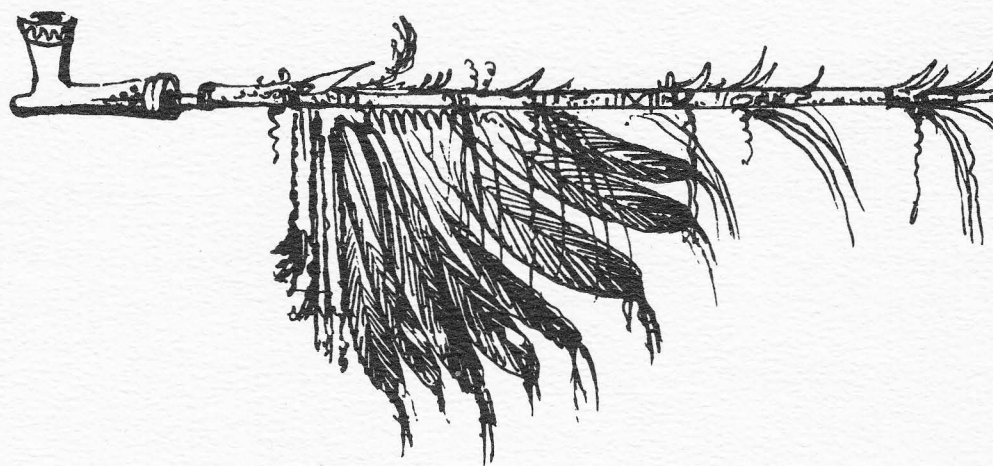


GEORGE CATLIN

Sketching Up The Missouri River
in
1832



American Scene Magazine

INTRODUCTION

George Catlin was one of the first artists to venture into the trans-Mississippi West. Catlin was born at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, July 26, 1796; he died December 23, 1872. As a boy, he was curious about nature and loved to listen to tales of high adventure and the out-of-doors. Thoughts of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys and such names as George Rogers Clarke and Daniel Boone, spelled excitement for young Catlin, yet his strong-willed parents, Puttman and Polly Sutton Catlin ignored their son's artistic leanings, and not only saw that George gained his schooling but encouraged him to study law. Law practice was not for Catlin; he had long since turned painter.

In time, Catlin became a successful painter of portraits, and had done such prominent personages as DeWitt Clinton, Dolly Madison, Sam Houston and many others. Tradition says that it was old Red Jacket, the great Seneca orator and philosopher, who inspired George Catlin to paint Indians.

1832 found him in the West alone, preparing for a journey up the Missouri river to sketch and paint. Mr. Catlin was an eye-witness to history; what he saw he preserved for all mankind.

The Catlin collection in the Thomas Gilcrease Institute consists of seventy-five oils, one hundred and thirty-seven water color paintings and a superb library of letters, broadsides and books. An important collection, yet the item that invariably intrigues the historian and art student is the Institute's unique book of his drawings and sketches. They were quickly executed. The artist may have used them in several ways, substantially, in doing a compilation for his great two-volume set of the *North American Indian* published in 1841. We present this selection simply as "Sketching up the Missouri River in 1832" because it portrays a not-too-well-known side of George Catlin, the manner in which he worked, his ability as both observer and writer and above all, his mind and spirit.

The Editors

This Issue of the American Scene is Dedicated to

WILLIAM S. BAILEY, JR.

Great Friend of Gilcrease Institute and of the George Catlin Collection

American Scene

THE ART AND HISTORY MAGAZINE WITH A PURPOSE

Contents quoted from
George Catlin's writings, notes and sketches in the
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Armed, equipped, and supplied, I started out in the year 1832, and penetrated the vast and pathless wilds which are familiarly denominated the great "Far West" of the North American Continent, with a light heart, inspired with an enthusiastic hope and reliance that I could meet and overcome all the hazards and privations of a life devoted to the production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character of an interesting race of people, who are rapidly passing away from the face of the earth — lending a hand to a dying nation, who have no historians or biographers of their own to pourtray with fidelity their native looks and history; thus snatching from a hasty oblivion what could be saved for the benefit of posterity, and perpetuating it, as a fair and just monument, to the memory of a truly lofty and noble race.

I arrived at this place yesterday in the steamer "Yellow Stone," after a voyage of nearly three months from St. Louis. The greater part of which has never before been navigated by steam.

The American Fur Company have erected here, for their protection against the savages, a very substantial Fort, with bastions armed with ordnance; and our approach to it under the continued roar of cannon for half an hour, and the shrill yells of the half-affrighted savages who lined the shores, presented a scene of the most thrilling and picturesque appearance. A voyage so full of incident, and furnishing so many novel scenes of the picturesque and romantic, as we have passed the numerous villages of the "astonished natives," saluting them with the puffing of steam and the thunder of artillery, would afford subject for many epistles; and I cannot deny myself the pleasure of occasionally giving you some little sketches of scenes that I have witnessed, and am witnessing; and of the singular feelings that are excited in the breast of the stranger travelling through this interesting country.

The Missouri is, perhaps, different in appearance and character from all other rivers in the world; there is a terror in its manner which is sensibly felt, the moment we enter its muddy waters from the Mississippi. From the mouth of the Yellow Stone River, which is the place from whence I am now writing, to its junction with the Mississippi, a distance of 2,000 miles, the Missouri, with its boiling, turbid waters, sweeps off, in one unceasing current; and in the whole distance there is scarcely an eddy or resting-place for a canoe. Owing to the continual falling in of its rich alluvial banks, its water is always turbid and opaque; having, at all seasons of the year, the colour of a cup of chocolate or coffee, with sugar and cream stirred into it.



Four Company's Fort.



Chief of the Blackfoot Tribe



Stu-muck-o-sues.

I have this day been painting a portrait of the head chief of the Blackfoot nation; he is a good-looking and dignified Indian, about fifty years of age, and superbly dressed; whilst sitting for his picture he had been surrounded by his own braves and warriors, and also gazed at by his enemies, the Crows and the Knisteneaux, Assiniboin and Ojibbeways; a number of distinguished personages of each of which tribes, have laid all day around the sides of my room; reciting to each other the battles they have fought, and pointing to the scalp-locks, worn as proofs of their victories, and attached to the seams of their shirts and leggings. This is a curious scene to witness, when one sits in the midst of such inflammable and cumbustible materials, brought together, unarmed, for the first time in their lives; peaceably and calmly recounting over the deeds of their lives, and smoking their pipes upon it, when a few weeks or days will bring them on the plains again, where the war-cry will be raised, and their deadly bows will again be drawn on each other.

The names of this dignitary, of whom I have just spoken, is Stu-mick-o-sucs (the buffalo's back fat), i.e. the "hump" or "fleece," the most delicious part of the buffalo's flesh.

Black Feet Indians



Eeh-nis-kim



Tcha-aes-ka-ding



Ju-ne-o-cose.
Ah kay-ec-pix-en.



Pee-toh-free-kig (Blackfoot)



Wum-nes-lon (Medicine)

The wife (or squaw) of this dignitary Eeh-nis-kim (the crystal stone), I have also placed upon my canvas; her countenance is rather pleasing, which is an uncommon thing amongst the Blackfeet — her dress is made of skins. A boy of six years of age, and too young to have acquired a name, has stood forth like a tried warrior; and I have painted him at full length, with his bow and quiver slung, and his robe made of a racoon skin. The history of this child is somewhat curious and interesting; his father is dead, and in case of the death of the chief of whom I have spoken, he becomes hereditary chief of the tribe. This boy has been twice stolen away by the Crows by ingenious stratagems, and twice re-captured by the Blackfeet, at considerable sacrifice of life.

Ah-key-ee-pix-en, the woman who strikes many in a beautiful dress of the mountain-goat's skin, and her robe of the young buffalo's hide.

Of the Blackfeet, whom I mentioned and whose portraits are now standing in my room, there is another of whom I say a few words; Pe-toh-pee-kiss, the eagle ribs. This man is one of the extraordinary men of the Blackfoot tribe; though not a chief he stands here in the Fort, and deliberately boasts of eight scalps, which he says he has taken from the heads of trappers and traders with his own hand. His dress is really superb, almost literally covered with scalp-locks, of savage and civil.

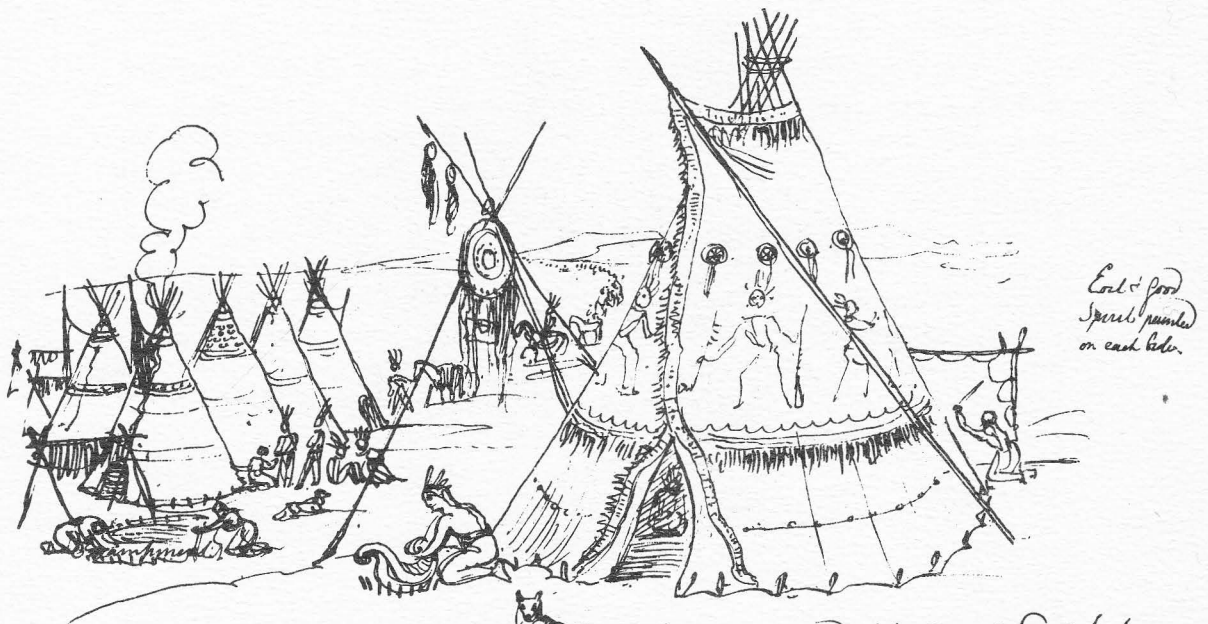
Besides the chiefs and warriors, I have also transferred to my canvas the "looks and very resemblance" of an aged chief, who combines with his high office, the envied title of mystery or medicine-man, i.e. doctor-magician — prophet — soothsayer — jongleur — and high priest, all combined in one person, who necessarily is looked upon as "Sir Oracle" of the nation. The name of this distinguished functionary is Wun-nes-tou, the white buffalo; and on his left arm he presents his mystery-drum or tambour, in which are concealed the hidden and sacred mysteries of his healing art.

There is an appearance purely classic in the plight and equipment of these warriors and "knights of the lance," and they wield these weapons with desperate effect upon the open plains; where they kill their game while at full speed, and contend in like manner in battles with their enemy. There is one prevailing custom in these respects, amongst all the tribes who inhabit the great plains or prairies of these western regions. These plains afford them an abundance of wild and fleet horses, which are easily procured; and on their backs, at full speed, they can come alongside of any animal, which they can easily destroy.



Crow Indian Chief on Horseback





Each of four
spirits painted
on each side.

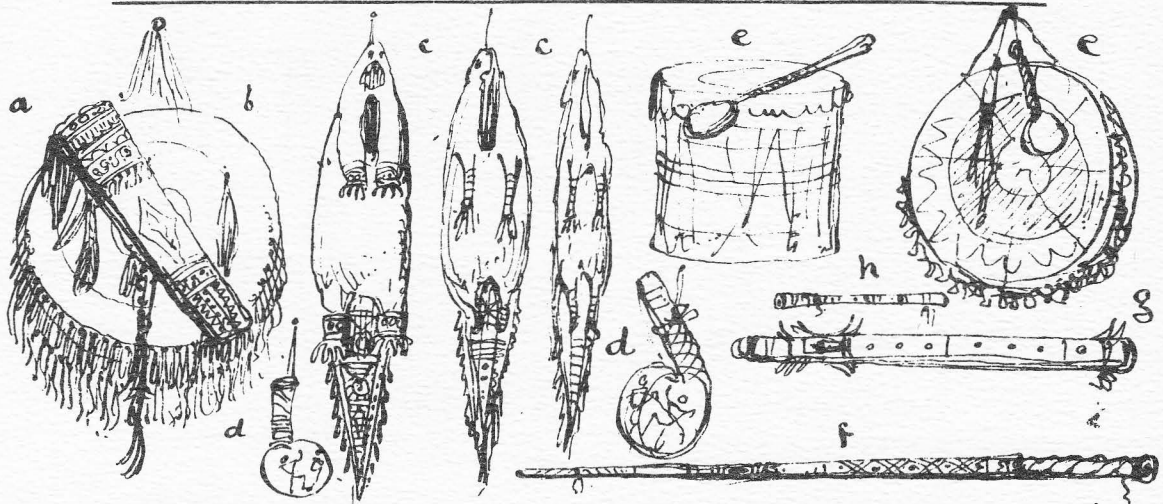
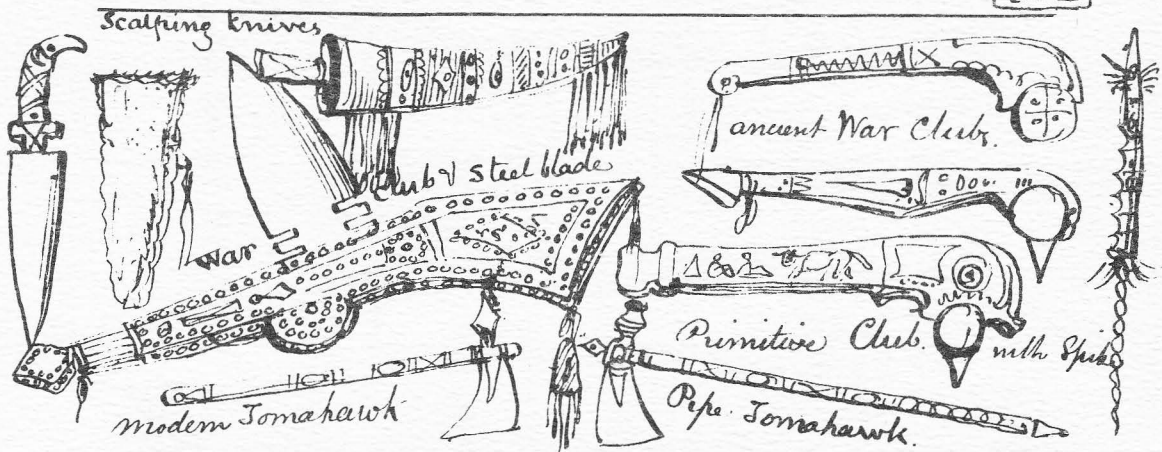
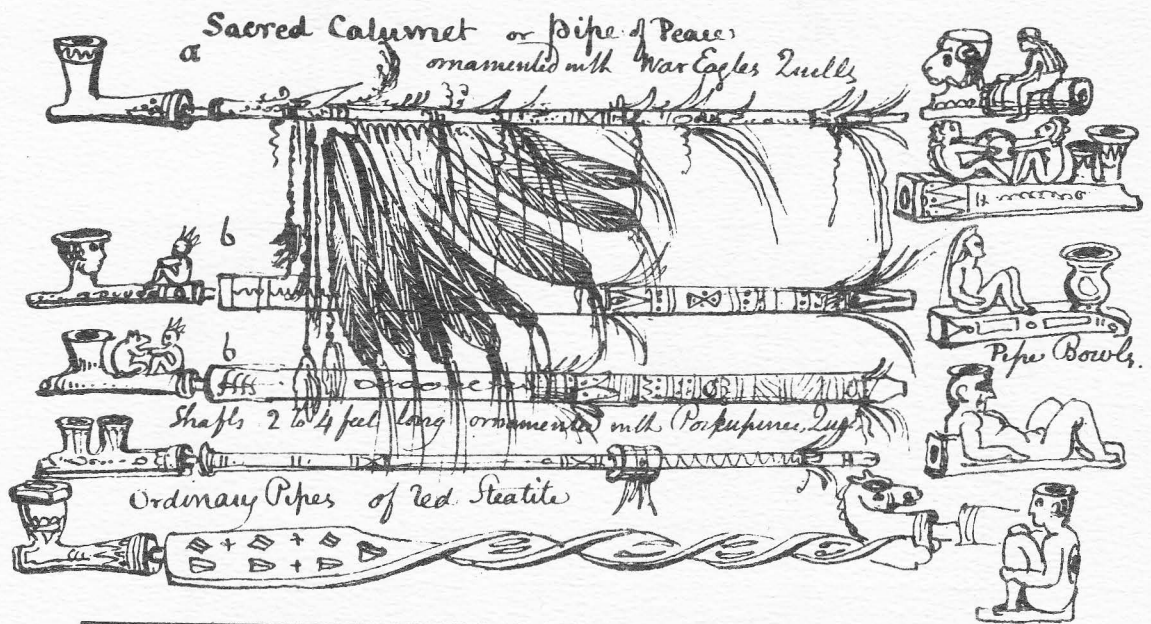
Wigwams of the Crow Tribe. highly ornamented & fringed with Seal's lock.



Village of Mandan Indians. with earth covered Wigwams

The Crows, of all the tribes in this region, or on the continent, make the most beautiful lodge. They construct them as the Sioux do, and make them of the same material; yet they oftentimes dress the skins of which it is composed almost as white as linen, and beautifully garnish them with porcupine quills, and paint and ornament them in such a variety of ways, as renders them exceedingly picturesque and agreeable to the eye. They are sufficiently large for forty men to dine under. The poles which support it are about thirty in number, of pine, and all cut in the Rocky Mountains, having been some hundred years, perhaps, in use. This tent, when erected, is about twenty-five feet high, and has a very pleasing effect; with the Great or Good Spirit painted on one side, and the Evil Spirit on the other.

In ranging the eye over the Mandan village from where I am writing, there is presented to the view the strangest mixture and medley of trash that can possibly be imagined. On the roofs of the lodges, besides the groups of living, are buffaloes' skulls, skin canoes, pots and pottery; sleds and sledges — and suspended on poles, erected some twenty feet above the doors of their wigwams, are displayed in a pleasant day, the scalps of warriors, preserved as trophies. In other parts are raised on poles the warriors' pure and whitened shields and quivers, with medicine-bags attached; and here and there a sacrifice of red cloth, or other costly stuff, offered up to the Great Spirit. In the distance can be seen green and boundless, treeless, bushless prairie; and on it, and contiguous to the piquet which encloses the village, a hundred scaffolds, on which their "dead live," as they term it.





Sioux Cradle.

Sioux Indians spearing Musk Rats in Prairies

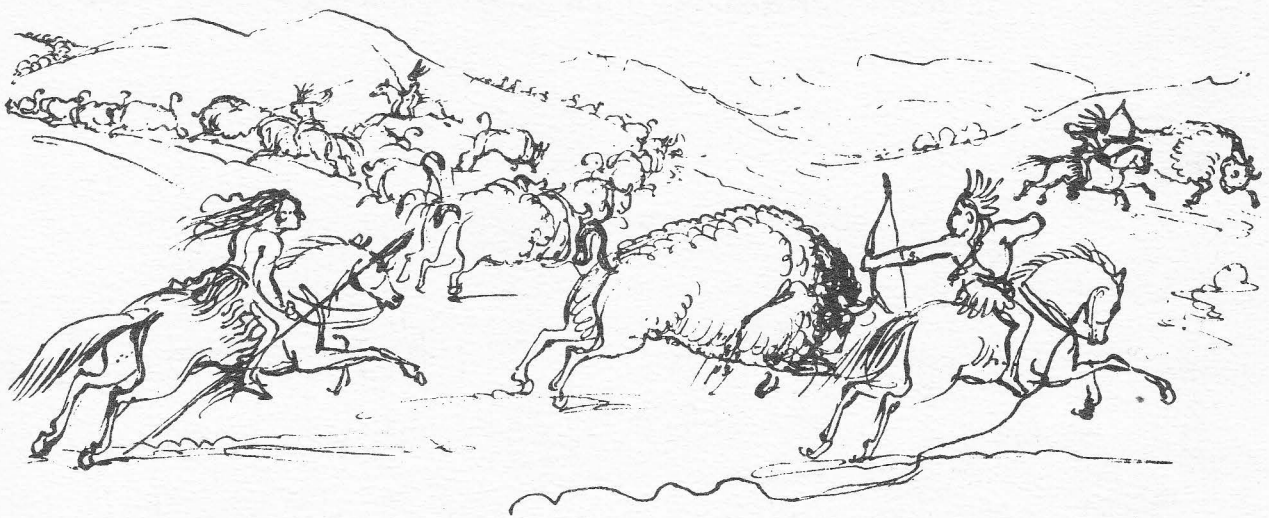


Sioux Squaws gathering Wild Rice in Canoes



Village of Prairie Dogs Burrows (marmot) Mouth of Yellow Stone River





Indians selecting & killing Buffaloes



Immense herd of Buffaloes crossing the Missouri River
in the running Season.

On Sunday, departed from our encampment in the Grand Detour; and having passed for many miles, through a series of winding and ever-varying bluffs and fancied ruins, like such as have already been described, our attention was more than usually excited by the stupendous scene, called by the voyageurs "the Grand Dome," which was lying in full view before us.

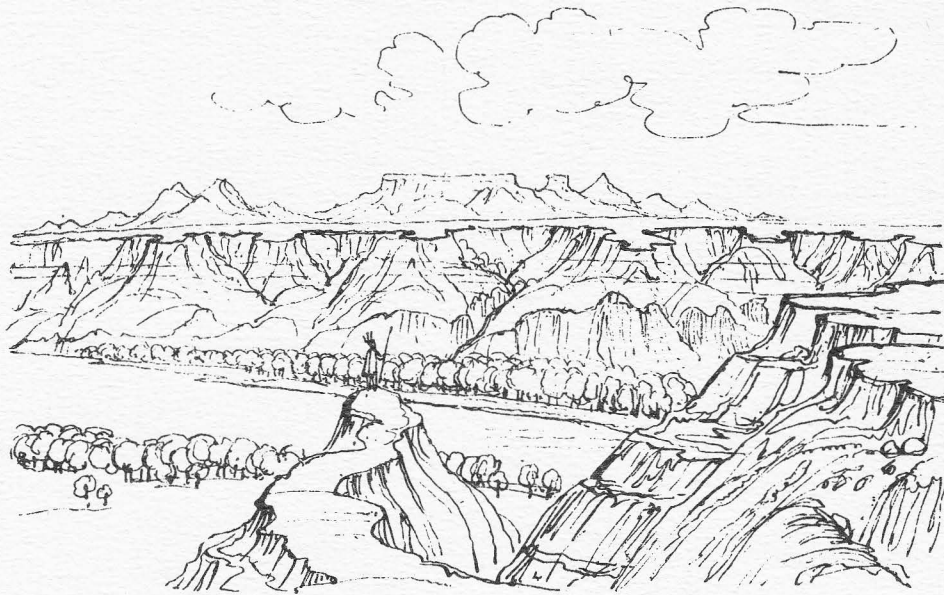
Our canoe was here hauled ashore, and a day whiled away again, amongst these day-built ruins.

We clambered to their summits and enjoyed the distant view of the Missouri for many miles below, wending its way through the countless groups of clay and grass-covered hills.

The sketch of the bluffs denominated "the Grand Dome", is a faithful delineation of the lines and character of that wonderful scene; and the reader has here a just and striking illustration of the ruin-like appearance, as I have formerly described, that are so often met with on the banks of this mighty river.

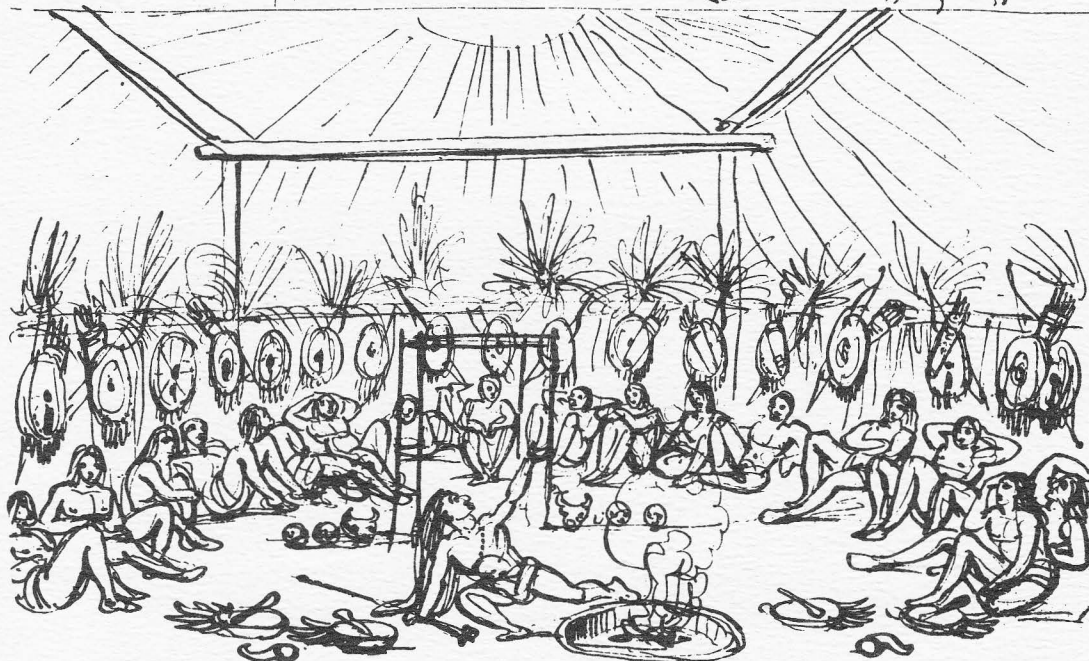
This is, perhaps, one of the most grand and beautiful scenes of the kind to be met with in this country, owing to the perfect appearance of its several huge domes, turrets, and towers, which were everywhere as precise and as perfect in their forms as they are represented in the illustration. These stupendous works are produced by the continual washing down of the sides of these clay-formed hills; and although, in many instances, their sides, by exposure, have become so hardened, that their change is very slow.

Upper Missouri 1900 miles above St Louis
"Big Bend" magnificent clay Bluffs 2000 ft high Table Land



Grand Dome.

*Medicine or Mystery man of the Mandans invoking the Spirits of the Thunder
Rain making*



Interior of Medicine or Mystery Lodge of Mandan Nation

Readers, did you ever hear of "Rain Makers?" If not, sit still, and read on; but laugh not — keep cool and sober, or else you may laugh in the beginning, and cry at the end of my story. Well, I introduce to you a new character — not a doctor or a high-priest, yet a Medicine-man, and one of the highest and most respectable order, a "Rain Maker!" Such dignitaries live in the Mandan nation, ay, and "Rain Stoppers" too; and even those also amongst their conjurati who, like Joshua of old, have even essayed to stop the sun in his course; but, from the inefficiency of their medicine or mystery, have long since descended into insignificance.

The medicine or mystery-man just appointed, and who had received his injunctions from Nu-mohk-muck-a-nah, was left sole conductor and keeper; and according to those injunctions, it was his duty to lie by a small fire in the centre of the lodge, with his medicine-pipe in his hand, crying to the Great Spirit incessantly, watching the young men, and preventing entirely their escape from the lodge, and all communication whatever with people outside, for the space of four days and nights, during which time they were not allowed to eat, to drink, or to sleep, preparatory to the excruciating self-tortures which they were to endure on the fourth day.

In a former letter I gave some account of Mah-to-toh-pa (the four bears), second chief of the Mandans, whom I said I had painted at full length, in a splendid costume. I therein said, also, that "this extraordinary man, though second in office, is undoubtedly the first and most popular man in the nation.

Mah-to-toh-pa had agreed to stand before me for his portrait at an early hour of the next morning, and on that day I sat with my palette of colours prepared, and waited till twelve o'clock, before he could leave his toilette with feelings of satisfaction as to the propriety of his looks and the arrangement of his equipments; and at that time it was announced, that "Mah-to-toh-pa was coming in full dress!



Mah-to-toh-pa

War Chief of the Mandan Indians



Minataree Village with earth covered Wigwams



Riccaree Indian Village open piquets 12 feet high

Soon after witnessing the curious scenes described in the former letters, I changed my position to the place from whence I am now writing — to the village of the Minatarees, which is also located on the west bank of the Missouri river, and only eight miles above the Mandans. On my way down the river in my canoe, I passed this village without attending to their earnest and clamorous invitations for me to come ashore, and it will thus be seen that I am retrograding a little, to see all that is to be seen in this singular country.

The Minatarees (people of the willows) are a small tribe of about 1500 souls, residing in three villages of earth-covered lodges, on the banks of Knife river; a small stream, so called meandering through a beautiful and extensive prairie, and uniting its waters with the Missouri.

The Riccaree village is beautifully situated on the west bank of the river, 200 miles below the Mandans; and built very much in the same manner; being constituted of 150 earth-covered lodges, which are in part surrounded by an imperfect and open barrier of piquets set firmly in the ground, and of ten or twelve feet in height.

This village is built upon an open prairie, and the gracefully undulating hills that rise in distance behind it are everywhere covered with a verdant green turf, without a tree or a bush anywhere to be seen. They certainly are harbouring the most resentful feelings at this time towards the Traders, and others passing on the river; and no doubt, that there is great danger of the lives of any white men, who unluckily fall into their hands. They have recently sworn death and destruction to every white man, who comes in their way; and there is no doubt, that they are ready to execute their threats.

During the time that I was engaged in painting my portraits, I was occasionally inducing the young men to give me their dances, a great variety of which they gave me by being slightly paid; which I was glad to do, in order to enable me to study their character and expression thoroughly, which I am sure I have done; and I shall take pleasure in showing them to the world when I get back. The dancing is generally done by the young men, and considered undignified for the chiefs or doctors to join in. Yet so great was my medicine, that chiefs and medicine-men turned out and agreed to compliment me with a dance. I looked on with great satisfaction; having been assured by the Interpreters and Traders, that this was the highest honour they had ever known them to pay to any stranger amongst them.

Of such "rudenesses and wilds," Nature has nowhere presented more beautiful and lovely scenes, than those of the vast prairies of the West; and of man and beast, no nobler specimens than those who inhabit them — the Indian and the buffalo — joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilised man; they have fled to the great plains of the West, and there, under an equal doom, they have taken up their last abode, where their race will expire, and their bones will bleach together.

Dances of the North American Indians

(Chippeways)
Dog (Sioux) Snow Shoes. Beggars Dance (Sackett's River)

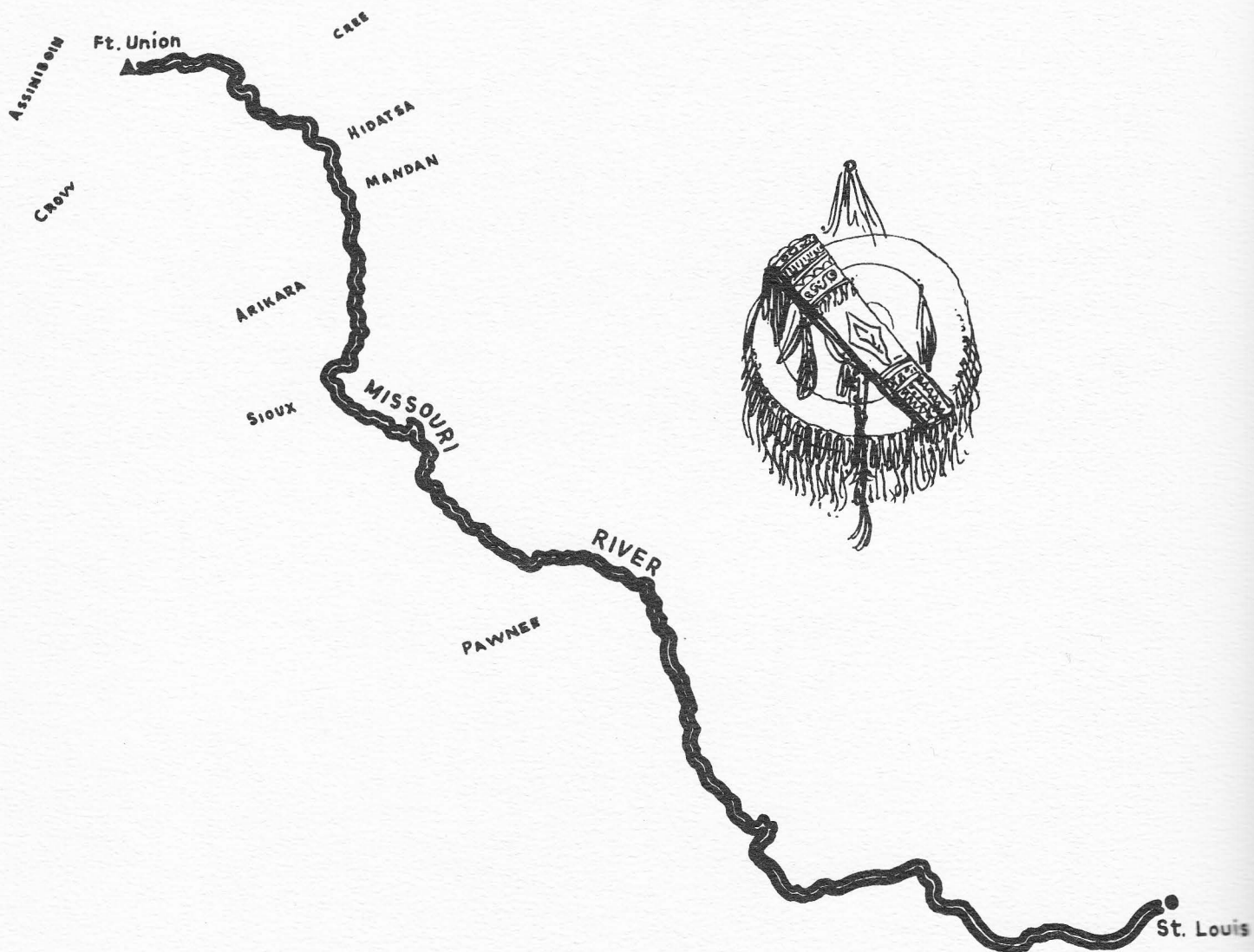


Begging Dance (Sioux)

Great Spirit (minatares)

Scalp (Sioux)





*Thus much I wrote and painted at this place, whilst on my way
up the river.*

Geo. Heath