bands.

The Siouan-speaking Assiniboinns intermarried with their allies the Crees, a large tribe of the Algonquian linguistic family. The Crees lived in Manitoba between the Red and Saskatchewan rivers but ranged down to Hudson Bay. Their hunting grounds touched only the northeastern corner of North Dakota. Though forest Indians, they were attracted by the buffalo herds of the Plains and assimilated the Plains culture from the Assiniboinns. As with the forest and prairie bands of the Assiniboinns, there came to be both Crees of the Woods, expert canoemen, and Crees of the Plains.

The Crees passed the Plains culture on to some of the Chippewas, also a tribe of the Algonquian linguistic family. The Chippewas, or Ojibways, as they were also called, one of the largest tribes north of Mexico, were living on both shores of Lake Huron and Lake Superior and at Sault Ste Marie when the French Jesuits first visited them in 1642. By the end of the eighteenth century the westernmost band, the latest Indians to enter the North Dakota grassland from the east, was moving out of the Minnesota woods onto the Great Plains in northeastern North Dakota and southern Manitoba near Pembina. The Plains Chippewas, or Plains Ojibways, became a distinct tribe and later moved on to the Turtle Mountains, to northeastern Montana, and to eastern Saskatchewan.

About the same time, the Arikaras, often called the Rees, were approaching North Dakota by coming up the Missouri River from Nebraska. This tribe belonged to the Caddoan linguistic family and was closely related to the Pawnees, the oldest Nebraska tribe. They planted corn and made pottery. Corn rites were prominent in their ceremonies, and in sign language they were the "corn eaters"—fingers simulated the gnawing of kernels from a cob. They had horses in 1738. In

1770, French traders found them on the Missouri River below the Cheyenne River in central South Dakota. In 1804 they had three earth-lodge villages between the Grand and Cannonball rivers, where they tended their gardens and hunted buffalo. Like the Mandans, whose culture was much the same, they bartered corn with the Cheyennes and other tribes for buffalo robes and meat.

Life in the earth-lodge villages of agricultural tribes such as the Arikaras and Mandans was influenced by the vast grassland, with its herds of buffalo, especially after the Indians acquired horses. Thus when the Chippewas, Cheyennes, Dakotas, and other tribes moved from the forest to the open plain, they faced the necessity of changing their way of life. In the forest, they were expert canoemen, ate fish and wild rice, built bark-covered wigwams, boiled maple sap into sugar, wore soft-soled moccasins, and used long bows. These customs were well suited to the forest and lake country of Minnesota, but the grassland was far different; there the forest people had to adjust to an entirely different environment.

They did so quickly. In their new home they rode horses, ate buffalo meat and tipsin roots, slept in skin tipis, made sugar from box-elder sap, wore hard-soled moccasins, and hunted with short bows. Horses gave them mobility and enabled them to follow the migrating buffalo. Tipis afforded ideal shelter for a wandering people. Horsemen could handle short bows more easily. Soft-soled moccasins were good for silent stalking in the forest, but hard-soled ones protected the feet from cactus needles and sharp stones, and silence was of little value on the open plain.

Even the social organization and religion of the tribes changed with their migration. The Chippewas who came to the Plains abandoned the Grand Medicine Society and took over the Sun Dance, a ceremony to call the buffalo. Forest villages with bark wigwams scattered at random gave way to organized camp circles of skin tipis. Large numbers cooperated in travel, in the organization of the camp, and in the buffalo hunt.

The cultural differences of the closely related Dakota tribes (Santees, Yanktonais, and Tetons) living in different environments reveal the changes made by those who moved

west. The Santee Dakotas still lived in the woods of central and southern Minnesota, with the western-most Santees coming into the southern Red River Valley. After their migration, the Yanktonai Dakotas lived on the Drift Prairie east of the Missouri. The Teton Dakotas found a new home on the Missouri Plateau west of the river.

Location influenced their cultures. For shelter, the Santees built large gable-roofed bark houses or small cattail-mat or bark wigwams. The Yanktonais had skin tipis or skin-covered wickiups. The Tetons used skin tipis. The Santees ate mostly venison, fish, wild rice, and maple sugar. The Yanktonais did some fishing, but not so much as the Santees; they planted river-bottom gardens (corn, beans, and squash) and went on two buffalo hunts each year. The Tetons, on the other hand, despised fish as unclean food, rarely had gardens, and depended mainly on the buffalo for food. The Santees wore soft-soled moccasins, the Yanktonais and Tetons hard-soled ones. The Santees chose leaders more for their kinship and clan ties than for their personal ability. The Tetons had no clans and chose their leaders only for ability; even captured enemies might become chiefs. The Santees and Yanktonais made pottery, but the Tetons made none. Plainly, the Yanktonais, like the soils and grasses of the Drift Prairie where they lived, occupied a middle ground between their Dakota kinsmen of humid, forested Minnesota and those of the dry, short-grass Missouri Plateau.<sup>7</sup>

Fundamentally, however, life on the Plains depended upon the acquisition of horses. Only with horses could the tribesmen conquer the vast distances, run down the herds, and lead the wandering life of the true buffalo hunters. Plains culture meant a horse culture; Plains Indians were horse Indians. This was a perfect adaptation to the environment, for buffalo were the great wealth of the grassland. Horses allowed the Plains Indians to take that wealth easily, and they became rich.

None of the western tribes had horses until they began to get them from Spanish outposts in New Mexico, probably after 1650. Horses spread slowly northward from tribe to tribe, and before the end of the eighteenth century, even the Indians of the

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<sup>7</sup> James H. Howard, "The Cultural Position of the Dakota: A Reassessment" (Unpublished MS lent by author, 1958); John Hesketh, "[History of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), V (1923), 89-100.

Northern Plains had them. The Tetons, Crows, and Cheyennes, typical Great Plains tribes, possessed large herds of horses. The Hidatsas, Arikaras, Mandans, Assiniboin, and Plains Chippewas did not have nearly so many.

## **LA VÉRENDRYE'S VISIT**

The earliest written record of North Dakota Indians was made by Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, the first white man to visit the future state. A hardy, courageous man, La Vérendrye had grown up at Three Rivers, Quebec, entered the army at the age of twelve, and fought for France in bloody raids on the New England frontier and in major battles in Europe, where, as a lieutenant in the Régiment de Bretagne, he suffered many wounds. Returning to Canada, he entered the fur trade and eventually took charge of the post on Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior on the outer edge of New France. At that time there was much talk of finding an overland route to the Western Sea. At Lake Nipigon, La Vérendrye heard about a great river flowing westward. After the Indian Auchagah drew a map of the waterways leading west from Lake Superior, La Vérendrye devised a plan for exploration through the lands of the friendly Crees and Assiniboin. The king of France gave him a monopoly of the fur trade in the new country, the profits of which were to support western exploration. La Vérendrye formed a partnership with some Montreal merchants and started west in 1731 with a party which included three of his sons and his nephew. During the next few years they built a line of forts on the canoe route from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg and the Red River of the North. It was dangerous work: his nephew died, and a son and others were killed by the Dakotas.

But La Vérendrye, still fascinated at fifty-three by the wilderness and determined to go as far west as he could, visited the Mandans in the fall of 1738. He had long been hearing about them from the Crees and Assiniboin, and he wanted to learn more about the westward-flowing river. Late in September he found ten wigwams of Crees at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, a favorite Indian camping ground and now the site of Winnipeg. La Vérendrye's men built Fort Rouge there that fall. The Crees were in the habit of going every year to trade with the English at York Factory on Hudson Bay. When La Vérendrye

rebuked them for this, they promised to trade with the French. The Crees, however, tried to discourage him from going up the Assiniboine River, saying that the Assiniboinis, their close friends and allies, were people without intelligence who did not know how to hunt beaver (every tribe wanted to keep the white traders from their neighbors; then they might profit as middlemen).

La Vérendrye pushed up the river and soon fell in with bands of Assiniboinis. They told him to stop where a portage started across the prairies to Lake Manitoba (probably present-day Portage la Prairie) on the road to the English at Hudson Bay. Many people would pass this way, they said. Here La Vérendrye built Fort La Reine. When he gave the Assiniboinis presents of powder, ball, tobacco, axes, knives, hatchets, and awls, they burst into tears of joy. La Vérendrye adopted them as children of the French governor, urged them to hunt beaver, and asked them to stay at peace with their neighbors his standard routine with each new band.

Then, on October 18, 1738, leaving a garrison of thirteen men at Fort La Reine, he set off across the prairies for the Mandans. He had a party of fifty-two, about half Indians and half whites. On the way they met a large band of Assiniboinis, who accompanied them to the Mandans. The combined party, probably numbering more than a thousand, moved slowly south, hunting as it went. The Assiniboinis wanted a good supply of fat to eat with Mandan corn, for the Mandans had "for the most part neither meat nor fat," or so the Assiniboinis told La Vérendrye.

The Assiniboinis moved in good order and in three columns, with scouts in front and on the flanks and a rear guard to avoid surprise. When buffalo were sighted, a cry was raised, and all of the most active men hurried forward to surround the herd and kill what they could. These Indians had no horses, and on the march, La Vérendrye noticed that "the women and dogs carried all the baggage." Often the dogs were loaded with firewood, for clumps of trees were found only at intervals. "Every day they talked to us," La Vérendrye wrote in his journal, "about the whites we were going to see, Frenchmen like our-selves, who said that they were descended from us." They seemed on the verge of a great discovery. Guided by the Indians, the party followed a wandering route

and traveled, La Vérendrye thought, nearly twice the distance which would have been necessary. At last, after forty-six days, they came to a Mandan earth-lodge village on December 3, 1738.

The village was probably the one whose ruins can now be seen on Apple Creek at Menoken, about thirteen miles east of Bismarck. For many years there was controversy about both the tribe and the location of the village visited by La Vérendrye. Professor Orin G. Libby of the University of North Dakota, an authority on the early history of the state, believed that La Vérendrye came to a Hidatsa village near Sanish. George F. Will, also an authority on early North Dakota history, argued that La Vérendrye must have visited a Mandan village near Bismarck. The discovery of the village site at Menoken in 1936 seems to uphold Will because it fits much of the description in La Vérendrye's journal.<sup>8</sup>

As La Vérendrye's party approached the village, which was still several days' journey away, some of the Mandans came out to greet them. To La Vérendrye's surprise, they did not differ much from the Assiniboins "being naked except for a garment of buffalo skin carelessly worn without any breechcloth." A Mandan chief, speaking Assiniboin, welcomed La Vérendrye with expressions of great joy and begged him to stay at his village—the smallest of six and the only one at some distance from the Missouri River. When they arrived, the Mandans carried La Vérendrye into the village and begged to be made his children. He fulfilled their request by putting his hands on the head of each chief. meanwhile, La Vérendrye's son visited the closest village on the Missouri and was cordially received.

The village in which La Vérendrye himself stayed had 130 lodges and was surrounded by a palisade and a deep ditch. He set down in his journal an interesting description of the people and their way of life:

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<sup>8</sup> Orin G. Libby, "[Some Vérendrye Enigmas](#)," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, III (September 1916), 143-60; George F. Will, "[A Criticism of 'Some Vérendrye Enigmas'](#)," *American Anthropologist*, XIX (April-June 1917), 291-297; Russell Reid, "Vérendrye's Journey to North Dakota in 1738," *North Dakota History*, XXXII (April 1965), 117-129.



This tribe is mixed white and black. The women are fairly good looking, especially the light colored ones; many of them have blond or fair hair. Both the men and the women of this tribe are very industrious. Their lodges are large and spacious, and are separated into several apartments by broad planks. Nothing is left lying about, for all their belongings are kept in large bags which are hung on posts. Their beds are made like tombs, surrounded by skins. All go to bed naked, men and women. The men are always naked and for covering they use buffalo robes. Most of the women go naked like the men, with this difference, that they wear a loin cloth about a hand breadth wide and a span long, sewed to a girdle in front.... Their fort has a great number of caches in which are stored such things as corn, meat, fat, dressed buffalo robes and bearskins.... They make wicker work very skillfully, both flat and in the form of baskets. They use earthen pots for cooking their food which they manufacture like many other tribes. They are for the most part great eaters and they are extremely fond of feasting.... The men are of good size and tall, very alert and for the most part good looking. They have fine features and are very affable. Most of the women do not have the Indian features. The men take part in a sort of ball play in the open places.<sup>9</sup>

La Vérendrye saw how the Mandans bartered with the Assiniboins, trading the latter corn, tobacco, painted buffalo robes, and well-tanned and decorated deerskins for muskets, axes, kettles, powder, bullets, knives, and awls. These articles the Assiniboins bought from the English on Hudson Bay. The Assiniboins apparently began to go there in the 1680's, acting as middlemen for tribes to the south of them. Whatever the date, La Vérendrye's 1738 account is the earliest record of white trade goods in North Dakota.

After a ten-day visit, La Vérendrye, though ill, walked back across the prairies to Fort La Reine, a desperate undertaking

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<sup>9</sup> Henry E. Haxo, "The Journal of La Vérendrye," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, VIII (July 1941), 263.

in the dead of winter from December 13 to February 10. "Never in my life have I experienced so much misery, pain and fatigue as on that journey," he wrote. In April, 1742, he sent two sons, Louis-Joseph the Chevalier and François, to search again for the western Sea. From Fort La Reine they went to the Mandans and then visited other tribes to the southwest. It is impossible to trace their course from their journal, but they probably did not go beyond the Black Hills. Near present-day Fort Pierre they buried an inscribed lead plate, which was found by some school children on February 16, 1913.

Although La Vérendrye failed to find a route to the Western Sea and withdrew from exploration in 1744, he and his sons were the first white men to see Manitoba, the Dakotas, and possibly Montana. They were also the first to move on the waters of the Red and Assiniboine rivers and to see long stretches of the Upper Missouri. One son built the first forts on Lake Winnipegosis and the Saskatchewan River.

### WHITE IMPACT: HORSES AND SMALLPOX

For about half a century after the visits of the La Vérendryes, no white men came to North Dakota. But during this time, two things from the whites greatly influenced the Indians of the region: horses, which gave them new freedom and power, and smallpox, which cut them down. Horses opened "a new world," so the Hidatsa legend ran, to the Missouri River tribes. In summer, the range of daily hunting parties increased, and instead of nibbling at the buffalo herds, they began to take deep bites from them. Almost the whole village could move out onto the prairies for the summer hunt, so the earth-lodge dwellers began to use tipis on their hunting trips. The surround replaced the corral, and game pits were used less.

Horses gave wandering tribesmen an advantage over sedentary agriculturists, both in hunting and in war, and made the Plains Indian more nomadic and so more addicted to warfare. Unimpeded by growing crops, he was ever prepared for war, ever ready to move. Moreover, the nomadic tribes suffered less during smallpox epidemics than the sedentary Indians. In 1782 (some sources say 1786), smallpox ravaged all

of the tribes on the Northern Plains. A large number of the Mandans and Hidatsas died. During the epidemic the Dakotas attacked two Mandan villages (Slant Village in present-day Fort Abraham State Park and Double-Ditch Village, now a state park, a few miles north of Bismarck), burned them, killed many of the inhabitants, and made others prisoners.

After the epidemic had run its course, the surviving Mandans abandoned the region about the mouth of Heart River. They united under the leadership of Good Boy and moved up the Missouri River, first to the Lake Mandan–Painted Woods region and then, in the 1790's, to the mouth of Knife River (present-day Stanton). Six large Mandan villages had been reduced to two small ones, and there were also two Hidatsa villages and one village made up of both Mandan and Hidatsa families at the mouth of the Knife. The place had been the home of two of the three bands of Hidatsas since they came to the Upper Missouri country, but not until after the 1782 epidemic did the nomadic Hidatsas, who generally ranged north of the Knife, come to live permanently in the large Hidatsa village on the north bank of the river.

The epidemic and the Dakotas had wiped out about three-fourths of the Mandans and half the Hidatsas. In 1794, David Thompson estimated the population of the two tribes at 1,520 Mandans and 1,330 Hidatsas. When Lewis and Clark visited the Knife River villages in 1804, they estimated that there were 1,250 Mandans and 2,700 Hidatsas. This brief contact with a white man's disease had raised much havoc among the Northern Plains Indians, but the worst was yet to come.