



Mato-Tope, the Four Bears, Mandan second chief, was painted by George Catlin in 1834, on the banks of the Missouri River. Though the Mandan were farmers, they ventured out on the High Plains to hunt buffalo.

HISTORIC BASIS OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS CULTURE

John C. Ewers

The Northern Plains—that vast grassland extending from the Mississippi and Red Rivers westward to the Rocky Mountains, and from the valley of the Saskatchewan River in Canada southward to the Platte in Nebraska and Wyoming—is the home of a score of Indian tribes—the Algonquian-speaking Arapaho, Cheyenne, Gros Ventres, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibwa, and the three Blackfoot tribes; the Siouan-speaking Assiniboine, Crow, Hidatsam Mandan, and the seven divisions of the Dakota or Sioux; the Caddoan-speaking Arikara, and the small Athapascan-speaking tribe of Sarsi.

No other Indians are more widely known than are those of this region. They and their deeds as big game hunters, warriors, and horsemen have been most frequently portrayed in the paintings of George Catlin, Frederic Remington, and Charles M. Russell;

John C. Ewers is the Senior Ethnologist, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution.

in Wild West Shows from the days of Buffalo Bill to current TV dramas, and in countless books and articles of fact and of fiction. Consequently, millions of non-Indians in this country and abroad tend to think of Indians in terms of the hard-riding, feather-bonneted warriors of the Northern Plains.

Actually, the Indian hunter and warrior on horseback lived for a relatively brief period on the Northern Plains. Little more than a century passed between these Indians' acquisition of European horses from the south and the extermination of the buffalo herds. For thousands of years prior to that period the Indians of this region had boldly hunted the big, shaggy buffalo on foot. Several centuries before Columbus some tribes began to build semi-permanent, fortified villages of earthlodges on the Missouri in the Dakotas and to raise crops of corn, beans, and squash in the alluvial soils of the river bottoms.

As early as 1783 a French trader-explorer accompanied a dog train of Assiniboine overland to the Mandan village on the Missouri. He found there a lively trade center where the villagers exchanged their agricultural produce for meat, hides, and leather products offered by nomadic tribes. Already some European guns and metal utensils reached the villagers through Cree and Assiniboine intermediaries who obtained these articles from white traders farther northeast. By the 1740's a few horses reached the villagers through nomadic tribesmen from the southwest.

After the nomadic tribes of this region obtained horses they gained ascendancy over the agrarian groups. The Mandan were more than decimated by smallpox in 1837. Meanwhile, white traders built posts near the nomadic tribes who became the major suppliers of furs and buffalo hides. On horseback they could kill large numbers of buffalo. With horses they could move camp more easily. It was during the post-horse period that the nomadic tribes came to occupy the hunting grounds they later relinquished in their 19th-century treaties with the United States.

It was on the plains of Montana that the last of the great buffalo herds were destroyed. Some of the most powerful tribes fought valiantly to preserve their hunting grounds against white intrusion. The Indian Wars of the Northern Plains provided some of the most bitter fighting between the U.S. Cavalry and the Indians, and the most dramatic action in the history of American warfare.