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THE ASSINIBOIN

THREE centuries ago the seven divisions of the Dakota were dwelling in the region between the headwaters of the Mississippi and the western end of Lake Superior. About the time of the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers, a band of the Yanktonai, deserting their tribesmen in anger, says tradition, over wrong done to their chief's wife, moved away to the north and east, until, after indefinite wandering, they established a temporary home on the shores of a wooded lake. Thus was born the Assiniboin tribe, first mentioned as distinct from the Dakota by the Jesuit Relation of 1640, and located by the Relation of 1658 on "Lake Alimibeg," later identified as either Rainy lake on the northern boundary of the present State of Minnesota, or else Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior in the direction of Hudson bay.

Into this territory the Assiniboin were received hospitably by the powerful Cree, and became, as their new-found friends long had been, bitter enemies to the Dakota. Drifting westward, by 1670 they had reached Lake Winnipeg, where, with the aid of their allies, they dispossessed the Blackfeet and established themselves on its shores and along the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine rivers. Here among the inlets of the lake and on the never-ending stretches of river they became so expert in the use of birchbark canoes that one band received the appellation "Paddlers."

Gradually they separated, the two divisions becoming so distinct by 1744 as to be noted under different names. One band continued to hold the valleys of the two northern streams, and became known as Stonies, while the other pressed southward to the Missouri, ranging east and then south along its course as far as Apple creek. There they were checked by the oncoming Yanktonai, their brothers of generations before, by whom they were forced back to the north.

In common with other tribes of the Missouri the Assiniboin fell prey to the scourge of the smallpox, which in 1838 spread to their camp, at that time in the country to the east of Fort Buford, North Dakota. Fully one-half of the occupants of their four hundred tipis succumbed. On the upper Missouri they continued to make their home, sending war-parties westward as far as the Blackfeet and Apsaroke, and southward against Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Yanktonai, and Teton, and harassed in turn by the constant attacks of their enemies, more particularly of

the Teton. For the Assiniboin were not so formidable as were many other tribes hostile to the Teton, and their camps became a favorite objective of young warriors ambitious for the honors of war.

Neither physically nor mentally do the Assiniboin appear to be the equal of the Dakota.

Thunder and Sun received the deepest veneration, and of course each individual paid devotion also to his own medicine, his tutelary spirit, which might be that of an animal or of an inanimate natural object. Besides the two great mysterious beings there was *Anú^{n}k-ite,* Double Face, vaguely described as a spirit which appeared to devotees in the Sun Dance and told them he was searching for those who did not make sacrifice to him. He was quickly appeased by offerings of bits of flesh cut from the arms or the tips of fingers. Double Face came also to members of war-parties, and though his two faces were exactly similar, his voices were unlike, and by this difference warriors were enabled to know whether success or failure awaited them.

Chief among the Assiniboin religious practices was *Watíchaghe,* Make A Home, a name probably referring to the nest built for the Thunderbird. The ceremony was allied to the Sun Dance of other tribes, but is perhaps not properly called a sun-rite, since Thunder, not Sun, was the being principally invoked. Whatever man in the course of a year first dreamed of the ceremony gave public notice of his vision, and when the sun had about attained its most southerly point, he called into a tipi certain noted warriors, whose compassion and aid he implored as he cried and laid his hand on their heads. These men the next day went into the woods for the sacred tree, which was brought in the same day and erected as the central supporting post of a lodge made of a framework of poles covered with skins. This Mystery Tree was about thirty feet high to the fork, in which was lashed a bundle of sticks, the Thunder Nest. In the soft bark near the top were carved figures of Thunderbird, a flash of lightning, and Double Face. At sunset of this second day began the dancing, which continued until the same time of the fourth day, women, who sometimes participated but never were pierced, dancing in the west quadrant of the lodge and the men in the other three quarters.

Inside the circle of the other participants they danced until to each had appeared the spirit to whom the vow had been given. This was not so frequently the Sun as it was the Thunder. Then if they had not previously torn themselves free, the ropes were thrown off.

The rites of the Ghost Keeper were performed in almost identically the same manner as among the Teton, and a Foster-parent Chant, obtained from the Mandan and Hidatsa during a friendly visit to their village,[1] was practised under the name *Cha*^{n}*nó*^{n}*p-kozap,* Wave The Pipes.

Medicine-men received their power from spirit sources through the medium of visions, and in their practices made use of songs, plants of *waká*^{n} strength, and jugglery, such as sucking the disease out through the affected part. Many herb-medicines and their appropriate songs were bought from the Cree. Of Algonquian origin also was *Wogíchihichapi,* They Awaken One Another, the medicine ceremony of a society which included both men and women. When a sick person was to be treated, a long tipi was set up, and the members, each carrying the *waká*^{n} skin of some animal, sat in two rows along its sides, singing, and making motions as if to throw the skins at the patient. At a climax in songs and motions he fell in a swoon, from which he was revived by piling the skins upon his body, thus drawing out both the powerful medicine and the illness. Another heritage from their long association with the Cree was the practices of the *Waécho*^{n}*sa,* who for a price would engage to bring disease or death upon the enemy of him who sought their service. Their power was obtained through dreams, which must be kept secret, and whose commands it was essential to obey implicitly. The *Waécho*^{n}*sa* in his conjurations made an image of birchbark, or, after the forest country had been abandoned, of rawhide, punched four holes through the vital parts, and buried it in a freshly raised mound on a hilltop. These things were of course done secretly. No man dared openly avow himself *Waécho*^{n}*sa,* for tribal sentiment would have cost him his life; but he could be known to the few for whom he practised his magic, and through them by rumor to the tribe, without causing malevolent designs against him. For a similar reason any organization they may have effected — and the Assiniboin of the present day declare they were organized — was necessarily secret.

Previous to the outbreak of smallpox among them in 1838 the Assiniboin population was variously estimated to be from six thousand to ten thousand. In 1907 there were 1217 Assiniboin in the United States: 656 at Fort Belknap agency, Montana, and 561 at Fort Peck agency, Montana. The various small bands of the tribe in Canada

[1] As Mandan and Hidatsa use Arikara words in the songs of this ceremony, the Assiniboin, having borrowed it from those tribes, do likewise.

aggregate 873.

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