

First Peoples of the Plains: Traditions Shaped by Land & Sky



University of Nebraska State Museum
3rd Floor Morrill Hall
University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Powwows of the First Peoples

Powwows are synonymous with Native Americans of the Great Plains. Rhythmic dances, colorful regalia, pulsing drums, distinctive songs, and pageantry all come to mind. Yet, the powwows of today reflect subtle blends of past and present traditions. The modern powwow has become a very important ceremony that includes singing, dancing, feasting, giveaways, and honorings.

The term "powwow" was perhaps derived from the Algonquian word *powwa* that refers to a "gathering of the people." A number of men's warriors societies organized dances known variously as the *Hakushka*, *Irushka*, *Grass Dance*, or *Wolf Dance*. The *Powwow*, *Omaha*, *Ponca*, and *Teton* and from Sioux borrowed dance steps and songs from one another.

During the late 1800s, however, the U.S. Government banned these gatherings and celebrations as part of their Assimilation Policy. Native Americans were forced to replace traditional sacred dances like the *Sun Dance* and the *Ghost Dance* with intertribal "jingles" and participation in solemn and fast. At the same time, Indian agents encouraged the First Peoples to showcase their "endowment" in order to support tourism and commerce within white society.

Today, the powwow has become a significant part of Native American identity throughout North America. These gatherings renew traditional dances, songs, and stories. They represent traditions including regalia, and food have emerged. The powwow endures as a powerful cultural event, celebrating traditions, expressing tribal identity, and creating connections.





Exhibits in the gallery present a story of persistence and continuity of Native peoples on the Great Plains. They focus upon ancient traditions of childrearing, food getting, shelter, clothing, and transportation, the destruction of traditions by the European immigrants, and the present-day birth and reshaping of traditions or “ways of doing.”

First Peoples of the Plains:

The Story of the First Peoples of the Plains begins with the “land” and the “sky” and all living things in between. The People lived upon and moved across the land in step with the changing seasons. They transformed the natural products of the land into tools, food, clothing, and shelter. Their solutions to the challenges of life on the plains became cultural traditions or “ways of doing things.” These traditions dealt with food, technology, clothing, housing, travel as well as family, children, language, religion, and artistic expression. Both the natural and social world – climate, geology, ecology, and interactions with other human groups – shaped their cultural traditions. What follows is a story about the persistence, as well as the change, of cultural traditions of the First Peoples.

The Land is an immense grassland that formed 6-8 million years ago on the interior of the continent. The Great Plains stretch from Canada to Mexico and parallel the eastern edge of the majestic Rocky Mountains. These lands gradually descend toward the East. Surprisingly, very little of the landscape is actually flat. This inland “sea of grass” was dotted with “islands” of rocky outcrops, sand dunes, wetlands, woodlands, and badlands. The land itself offered up stones for tools, minerals for pigments, and clay for pottery. The land’s dramatic landmarks and sacred places guided the First People as they journeyed from here to there.

Traditions Shaped by Land & Sky



Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library

Photograph © Michael Forsberg

The Sky or climate of the Plains was shaped by atmospheric forces far away in the Pacific, the Arctic, and the Gulf of Mexico. Energy from these distant sources pushed quickly into the “turbulent heartland” to create raging blizzards, violent thunderstorms, and searing droughts. Arctic storms fiercely attacked in winter and brought deadly challenges to all life across the Plains. Lightning-induced grassfires raced across the flattest lands and confined trees and shrubs to rugged slopes and deep stream valleys. In summer, “dust devils” and rain clouds skipped randomly across both land and sky. Violent thunderstorms flooded valleys, created shallow lakes, and sculpted the earth. Frequently, however, life-giving rains never came at all!

Between Land & Sky, we find plants, animals, and human beings. Once the glaciers retreated northward and the Ice Age animals were gone, the Plains were home to herds of modern bison and antelope. Drought, prairie fires, and heavy grazing created and maintained this “inland sea of grass.” The First Peoples did find wild, edible plants throughout the Plains but they not very abundant and they almost always required costly preparation. Consequently, wild animals provided the mainstay of the diet until much later when the First Peoples adopted horticulture.

Today

- Cultural / spiritual revitalization
- Return of the bison
- Self-governance



Historic Tribes

400 years ago – Present

- Europeans arrived, brought disease
- Horses introduced to the Plains
- Bison became nearly extinct



Bison herds were slaughtered to near extinction by settlers.



Plains Villagers

1,100 – 550 years ago

- Farming intensified
- Large villages formed
- Warfare increased



Plains Woodland

2,100 – 1,500 years ago

- People became less nomadic
- First bow and arrows used
- Humans began to plant crops
- First ceramic vessels were made
- Human population grows



Archaic

8,500 – 2,500 years ago

- Hunters used atlatls (spear-throwers)
- People consumed wild plants
- Earliest houses were built



Late Paleoindians

11,000 – 8,500 years ago

- Began hunting *Bison antiquus*
- Used a variety of dart and spear points



Early Paleoindians

25,000 – 11,000 years ago

- Late Glacial Period
- People adapted to living in the cold
- Humans wore tailored animal skin clothing
- Were mobile hunters and scavengers





Above: First Peoples of the Plains Gallery, 3rd Floor Morrill Hall

Left: Changing Lifeways and the Persistence of the First Peoples of the Plains



Photograph by Walter McClintock, Blackfoot

Traditions of the First Peoples related to moving across the vast “oceans of grass” were both old and new. Since the Ice Age, Native Americans relied heavily upon pedestrian or foot travel. Dogs assisted in the transport of material possessions including food. The domesticated horse arrived late on the Plains. Yet, its impact upon the lives of the First Peoples was great.

“It was summer. Berries were turning red on the bushes. Our big village was moving. Long strings of travois and pack-horses were raising dust on the plains.”

Pretty Shield, Crow

Right: Geographical distribution of Native American tribes in the Great Plains circa late 1800s.

Native American Tribal and Language Areas during the Early 1800s.
Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 1. Smithsonian Institution, 2001.





Cradleboard
ca. 1910
Crow



Cradleboards

proved invaluable for the more mobile groups on the Plains. Children could be transported quickly and easily throughout the daily course of mothers' activities. Cradleboards were made by close relatives of the infant's mother and father. When secured in the cradleboard, the infant remained upright and could interact face-to-face with the family.

Cradleboards and swaddling kept the infant safely off the ground and out of harm's way. Swaddling soothes pain, reduces crying, and allows the infant to sleep longer. Cradleboards reduce the risk of suffocation and heat stress. Swaddling may, however, lead to hip joint problems and pneumonia.

Cradleboards were almost essential back in the days when my grandmothers did all of their traveling by horseback. The strap on the back of the cradleboard was hooked over the high horn of the traditional-type woman's saddle. If the mother was doing work around her camp she would hook the strap to some tree branch, where the baby could sleep in the shade."

Beverly Hungry Wolf



Crow mother and child

Traditions guided childrearing on the Great Plains. Children were immediately brought into the activities of everyday life. Traditions were passed on to the children and traditions were the core of their education. Two important traditions of the Plains involved the navel amulet and the cradleboard.

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Beverly Hungry Wolf
The Ways of My Grandmothers



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Don Doll S.J., Gary Farmer (Cayuga),
Michael and Patty Forsberg,
Donel Keeler (Dakota Sioux & Northern Ponca),
Tom Tidball, Howard Wolf (Omaha, deceased),
Ruben Zendejas (Omaha)

Exhibit Contributors:

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This gallery is dedicated to the First Peoples of the Great Plains. Their traditions have sustained them for countless generations. Many of these traditions are rooted in the ancient past. Through time, old traditions have been renewed and new traditions have emerged. These traditions have served the First Peoples well during both times of joy and sorrow. Their story continues today between the land and sky.

Cover photograph by Don Doll, S.J.

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