

## **Ethnography of the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians on the Missouri River**

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Savages. The term commonly heard when referring to the people who were inhabiting the Americas when European travelers began their exploration. Down the road a little, after the Europeans made their way into the New World, they began to set up their own posts to establish a trade system among these so called savages, or Native Americans. One Native American tribe that was well known among the fur traders, and over the years gave shelter to many traders on their journey along the Missouri River, was the Mandan. Traders who took shelter with these Native Americans during their journey learned much of their culture. Some of them even recorded what they learned in journals. This ethnography is the result of an analysis of information extracted from those journals, and will give insight to the lesser known people behind the fur trade. This analysis will not only provide information on the Mandan tribe, but also the Hidatsa tribe that lived upriver from the Mandan and shared many customs with them. This information comes from a collection of journals by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Alexander Henry, Henry Marie Brackenridge, the letter journal of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de La Verendrye, and a narrative by David Thompson based off his own journals written during his explorations.

### **Background**

The fur trade in northern America had simple beginnings in the 1500s, but didn't become a large industry until 1670 when the Hudson's Bay Company gained its charter. French firms had already begun to spread along the St. Lawrence River and down the Mississippi, but the Hudson's Bay Company was the first English company. This sparked a new competition among fur traders and led to a growth in the industry (Carlos and Lewis 2000). During these years, the

Native Americans had many encounters with the European traders. They provided shelter for them, fed them, offered them their women, and allowed them to partake in certain ritualistic ceremonies. La Verendrye was one of the earlier traders to encounter the Mandan, but over the years, their village became a popular resting and trading point. They were located directly off the Missouri River and surrounded by multiple other Native groups. This was an appealing situation to a trader. In the later 1700s and early 1800s they were seeing many more European traders in their parts, as well as explorers wishing to trade only for shelter and food during their stay. Thompson and Henry both made their way in the trade business, but the Lewis and Clark party and Brackenridge did much of their travelling for information. Whether or not they were traders, each contributor to this paper was affected by the trade, whether this be direct dealings, use of maps made by the fur traders, information about the routes and tribes and what to expect on their journeys, or transportation.

Pierre Gaultier de Verennes de La Verendrye was born into a military family and quickly followed in their footsteps. He made his way from New France, back to France to work his way up in the ranks. After his time in the military, he returned to New France in 1712, and decided to join the fur trading business taking place at the time. He became the commander of a fur trade partnership after the passing of one of his brothers. Wishing to obtain a license to trade with the Indians beyond Lake Superior, north of which he had been trading, La Verendrye pitched his knowledge of the whereabouts of the Western Sea to the governor of New France. He obtained the license under the pretense that he would be obtaining more information on the Western sea during his travels. It was during these travels that he visited with the Mandan tribe for a brief part of the winter of 1738 (Zoltvany 1974). La Verendrye's letter journal was just that, a letter. He was writing back to the governor of New France of the progress of his voyage. This indicates

that there could be some bias in the report whether it be embellishments or withholding of information that would not seem relevant. La Verendrye was also using an interpreter for part of his stay with the Mandan. Translations had to pass through multiple different languages including Mandan and Cree before it was translated into French; therefore, the information provide had many opportunities to be misinterpreted. He lost access to this interpreter early on in the trip, so some of his information could have been mistaken due to lack of understanding (Burpee 1927:334).

David Thompson was orphaned at a young age. While he was attending a charity school in London, Thompson was picked up as an apprentice for the Hudson's Bay Company and moved to North America where he began his job as a clerk at a trading post on the western coast of Hudson's Bay. He often spent his days with Samuel Hearne, transcribing his journals of travels inland and across much of what is now northern Canada. Thompson later spent many years travelling throughout northern and western America, continuing his clerical duties for the Hudson's Bay Company. It wasn't until he obtained a serious leg injury that his travels came to a stop for some time. During this immobile time, he was taught to use astronomy to survey. Once he became mobile again, he wanted to put this new skill to use. When he found he was unable to do so for the Hudson's Bay Company, he left and joined the North West Company. It was during his time with the North West Company that his travels brought him in contact with the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians in 1797. He kept journals during his travels, as well as detailed accounts of his location due to his experience with surveying. Many years later, after retiring from the trade business, he decided to write a narrative of his time travelling northern and western America based off the journals he had kept. It wasn't until 1850, when Thompson was 70 years old, that he decided to begin work on his narrative. The time lapse between the visit

and the writing of the narrative could be the cause for some skewed information, or simply false or embellished memories. He also had written the narrative with the intention of selling it which could have resulted in additions to the story that made the narrative more interesting or adventurous. Another issue with the information is the bias that might be present due to Thompson's religious affiliations. Thompson had recently gone through a religious awakening on his journey just prior to encountering the Mandan. This could have led to some judgmental and critical records of the Mandan in Thompson's original journals (Nicks 1985). Thompson also communicated with the Mandan using an interpreter, presenting the same issues that may have been present in La Verendrye's journals; misinterpretation (Tyrrell 1916:234).

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson assigned a task to Meriwether Lewis, to travel the Missouri River and beyond to the Pacific Ocean. His mission was to explore the northern portion of the Louisiana Purchase, a route to the Pacific Ocean, the land to be crossed, its inhabitants, and its potential. Lewis recruited one of his old army commanders, William Clark, to join him on this expedition. They set off in May of 1804 having a clear set of guidelines from President Jefferson as to their goal (The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc. 2003). One goal was to gain specific knowledge about the native tribes along their route, including those along the Missouri River. They were to assess their possessions regarding what they needed and what they had to trade. They were to learn of the tribes' relations with surrounding tribes, their language, traditions, routines, arts, food and clothing, diseases, moral and physical values, and any laws or customs they had that would be seen as peculiar (Jefferson, 1803). With this goal in mind, they set forth, arriving at the Mandan villages during the latter part of fall and remaining there until winter had passed. Although Lewis and Clark (and some of the other men on the expeditionary team) kept journals of their travels, Lewis did not write much during this period. The journal

read for this specific analysis was written by William Clark. In addition to the journals of daily observations and activities, Lewis and Clark collected various other kinds of information including that about the tribes that was tabulated over the winter of 1804-05 into a format developed in part prior to their travels in association with Thomas Jefferson (Moulton 1987). For the most part, these documents seem clear of obvious biases, but Clark's journal does have some language that infers that he might look down upon them for some of their beliefs (Thwaites 1904:211). This might have caused him to record some occurrences with a judgmental eye; or to neglect inserting the information at all if he found it too bizarre. Given their need to survive the winter of 1803-04, Clark focused much of his journal on his team's daily tasks. However, he often mentioned Native peoples who visited the small fort they constructed near the Mandan villages. Thus, most information came from visitors, who were often male leaders of the Mandan and less so the Hidatsa. Because Lewis and Clark were to collect information that would be useful for commerce and interaction with the United States government, the kinds of information collected did not reflect all aspects of the lives of the Mandan and Hidatsa (Ronda 1984). The team had to use an interpreter for communication with the tribe. Information could have been misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Alexander Henry was born into a family of fur traders. Once he got his start as a trader he did much traveling throughout North America, coming into contact with many Native American tribes along the way. He is well known for the extensive amount of detailed journals he kept during his travels. The journals began in 1799, but it wasn't until 1806, not long after the visit of the Lewis and Clark party to the middle Missouri region, that Henry came into contact with the Mandan. He did have a large amount of experience in dealing with Native Americans by the time he met the Mandan. Despite this he did record much of his visit with them and the

aspects of their culture he was able to witness. Henry was, however, observant of the uncivilized nature of the Native Americans during his travels which could be reason to believe he was biased in his recording of their habits and beliefs (Gough 1983). His language in the journal is often condescending of the Mandan, but most especially of the nature of one of the Hidatsa bands (Coues 1897:347). His frequent encounters with other Native Americans might also have led to a different view of the Mandan. He could have possibly been judging their actions compared to those of another tribes or even making assumptions of the Mandan based on his previous encounters. Henry also used an interpreter during his visit, meaning one must allow for a certain level of possible miscommunication.

Henry Marie Brackenridge was famous for his work as a lawyer, legislator, writer, and diplomat. He spent much of his life in the legal field and publishing writings over politics and economics (Barnard 2000). He was inspired by Manuel Lisa, a St. Louis fur trader who was well traveled among the Native Americans along the Missouri River, and decided to take on an excursion of his own to study. He did so in 1811, coming across the Mandan during his travels (Thwaites 1904:23). The language used in the journal suggests that Brackenridge was very taken with the Natives Americans. He had very little previous encounters with them and seemed awestruck by some of their actions. This being said, some bias might be present in the form of over embellished recordings.

## **Villages**

As stated earlier, the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes were located along the Missouri River. Beginning upriver and travelling down, the first village encountered by Thompson in 1797 was the Hidatsa winter village. Located on the north side of the Missouri, this village laid above the rest (Coues 1897:321). Henry was told that most of one of the Hidatsa villages decamped from

the summer villages and moved here in the winter to gain better access to the driftwood that floats down the Missouri River (Coues 1897:349). The abandoned winter village seen by Henry in the summer of 1806 was a short distance from a large bank that runs perpendicular to the river; and was often partially submerged in water during the summer due to its lower placement (Coues 1897:321). The Hidatsa tribe during the period between 1790 and 1811 consisted of three different bands. One of the bands was known as the Menetaree; or the Big Bellies. They were the tribe that inhabited this village in the upcoming winter. When Thompson visited in 1797, the Hidatsa were still considered one tribe, but Thompson refers to them as the "Fall Indians". He observed that there were 31 houses and 7 tents in the village (Tyrrell 1916:228). This was smaller than Henry inferred their village was in the summer, but this could be due to the large hunting parties that go out for months at a time during the winter to collect food (Coues 1897:349). Those who are constantly engaged in hunting had no need for housing within the winter village.

Continuing to travel down river, the next village Thompson encountered in 1797 and occupied by the Hidatsa when our other informants visited the region was the Upper Big Belly village. This village was located on the north side of the Knife River and one mile away from the west side of the Missouri River. Henry, being there in the summer while the Big Belly were inhabiting this village rather than their winter village, observed 130 houses (Coues 1897:322). Thompson, being there in the winter, would not have seen any inhabitants in this village. He ran into the inhabitants of the Lower Big Belly village. This village was located on the south side of the Knife River, directly across from the Upper Big Belly village (Coues 1897:344). Henry reports seeing 60 houses in this village, but Thompson reports 82 (Coues 1897:345; Tyrrell 1916:228). When Henry visited, the Hidatsa had split into three bands, as mentioned earlier, and

one of these new bands was located below this village on the Knife River (Coues 1897:344).

This split could account for the reduction in size in such a short time, as some of the inhabitants during Thompson's visit may have moved to the new village.

This new village was inhabited by the Saulteur, or Shoe, tribe. Part of the Hidatsa tribe, the Saulteur lived just one mile below the Lower Big Belly village along the Knife River (Coues 1897:344). Henry reports having seen 40 huts in this village (Coues 1897:344). Thompson reports of a Mandan village that contained some Hidatsa Indians that was abandoned during Henry's visit (Tyrrell 1916:226). Henry passes this abandoned village just upriver from the first inhabited Mandan village, which laid just five miles downriver from the Upper Big Belly village. The inhabitants of the village are believed to have joined with the other Mandan villages due to population decrease and a decrease in the quality of soil at the abandoned village (Coues 1897:323). The Hidatsa that resided here during Thompson's visit may have joined them, but they may have also joined the new Saulteur village across the river, which would account for the number of people in that village. This abandoned Mandan village was also abandoned during Lewis and Clark's visit, as they reported having come across three Mandan villages, the first of which was abandoned.

The first of the two Mandan villages that Henry encountered laid directly below the abandoned Mandan village, on the north or east side of the Missouri River (Coues 1897:323). Thompson reports seeing 113 houses in this village (Tyrrell 1916:227). The fort built by the Lewis and Clark party, Fort Mandan, laid just downriver from this village (209). This was one of the two Mandan villages still present. The second one lying just across the river on the south or west side of the Missouri and consisting of about 40 huts as recorded by Thompson (Coues 1897:329; Tyrrell 1916:227). La Verendrye encountered six Mandan villages during his visit in



1738, but the villages were located farther down the river based on stories told to Clark during his visit. (Burpee 1927:335). They moved up river due to reasons that will be discussed later.

The housing structures La Verendrye saw during his visit were described as “cabins” that are divided into “apartments” (Burpee 1927:339). This is the only clue we have as to the structure of the houses in 1738-39. From our cultural perspectives this suggests a possible square shape and possibly made of wood. He mentioned that the settlement was on elevated land and surrounded by a 15 foot deep by 18 foot wide ditch. Wooden planks surrounded the village behind the ditch and the only way to enter was to cross the ditch on a plank and have another plank raised to allow entry (Burpee 1927:340). This description is quite different from what we find from Thompson, Clark, and Henry, but their visits were much later and were made at villages different from the ones that La Verendrye visited. The Mandan may have changed their housing style during their journey up the Missouri. The Hidatsa houses are described as similar to the Mandan (Tyrrell 1916:235). This may indicate that the Mandan based their housing structure off those of the Hidatsa Indians when they moved near their villages or vice versa.

Instead of inferring a square outline based on our cultural interpretation of the word ‘cabin’ translated from LaVerendrye’s letter journal, Thompson and others after 1797 tell us that the Mandan and Hidatsa lodges were round. They were approximately 18 feet high and covered in earth to insulate and protect from attack. Wooden boards rose 6 feet out of the ground and formed the base to the dome, while planks were then laid at a slanted angle to form the dome shape. These structures were built up leaving a hole at the top that acted as a chimney and as the sole entry for light to the hut. Each house contained a fire pit in the center, with horse stables located directly to the right of the entry. Each house was spaced anywhere from 15 to 30 feet from the next. The door to the hut was covered in buffalo hide and was approximately 6 feet by

4 feet and opens to a porch leading out of the house (Tyrrell 1916:227-28). Clark indicates a similar structure, describing round houses that were covered in earth with centered fire pits (Thwaites 1904:208, 219). Henry also describes a structure very near Thompson's description with only a few differences and additions. Henry saw 18 foot round homes with centered fire pits, horse stables to the right of the entry and doors 6 foot by 5 feet connected to a large porch. After visiting the Big Belly tribe, he noticed that their horses remained outside of the house even during the night, in a stage built near the porch. Henry states that these porches widen to 7 feet and are 10 feet in length, and lead to an 8 foot high stage in front of the house that was 10 feet by 20 feet and was used to hang crops and meat to dry or to store driftwood in the summer. The doors were covered in buffalo hide that was suspended by cords, and a piece of timber laid inside and was placed between two posts on the inside of the hut to barricade the door at night. The build of the house was similar with 6 foot posts surrounding the hut, slants forming the dome, and an opening at the top to allow for light to enter and smoke to escape. Henry records that the house was in fact covered in earth, but almost double the thickness described by Thompson, and this earth laid on top of a 6 inch cover of willow branches. According to Henry, the bottom of the hut was dug 1 ½ feet into the surface of the ground, and the Big Belly huts had floors that are as deep as 4 feet below the surface. The fire pits were 5 foot squares and dug 2 feet into the ground. Next to the fire, on the left of the entry was a couch made of willow branches and covered in hides, usually for the master of the house to sit. The houses described by Henry were irregularly arranged around the village which could be due to an increase in population, and the need to fit more huts within the current space. This would also explain why Henry says some of the houses had practically no space between them (Coues 1897:338-341). The beds were described by both Thompson and Henry as raised frames covered in hides. Thompson reports that the beds lined

the walls, and Henry adds that the master and his favorite wife slept in the bed nearest the entrance on the left, followed by the other wives, and finally the children's beds (Tyrrell 1916:229-30; Coues 1897:340). Henry also spoke of a 4 acre central plaza in the first Mandan village that was surrounded by 30 huts (Coues 1897:338).

Both Henry and Thompson describe a stockade-like barrier around the villages similar to the one described by La Verendrye. Thompson mentions a 12 foot wall that surrounded the villages using 10 inch logs (Tyrrell 1916:27). Henry describes the wall as made of driftwood, and states that it was falling apart (Coues 1897:362). This may be due merely to passing of time or the tribes have seen no need to reinforce their fortification due to a reduction in threats from outside tribes that will be mentioned later.

### **Sustenance**

The food eaten by the Mandan stayed primarily the same between the first account of La Verendrye and the last one of Henry. La Verendrye, Thompson, Clark, and Henry all give reports of an abundance of corn and beans, as well as the hunting of buffalo (Burpee 1927:343, 337; Tyrrell 1916:231; Thwaites 1904:206, 234, 240; Coues 1897:336, 338). Henry included both the Big Belly and the Saulteur bands in this use of corn, beans, and buffalo (Coues 1897:338, 357). The Big Belly tribe, being more mobile, didn't cultivate as much of their food as the Mandan and the Saulteur did. When looking out from the latter two villages, Henry says one could see large fields of corn, beans, squashes, tobacco, and sunflowers (Coues 1897:338). In comparison, the Big Bellies only grew corn and mostly for trade purposes (Coues 1897:346). La Verendrye, Clark, and Thompson reported also being fed pumpkin and deer during their visits (Burpee 1927:325; Thwaites 1904:233,234; Tyrrell 1916:231). The crops are always cooked, usually mashed up with a mortar and boiled together in an earthen pot. They kept pots full of

these mixtures of beans and corn cooking all day so as to be able to feed guests (Burpee 1927:343; Tyrrell 1916:229; Coues 1897:325). This explains why Thompson reported having not seen the Indians engage in regular meals, as they were constantly eating throughout the day at no specific times (Tyrrell 1916; 232). The Big Bellies and the Mandan both gathered pears, chokecherries, red cherries, raspberries, and gooseberries from around their villages (Thwaites 1904:240; Coues 1897:321). Clark reports being offered hominy from some of the Indians (Thwaites 1904: 210). Most of the crops, especially corn and beans, were dried and stored in underground cellars. These are reported in La Verendrye in the old villages and by both Clark and Henry. La Verendrye and Clark report that large amounts of corn and beans were usually kept in their reserves for the summer (Burpee 1927:330; Thwaites 1904:247). Henry described these reserves as pits that were 8 feet deep and lined with dry straw (Coues 1897:360). Other than buffalo and deer, the Saulteur were reported to hunt antelope as well. Clark witnessed an offering of one to the Mandan during their stay (Thwaites 1904:235). Most of the meat consumed by the Mandan was boiled and/or dried (Tyrrell 1916:229). Henry claims that the Big Belly tribe preferred their meet to be rotten before eating, and if they were consuming fresh meat, it was either nearly or entirely raw (Coues 1897:357). No other mention of this was made in any other journal, and the description consists of a fair amount of insults toward the Big Bellies and their habits, which may mean that the account was slightly exaggerated.

### **Hunting**

Hunting was one of the greatest means of attaining food during the winter, most especially for the Big Bellies who did not cultivate or store as much food as the Mandan and Saulteur did during the summer and fall. Clark joined a hunting party during his stay near the Mandan and recorded that the Indians were extremely agile and great horsemen, running on their horses

shooting down the buffalo with their bows and arrows (Thwaites 1904:234). Henry also states that the Mandan only hunted using their bows and arrows (Coues 197:337). It's not clear whether this was ceremonial, only to kill the buffalo with their own tools, or if it's merely a way to preserve ammunition. Another method of hunting, as mentioned by Henry was to dig deep holes in paths as to catch and trap small animals as they walked by (Coues 1897:322). Henry also stated that the Mandan only hunted in large parties in case of a run in with an enemy while out, but also to be able to completely surround a herd of buffalo without letting one escape to scare other herds off. This helped them hunt large amounts of buffalo at one time (Coues 1897:336). Brackenridge also stated that the Mandan often hunted in large, whole village, hunting parties. Even the women would go on these hunts as to help tend to the horses and dogs and to dry the meat (Brackenridge 1816:260). These accounts are severely contradicted by both Thompson and Clark. Thompson was told by a Mandan that they no longer hunted in large parties due to an attack on their village by the Sioux while they were away (Tyrrell 1916:229). Clark also reported that no large hunting parties were used anymore (Thwaites 1904:247). There are a few ways this could be explained. If the population was rising, they may have found themselves more able to hunt in large parties, as they had a greater population that could stay back to defend the village. This also might have been a result of an attack by the Sioux that will be discussed later. Henry says that the Sioux had been much more cautious of coming around since this attack (Coues 1897:362). This could explain the switch to large hunting parties, if this attack happened in between the Lewis and Clark visit and Henry's. The Big Bellies, however, had always hunted in larger parties. These parties sometimes consisted of as many as 200 men and 200 women. The Mandan and Big Bellies did not hunt together. According to Henry they hunted in different directions of the Knife River as to not get in each other's way (Coues

1897:337). Whether this was an arrangement, or just blindly followed by the two tribes is not said. The Mandan would hunt with the Saulteur though. It would be announced that a hunting party was departing, and on the morning of departure anyone wanting to join, Mandan or Saulteur, would gather south of the village and leave as one party (Coues 1897:337). Another method of hunting that didn't involve going out searching, was to catch floating buffalo. Buffalo that had tried to cross the Missouri on spring ice and failed would drown and float down the river. Both the Mandan and the Big Belly collected what they could of these buffalo (Coues 1897:341, 349; Thwaites 1904; 279). Once the buffalo were caught, none of it was wasted. Brackenridge reports that every part was used, including the marrow, and the bone itself that was ground up and used for its oil (Brackenridge 1816:260). Henry also points out that they used the stomach as a means of transporting water (Coues 1897: 349).

The method of dispersing the meat was entirely different between the Big Belly and the Mandan villages. The Big Bellies were very possessive of their kill and kept all of what they killed for themselves and their family (Coues 1897:356). The Mandan were quite different. When entering the village they would toss some of their meat out to older men and women with no husbands who had crawled out to meet them (Coues 1897: 337). Once the meat had made its way back to the village, it would be taken to the hut of the person who killed it, spread out by the wives, and the rest of the village would travel from hut to hut taking what they needed, or what they were offered by the host. This left some families with very little of what they had originally had, but they ventured to other huts to collect meat as well to make up for their losses (Coues 1897:337). This strategy ensured that everyone in the village got to eat. This may be a reason the Big Bellies have always hunted in such large parties. Each man must hunt for his own family and cannot depend on obtaining meat from a community sharing. If more men needed meat,

more would join the party. Clark believed that this was a cause for the Mandan being short on meat during the winter (Thwaites 1904:247).

## **Appearance**

The appearance of the Mandan Indians was reported as quite a bit fairer than the appearance of members of other tribes, including the Hidatsa. The women had fair skin and fair hair that was soft (Burpee 1927:340; Tyrrell 1916:233; Coues 1897:341). Their hair and eyes were both described by Thompson and Henry as dark brown rather than the typical black (Tyrrell 1916:233; Coues 1897:341). The Hidatsa were not described as fair, but rather much darker than the Mandan with stern facial features (Tyrrell 1916:235). This difference could be due to the large amount of Europeans who have stayed with the Mandan. The Mandan having been the more welcoming of the two tribes (see "Hospitality" below), may have been showing a physique more mixed with European features due to a long period of sexual relations with the traders, and as a result of some of the traders choosing to live among them and take wives. All accounts of their physicality described them as tall, active, and well-built people (Burpee 1927:343; Tyrrell 1916:233; Coues 1897:341).

Their dress may have changed slightly over the years. La Verendrye reported that the women wore belts that had a foot long cloth, about a hand wide to cover their more private parts (Burpee 1927:341). They would occasionally wear petticoats or buckskin jackets if the weather was too cold (Burpee 1927:342). The men wore buffalo robes or nothing (Burpee 1927:342). By the time Lewis and Clark visited the Mandan, the men were said to be wearing goat skin pants under their buffalo robes, as well as moccasins made from buffalo skin (Thwaites 1904:234).

Thompson mentions that they were also wearing a type of long shirt that was belted, but there was no mention of this by Clark (Tyrrell 1916:233). Their attire during the summer consisted of no pants, just the buffalo skin robe, and only when out of the house. Men would often sit in their huts naked during the day and only dress to wander the village. The women wore calf length leather dresses in the summer, but fully covered up in winter with buffalo shoes, a long leather dress that was belted with leather pants underneath (Coues 1897:326; Tyrrell 1916:233). The women wore their hair no longer than to cover their ears and neck; and would occasionally daub it with red earth. The men, however, grew their hair out to what Henry describes as an “enormous length” almost touching the ground. The Mandan men would twist the hair and daub it with white and red earth. The Big Bellies who also grew their hair out to great lengths, would use gum to secure the hair into 10-25 different tresses down their back, and daub this gum with red earth. The Saulteur were reported to have worn silver brooch-like ornaments in their hair (Coues 1897:342).

### **Social Hierarchy**

According to the Euroamerican informants, each village had a principle chief, some containing a second and third principle chief. The Mandan had a Grand Chief who was considered the highest chief, but this man may have also been one of the principle chiefs of a village (Coues 1897:204,210). The Big Bellies also had a principle chief who, during the time of Henry’s visit, was Le Borgne. This specific chief was in charge of the actions of all five villages, including the Mandan villages (Coues 1897:380). The Mandan chiefs had power over their people, but still had to follow orders from Le Borgne, especially when they had joint activities or at least this was perceived so by Euroamerican visitors. It’s not clear whether this was arranged as part of their hierarchy system; or if it was a result of the tyrannical ruling of Le



Borgne and his stature that scared the Mandan into submission (Brackenridge 1816:261). The Big Bellies had war chiefs who, along with the principle chief, made decisions regarding actions towards other tribes (Thwaites 1904:249). Below the chiefs they had *mishiniways*, who acted as a sort of secretary to the principle chief (Coues 1897:388).

Old men were valued quite highly in the Mandan villages. Thompson described them as the governing body who formed a council to make certain decisions. These decisions included the amount of land each family was given and what was given to the injured party of a quarrel between two members of the tribe. They had no formal law system, but rather a retaliation system. The injured party of a quarrel decided the punishment, but in a case such as murder, this could lead to endless bloodshed; therefore, the dispute was usually solved by the older men of the tribe giving presents to the injured until they accepted the price. Once they did, the debt of the killer was considered paid (Tyrrell 1916:231, 233).

The role or status of women in Mandan society was perceived as low by our Euroamerican informants, who happened to come from societies where women also usually were considered of lower status than men and their contributions were often overlooked. The men had what Clark refers to as “squars”, or squaws, that acted as servants to them (Thwaites 1904:249). Even the wives were sometimes treated as servants to their husbands. Henry described the way in which Le Borgne treated his wives as more of a treatment of slaves than of a wife (Coues 1897:381). Women were also punished for choosing to sleep with strangers or other members of the village if they weren’t given consent by their husband. If consent was given, it was required that she lay with him if both the husband and other male wished it. If she were to do so without consent, she would be punished by having her face tattooed in what Henry describes as a “savage manner” (Coues 1897:365-66).

## **Hospitality**

The hospitality of a tribe could be determined immediately upon entry to the village and, in some cases, even before. The Mandan displayed their hospitality before a guest even entered the village. The chief of the village they were approaching would come out of the village and meet them (Burpee 1927:325; Coues 1897:324,331; Brackenridge 1816:260). This isn't the case during Thompson's visit, but this could be due to the amount of traders that were present in the village during his visit. The chief might also have been away at the exact moment of his arrival. Visitors were often invited to stay in many huts, as the owner of the hut usually received some sort of payment for their trouble, or at least this was the case during Henry's stay (Coues 1897:342). The Saulteurs and Mandan both invited visitors into their huts to sit around the fire and eat, though this may also only be done in order to receive the items the visitor chose to bestow upon the owner of the hut for their food (Coues 1897:344). La Verendrye was not often invited into huts, but he was brought food by the Mandan throughout the day (Burpee 1927:343). Lewis and Clark weren't often invited to huts to eat either, but they resided in a fort downriver from the Mandan and, although they had gifts, were not there primarily as traders so there was not as much of an economic reason to build alliances with Lewis and Clark. The location of their living quarters away from the village might have been the reason for their lack of invitations.

The Big Belly Indians seemed to have a much different reaction to visitors. Henry reports that he was made fun of and laughed at by both the children and men as he walked through their village (Coues 1897:345). Thompson gives a different account, saying that the Hidatsa were very happy, friendly, and hospitable people both to visitors and amongst themselves (Tyrrell 1916:236). His encounter may have been with the people who went on to

form the Saulteur village, rather than those who formed the Big Belly village. The Big Belly did honor visitors though, in that if they came to their village in peace they would be protected (Coues 1897:336).

### **Relationship with Other Tribes**

The Mandan are commonly described as a peaceful people, who didn't wage war unless they were acted upon first (Thwaites 1904:214). They had their share of conflicts over the years though. They were perpetually at war with the Sioux as were the Big Bellies and the Saulteur, and had a fairly long standing feud with the Pawnee or, more likely, the Arikara Indians, whom they occasionally made peace (Thwaites 1904:220; Coues 1897:330). For instance, they were at peace with the Pawnee when Thompson visited the village in 1797, and prior to that, after La Verendrye's visit in 1738, they had a misunderstanding with the Pawnee so great as to force them to move up river to their location next to the Big Belly and Saulteur, but they were negotiating another peace with them during Henry's visit. (Tyrrell 1916:222; Coues 1897:334-35). Their numbers severely reduced during this time due to smallpox and disease, they were no match for the Big Belly Indians who forced them to stop their movement up the river, as they wanted to be the uppermost village in that area of the river. They offered up little argument and settled lower on the river (Thwaites 1904:220; Coues 1897:334). Since that time, there had been a few more conflicts involving both the Mandan and the Big Belly. The Sioux attempted an attack on the Big Belly tribe, carried out by the Yanktons and Tetons, who the Mandan and Saulteur had recently made peace with. The attack attempted to cut water off from the Big Belly village. The attack failed, but the Mandan and Saulteur made no attempt to assist their neighbors (Coues 1897:358-59). A later attack by the Sioux on the Mandan, carried out again by the Yanktons and Tetons, resulted in the Big Bellies assisting and a victory for the Mandan. The

attack was so brutal for the other tribes that, according to Henry, they hadn't attacked the Mandan at their village since (Coues 1897:361). This was the battle that may have led to the Mandan returning to the practice of using large hunting parties. However, no information is given as to when this conflict took place. All of these tales were told to Henry during his visit after he observed a pile of bodies in the Big Belly burial grounds and one outside the Mandan village (Coues 1897:358,361).

During Henry's visit, negotiations were taking place for a peace between the Cheyenne and the Big Belly. The Cheyenne were already close allies with the Saulteur Indians, but had previously been at war with the Big Bellies. The peace negotiations that were attempted through the adoption of a Cheyenne boy by Le Borgne, failed (Coues 1897:367-81). The Saulteurs had also always been close allies with the Mandan, but had recently engaged in a three-year war with the Big Bellies (Coues 1897:334). The Big Bellies only removed themselves from the conflict after seeing that the Saulteurs wouldn't stop until they had either won or had been wiped out completely (Coues 1897:344). All three of the tribes wished to be at peace with the Arikaras who resided below them on the Missouri, and Clark tried to help negotiate peace between them (Thwaites 1904:267).

## **Trade**

Trade was a very significant activity between the different tribes as well as with the Euroamericans. Mandan and Saulteur trade took place within the Mandan village, and the Big Belly tribe remained in their own village to trade (Moulton 1987). The Mandan were known for trading an abundance of corn and furs to the French and English fur traders, and later on the American fur traders. La Verendrye noted that the Mandan were unequalled in their skill of dressing leather and decorating with feathers. They traded headbands, girdles, decorated deer

and buckskin, and painted feathers and fur with other Native American tribes as well (Burpee 1927:332). There was no more mention of these items after La Verendrye, but their methods of trading may have changed once the European traders became more common and were more in need of plain furs to sell rather than decorated ones. Both Clark and Henry report having traded for buffalo skin, and Clark also recorded in his report to Jefferson that the Mandan were able to provide, beaver, fox, and elk hides (Coues 1897:325; Moulton 1987). The Mandan traded a lot of their crops including corn, squash, tobacco, and meat from their hunts (Coues 1897:325; Thwaites 1904:255, 266). They often traded for weapons: guns, ammunition, powders, knives, and axes, both during La Verendrye's visit, and still during Henry's (Burpee 1927:332; Thwaites 1904:266; Coues 1897:391).

They tried to trade immediately when a trader or visitor arrived in order to get first dibs at what they wanted (Coues 1897:324). If they wished to do a solo trade with the trader, they invited them into their home, fed them and smoked with them, then discussed the intended trade (Coues 1897:358). When visiting Lewis and Clark at their fort, they often brought corn and meat in the hopes of leaving with a few of items of their own (Thwaites 1904:134). They frequently traded with the Northwest Company and Hudson's Bay Company whose people would stay in the village for the duration of their trading business (Thwaites 1904:227, 232).

Henry described a custom of theirs, most commonly witnessed among the Big Bellies, where the Big Belly would make a trade, accept the price offered, and walk away. He would then return demanding his property back, and when offered a new price would accept. He would return again and again until the buyer returned the Big Belly's property and took their own items back. They are known for doing this with visitors, but also among themselves (Coues 1897:354-356).

One occasion where the returning of trade items would certainly not happen was during the trade of a white buffalo skin. These skins were highly regarded among all the tribes for their non-material importance, and most would pay a great price for one. If a person wished to trade a white buffalo skin, they would inform the village and set up in a hut. The skin would rest on two sticks pressed into the ground. The people wishing to obtain the hide would bring in their items. The trader would shake the tail of the hide to signal that he was not happy with the price. The Indians would bring forth more items until the trader did not shake the tail in return. Once this happens, the hide was taken, cut up, and dispersed among those who contributed to the trade. The size of hide was determined by the amount contributed. If one wished to acquire a full hide, they would be sought out by a trader in possession of one. They would then trade a great deal of items, or sometimes their finest war horse for the hide. Traders often sought out these hides in order to obtain one of these war horses (Coues 1897:353-54).

### **Daily Life**

The Mandan and Hidatsa both had many routines present in their daily lives, but they also had a few things that made their daily life interesting to outsiders. Their boats were one example. Clark and Henry both were quite interested in these. They were made of bent willow branches that formed the round framework, which was then covered in buffalo hides (Thwaites 1904:219; Coues 1897:331). The paddles they used were 5 foot poles that had a split at the end to allow for a 2 foot board to be inserted. This made a cross-like shaped paddle. Each boat was propelled or steered by one paddle. Henry remarks about the sturdiness of these watercraft and the skill with which the natives steered them (Coues 1897:331). They were also interested in the way the Mandan treated their leather. When leather got wet, both the Mandan and the Big

Bellies would rub it with a sort of white earth that kept it from being damaged by the water (Coues 1897:361, 395).

The way the Mandan cared for their horses also intrigued Clark. When pasturage was not handy, such as when the horses were kept in the village or in the winter, they would feed them only twigs and bark from the cottonwood tree. The horses were put through severe physical strain and remained fit despite their feeble diet (Thwaites 1904:258-59). The Mandan and Big Bellies were both very fond of their horses. They had horses that were specially trained for war and some that were noted for running (important for bison hunting) that would only be parted with if the buyer was in possession of a white buffalo hide (Coues 1897:352). The amount of horses these tribes possessed had severely increased from Thompson's visit. Thompson reports seeing very few horses and only seeing three owned by the chief he was staying with (Tyrrell 1916:230). The report by Henry tells of several hundreds of horses, each family possessing 20-30 horses (Coues 1897:345). Henry witnessed them spending their days feeding in the meadow when they weren't out to war or with hunting parties (Coues 1897:328).

The daily routine of the Mandan was mostly witnessed by Henry. They would take time each morning and evening to bathe in the Missouri. The Big Belly would do so in the Knife River. Clay was used to clean the body and hair. They would all bathe naked in the river and remain undressed as they dried out by the fire afterwards. Prior to their bath, the women and men would lay together and enjoy each other's company. After bathing, the women would prepare the corn dish for the day, and head to the fields. The Mandan children also spent their day in the fields, while the Big Belly children spent their days wandering the village. The men of both tribes spent their days either hunting, sleeping on the top of the huts, or wandering the village eating and smoking. At night, after any festivities possibly taking place, the women

would make their way to their huts and barricade their doors, while the men remained outside keeping watch (Coues 1897:327-28, 345).

### **Cultural Practices**

Many practices were observed of the Mandan and Hidatsa culture. Some of them were documented multiple times and can be assumed to be true. Some were either only documented once or were only documented based on hearsay and, as a result, are questionable. One of those cases is in reference to their language. Clark documents in his report that the Saulteur and the Big Belly spoke the same Siouan based language, but the Mandan spoke a different form of Siouan language (Moulton 1987). Henry, however, reported that the Saulteur had a language similar to the Mandan, but both were different from the Big Belly (Coues 1897:343). This might be a result of the Saulteur living so close to the Mandan over the years and adopting certain language habits from them, thus altering their own language to be more like the Mandan and less like the Big Belly. Both tribes also had a system of sign language that seemed to be fairly universally understood among Plains tribes. Some conferences were held between tribes and no talking took place, only signs (Coues 1897:335). This indicates that the natives might have been using a form of sign language for a long time, and it had become fairly consistent among all the tribes.

The Mandan and Hidatsa both had their superstitions or beliefs, but the Big Belly band might have been the most superstitious of the tribes. When presented with flags from Lewis and Clark, the Big Belly chief disposed of it to one of their opposing tribes as they thought it was “bad medicine” or unlucky. They hoped the transfer would bring ill-will to their enemies (Coues 1898:350). There was also “great medicine” that was mentioned in Clark’s journal. This term was used by the Mandan to describe something mysterious or supernatural but good (Thwaites



1904:209). Another superstition found among the Mandan comes in the shape of two bulls' heads. They were considered a sign of protection. They were well protected by a covering of earth, and kept in private boxes or spaces within the owner's hut (Coues 1897:340).

The appearance of the Big Belly women's genital area raised another possible cultural practice. Henry had heard from multiple sources that the men of the Big Belly village stretch the women's labia, beginning when they are children. Even he admits that he has no proof of this practice, but he did admit to personally seeing the stretched areas (Coues 1897:348). Whether or not this was a natural occurrence or the result of an active physical alteration is unknown.

When it came to their wives, the Mandan men were not too possessive. Each man typically took on multiple wives. This was the same with Big Belly men (Coues 1897:324, 380). The women of the village often did a lot of chores and work in the field. It might have been beneficial for a household to have more than one woman providing food, preparing meat and hides, raising children, caring for the home, and doing many other chores. The wives were also often offered up to strangers and other men of the village (Coues 1897:342). A man would take offense to a stranger declining this offer.

As mentioned earlier, the men of the villages, when not hunting, did as they pleased during the day. This sometimes included racing or playing games. Henry witnessed the Saulteur and Mandan men racing one day. They ran 6 miles as fast as they could to practice fleeing (Coues 1897:362). Horse races also took place. The Mandan would race their horses about three miles, and upon returning would begin to practice war maneuvers with each other while still mounted on their horse (Coues 1897:363). The Big Bellies often spent this extra time having target practice with bows and guns (Coues 1897:363). The game that Henry witnessed, and didn't fully understand, consisted of two players with 6 foot poles. The poles had notches in

them, and each notch represented something only known to the players. The winner was determined by measuring the notches at the end of the game (Coues 1897:363).

Brackenridge and Henry were both able to witness war parties during their visits. These groups are described as being split into 10-20 people bands that sang war songs as they marched. They painted their bodies and their horses, and carried scalps and decorated bows and axes with them (Brackenridge 1816:262; Coues 1897:368). Henry witnessed this while the party was on their way to make peace, while Brackenridge witnessed this as a party returned from a conflict.

A means of forming temporary peace that was practiced with many of the traders at this time, was smoking with them. Both the Mandan and the Hidatsa viewed smoking as a form of friendship and peace. Clarke described it as “the greatest mark of friendship” (Thwaites 1904: 270). Lewis and Clark themselves smoked with the natives on many occasions, as did Henry (Thwaites 1904:233; Coues 1897:358).

The natives were sometimes seen with tattoos, but only La Verendrye and Henry record having seen any. La Verendrye states that most of the village had tattoos, but never covering any more than half of their body (Burpee 1927:342). Henry records seeing them, but says they were done in savage manner. Some were done for beauty, while some tattoos were a symbol of having been punished, especially for the women (Coues 1897:366).

The Big Belly had a creation story that was shared with Henry, but was not mentioned in any other journal. The story suggested that the world was once entirely water. A great swan swam alone on the water. This swan produced a wolf, a water hen, and a crow. The crow grew tired of living on water. She went to the wolf and told him that they shouldn't live like this, and that they should make earth. They asked the water hen to fetch some earth from the bottom of

the water. The water hen did. The crow gave the wolf a rattle and he shook it and sang while the crow sprinkled the dirt and created the globe. The crow still wasn't happy and once again approached the wolf. She told the wolf that they should have better and decided to make man. She shook the rattle while the wolf sang. The crow turned into an Indian. She then made all the animals and it was from here that all other Indians were born (Coues 1897:351-52). The Big Belly believe that when you die, you decay and once again, become part of the earth. All of your existence ends (Coues 1897:352). This could explain why their dead were merely placed on scaffolds in open fields or deserted villages. The description gives the image of careless placement of the bodies that had been covered and not tended to (Coues 1897:358, 323). If the life of a loved one ends, it was customary for the Mandan, Saulteur, and Big Belly to cut off their last two fingers on their left hand as an outward display of their grief (Thwaites 1904:205; Coues 1897:364). Both Clark and Henry saw the results of these amputations.

## **Rituals**

Every culture has rituals and, since the journals cover a good part of the year, there is record of quite a few within them. The first ritual was recorded by Thompson during the winter. He talks of a late night dance that took place every night in the Chief's hut where he resided. Twenty-four women aging from 16-25 came to the hut, as well as five to six musicians and forty to fifty men. The women would change into thin white deer skin dresses with an ornamental belt. They would form two rows of twelve about three feet apart and fourteen feet from the row of musicians. The women would dance toward the musicians for ten minutes until the music stopped. They would then make their way back to their original rows. This would continue to repeat itself for an hour until the men would quietly get up and leave and the women would then change back into their clothes and leave (Tyrrell 1916:233-34). Supposedly having happened

every night, one would assume there would be another account of this ritual, but none of the others stayed in any of the Chiefs' main huts. They either stayed in their own forts, or in separate huts, so they may have simply not been around to witness it.

The other ritual recorded by Thompson was a three day ritual. It took place outside of the village where both men and women would walk around crying out in sorrow. They would go home at the end of the day. The next day, the same thing would take place, but some people would sing very low during their cries. On the third day the men and women split up. The men would sit in a line with their elbows on their knees and head in hands. The women would then stand in a line across from them, still crying. They would choose a man and lead him away to lay with him somewhere. It was a sign of affection for your husband if you chose an older man during this ritual (Tyrrell 1916:234-35). As with the previous ritual, there is no other account of this occurring, but this could be due to timing. The other contributors may also have not witnessed the ritual, as it took place outside of the village.

Lewis and Clark also witnessed a couple rituals of their own. Clark records an annual pilgrimage to the "Medicine Stone". The Mandan would march southwest of the village for three days every spring. Once they had arrived at the stone, they would give the rock smoke and return in the morning to read it. Raised white marks on the stone would tell the Mandan of war and/or changes for the upcoming year. They put a lot of confidence in what they were told by the rock. The Big Bellies were believed to have a similar rock (Thwaites 1904:264).

Lewis and Clark also witnessed a ritual known as the Buffalo Dance. It was performed in hopes of bringing the buffalo near the village to be hunted in the winter. This ritual lasted three nights and consisted of the old men of the village sitting in a circle. The younger men would present them with pipes, and after smoking, the young men would offer their wives, who were

seated in a circle behind them, to the older men. The wives, wearing nothing but a robe would lead the old men to a place where they could lay together and would return after. If the old man, or sometimes the white man, was not satisfied, this would repeat. If the old man was not satisfied after the first two times, the young man would usually offer him a robe and beg for his acceptance (Thwaites 1904: 245). It was their belief that this would cause the buffalo to come near them. This ritual may be an altered version of the ritual described by Thompson. Both consist of sexual relations with older men, and last three days. Many parts of the ritual are quite different though, so they either aren't the same, or the ritual was altered significantly in between their visits.

Henry was told of two rituals, but only witnessed one. The first being a rite of passage ritual done by the boys of the village when they turn 20. They ventured to a hilltop that was located one day from the village. They would go naked, with nothing but a barbed arrowhead, and two to three pairs of shoes. They spent as many days in the cold as physically possible, not eating or sleeping, but singing and dancing. While they were away, they used the iron barb to cut off a finger. When they returned, they were given bull heads, the number equaling the amount of days they were gone. The bull heads had cords tied to them. The other end was tied to another barb of iron and was inserted through a pinch of skin on the back. This was done with all of the bull heads. The boy would then walk around the village, often moaning in pain. He would walk until the number of his trips around the village equaled the number of days he was gone. He would then be taken to a tent where his wounds would be tended to (Coues 1897: 364-65). Henry did not witness this ritual with his own eyes, but he had heard of it from several people who claimed to have personally seen it.

The ritual that Henry was able to personally witness was Le Borgne's attempt of an adoption of a Cheyenne boy in order to build alliances between tribes. The ritual was meant to finalize peace between the Cheyenne and the Big Bellies and was carried out on the prairies where the Cheyenne had set up a camp and the Hidatsa and Mandan went to join them. On the day of the adoption, six large tents were arranged together to form a circle that opened up to the north. Three of Le Borgne's mishiniways entered the circle and one of them fixed the pipe stem for the ritual. The other two began singing and drumming to keep time with a rattle that the first man was shaking. A young boy then lead three horses to the hut where the boy to be adopted lived. The person with the stem offered it to the boy, and after he (reluctantly) accepted it, he was carried back to the center of the tents. Gifts were then brought forward by the Cheyenne and the Hidatsa. There was a standstill between the Cheyenne and Big Belly about their items being traded that led to a halt of the entire adoption (Coues 1897:367-81). Needless-to-say, the peace between those two tribes was not agreed upon that day.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Mandan were a peaceful tribe on the Missouri River. They were hunters and gatherers, as well as farmers. They showed respect and hospitality to those who entered their village peacefully, and took part in a large amount of trade with those visitors.

- After a skirmish with a nearby tribe, they were forced to move from their home to a location farther up the Missouri River. There they became neighbors with the Hidatsa. The Hidatsa and the Mandan lived fairly peacefully alongside each other for years. The Hidatsa eventually had a civil conflict that ended in the separation of their tribe into two bands. They then became the Saulteur and the Big Belly, but they went by many other names as well. The Saulteur were friendly neighbors, sharing much of their culture with the Mandan, but the Big Bellies were more

removed, valuing their customs over others. The Mandan continued to live as they did at their previous home, but with a few changes, especially related to protection (possibly going out to hunt less often and focusing less on hunting on the Plains where they might be open to attack). Their relationship with the Big Belly village was rocky over the years, but they were always at peace. The Big Belly Chief took power over the Mandan. The Mandan chiefs were in charge of their villages, but listened when orders were given by the Big Bellies. The Mandan were much fairer than the Hidatsa, most likely due to more integrating of European blood among the tribe. Their daily lives consisted of similar routines such as washing, harvesting, hunting, and eating, with a few differences in methods, but their more largescale ritual practices were not observed often enough to assess the similarity between the two tribes.

The journals used to analyze this culture provided a great look into the Mandan and Hidatsa culture. They still left much to be questioned and much to be inferred. The tribes' participation in the fur trade and their welcoming of traders and strangers allowed their culture to be recorded and remembered, and this analysis made an attempt at piecing those records together.

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