

Village Life

IN THE UPPER MISSOURI RIVER VALLEY, c. 1740–1845

Overview

This lesson idea teaches units on pre-Columbian North America and the westward movement in the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States.

Objectives

Students will

- describe village life of the Hidatsa and Mandan groups during the peak of their cultures in the early 19th century
- explain how villagers shaped their environment and adapted to it
- discover American Indian groups that lived in the student's own region
- explore how local groups were similar and dissimilar to Hidatsa and Mandan people
- distinguish between primary and secondary sources

Subjects/Skills

- history, geography, social science, art
- research, observation, analysis, interpretation

Age Level

Grades 7–12

Materials

- textbooks on local native groups
- primary source documents on local native groups
- historical and/or environmental atlases
- student handout (see p. 9)

Time Required

Allow two hours to prepare for the lesson plan and two classes to present it. Optional: allow one class period for a complementary trip to a museum.

Vocabulary

earthlodge—a circular, earth-covered wooden house or public building. The interior usually was dug one foot below ground surface. The exterior wall was formed by a ring of poles covered first by brush and then by earth. Four central posts supported rafters and a roof, which had a central smoke hole. The lodge was entered by a ladder through the smoke hole or through a tunnel-like passage built into the outer wall.

palisade—a fence or fortified wall, often constructed of pointed stakes or tree trunks; also, a line of steep cliffs, usually along a river.

primary source—a source contemporary to an event, person, or time period such as a document, artifact, or structure.

secondary source—a source based on studies or interpretations of events, persons, primary sources, or time periods.

sinew—tough, fibrous tissue (a tendon) that was processed by Native Americans and used for binding, sewing, and other purposes.

Preparation

1. Ensure that student textbooks offer secondary source material worthy of comparison to the primary source documents. If necessary, locate additional secondary source material.

2. If adapting this lesson to a local area, consult archival or other sources to obtain primary source descriptions of native life. Make copies of these primary sources.

3. *Optional:* Arrange a visit to a local museum that offers information about local Native American populations.

Procedure

1. Ask students to read the student handout about village life from circa

1740 to 1845, when fur traders, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and other European Americans visited the Knife River site.

2. Lead a discussion using the following questions as guides:

- What natural conditions of the Upper Missouri River Valley did the village Indians use to their advantage?
- These village Indians had a governmental structure quite different from those we know today. What elements of their political system fostered a well-ordered society?
- The reading states that gender roles were clearly defined. What evidence is presented?
- How did the villagers make their living?

3. Ask students to compare what they have learned in this reading to information in an American history textbook that describes prehistoric cliff dwellings, mound cultures, or other sites illustrating early life in the Americas. Have them construct an organizer chart to outline differences and similarities. Follow this exercise up with a discussion of the validity and usefulness of primary and secondary sources.

4. Assign a research project in which students investigate Indians who lived in the local region. Identify specific questions to be answered; for example, were they more like cliff dwellers than Hidatsa villagers? Were they engaged in early trade?

5. If possible, take the students to a local museum that displays prehistoric artifacts from the region.

6. Conclude the lesson with a class discussion about why the cultures that have been studied might differ (for example, environment, available resources, proximity to the ocean or other groups). Ask students to evaluate the success of these cultures in adapting to each unique environment.

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A Way of Life

The Mandan (man-dan), Hidatsa (hi-daht-sa), and Arikara (ah-ree-ca-ra) tribes shared a culture superbly adapted to the conditions of the Upper Missouri River Valley.

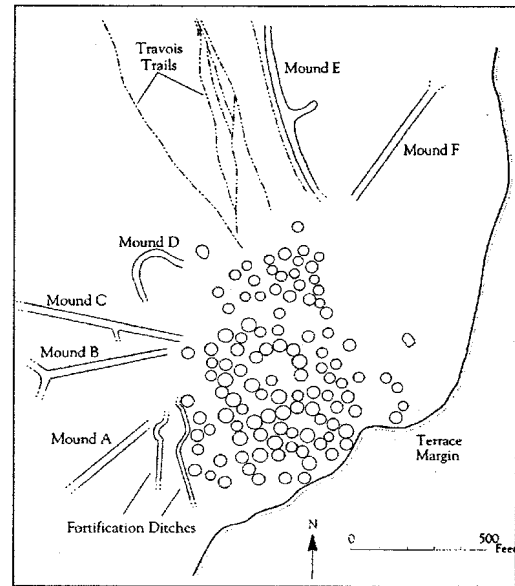
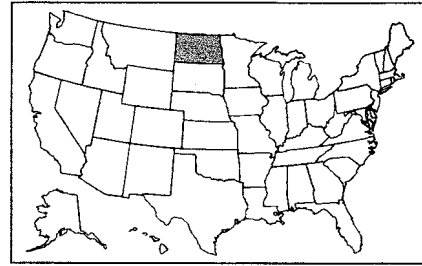
Their summer villages, located on natural terraces above the river, were ordered communities with as many as 120 earthlodges, each sheltering an extended family of 10 to 30 people from the region's extreme temperatures. These summer villages were strategically located for defense, often on a narrow bluff with water on two sides and a palisade on the third. In winter the inhabitants moved into smaller lodges along the bottomlands, where trees provided firewood and protection from the cold wind. The climate was harsh, with recorded winter temperatures as low as 45 below zero.

In this village society, men lived in their wives' households, bringing only their clothes, horses, and weapons. Women built, owned, and maintained the lodges and owned the gardens, gardening tools, food, dogs, and horses. Related lodge families from numerous villages made up clans, whose members were expected to help and guide each other, but who were forbidden to marry other clan members. Clans were competitive, especially in war, but it was the age-grade societies, transcending village and clan, that were looked to for personal prestige. Young men purchased membership in the lowest society at 12 or 13 years of age, progressing to higher and more expensive levels as they reached the proper age. Besides serving as warrior bands, each group was responsible for a social function: policing the village, scouting, or planing the hunt. Most important, the age-grade societies were a means of social control, setting standards of behavior and transmitting tribal lore and custom.

The roles of men and women were strictly defined. Men spent time seeking spiritual knowledge, hunting, and horse raiding—all difficult and dangerous but relatively infrequent undertakings. Women performed virtually all routine work: gardening, preparing food, maintaining lodges, and, until the tribes obtained horses, carrying burdens. However, the lives of these people were not totally devoted to subsistence. They made time for play. Honored storytellers passed on oral traditions and moral lessons, focusing on traditional tribal values of respect, humility, and strength. The open area in the center of each village often was used for dancing and rituals, which bonded the members of the tribe and reaffirmed their place in the world.

The Village Economy

Agriculture was the economic foundation of the Knife River people, who harvested much of their food from rich flood-plain gardens. Land, which was controlled by women, passed through the female line, and the number of women



Big Hidatsa Village and location map

who could work determined the size of each family's plot. They raised squash, pumpkins, beans, sunflowers, and, most important, tough, quick-maturing varieties of corn that thrived in the meager rainfall and short growing season of the Knife River area. Summer's first corn was celebrated in the Green Corn ceremony, a lively dance followed by a feast of corn. Berries, roots, and fish supplemented their diet, while hunting provided buffalo meat, hides, bones, and sinew.

These proficient farmers traded surplus produce to nomadic tribes for buffalo hides, deer skins, dried meat, and other items in short supply. At the junction of major trade routes, they became brokers, dealing in goods within a vast trade network: obsidian from Wyoming, copper from the Great Lakes, shells from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Northwest, and, after the 17th century, guns, horses, and metal objects.

There is little archaeological evidence for the garden produce, hides, and other perishable items traded in prehistoric times. Some of the best evidence for this trade is in the stone used to make everyday tools and implements. The high-quality Knife River flint quarried locally found its way to tribes spread over a large part of the continent through this trading system. This flint is a dark brown, glassy material, in high demand for producing durable, sharp-edged implements.

Maps were adapted from Stanley A. Ahler, Thomas D. Thiessen, and Michael K. Trimble, People of the Willows: The Prehistory and Early History of the Hidatsa Indians (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1991).