

Indian Tribes—Paper No. 15.

THE HIDATSA INDIANS.

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CONSIDERABLE confusion has frequently been caused in the minds of those who have taken up the study of the various Indian tribes, owing to the various names and appellations which have been carelessly or unwittingly applied to the same people. The above name,

Hidatsa, is one that is probably but little known by the general public, and yet it represents a once important and powerful tribe, their cognomens being *Gros Ventres* and *Minnitaree*. There is also some further confusion about this tribe, owing to another people of a wholly distinct stock, living far to the west, having received the same rather uncomplimentary epithet of *Gros Ventres* (big bellies). The *Gros Ventres* of the western prairies in Montana are properly the *Atsinas*, and the tribe of which we are now speaking, in Dakota, are properly the *Hidatsas*. They have no relation one to the other, neither is there any affinity in their languages.

Hidatsa is the name now generally used by this people to designate themselves; it was the name of their principal village on Knife River (a branch of the Missouri), at the time when the explorers Lewis and Clarke visited them in 1804; although even at that time they were spoken of both as *Minnitarees* and *Gros Ventres*. The origin of the word *Hidatsa* is obscure. It is said by some to mean "willows," indeed the name "Willow Indians" has not unfrequently been applied to them. The title of *Minnitaree* they obtained from their near neighbors, the *Mandans*. The story is that when this tribe in its early wanderings arrived on the north-eastern bank of the Missouri river, the *Mandans* were encamped on the opposite shore; the *Mandans*, seeing strangers approaching, cried to them in the *Mandan* dialect, "Who are you?" The *Hidatsas*, not understanding what was said, but supposing that the *Mandans* (who were provided with skin boats) asked them what they wanted, shouted in return, "Minitari"—we want to cross the water. All travellers agree that the term "*Gros Ventres*" is a decided misnomer. Palliser remarks:—"They are most absurdly termed *Gros Ventres* by the French traders, there being not

the slightest foundation for branding them with that epithet." The *Hidatsas* are regarded as belonging to the Siouan stock, to which pertain the *Dakotas*, *Omahas*, *Osages*, *Poncas*, *Mandans*, *Crows*, and several other important tribes.

Although distantly related to the *Mandans*, their language is, nevertheless, very different to the one spoken by that tribe; and when they first came into contact with each other, as distinct tribes, on the banks of the Missouri river, they were unable to understand each other's speech. However, they made friends and settled together in contiguous villages; and another tribe, the *Arickarees*, of a wholly distinct stock, also made friends and built their villages near them. And so, when Lewis and Clarke made their memorable western tour, at the beginning of the present century, they found these three tribes—the *Hidatsas*, the *Mandans*, and the *Arickarees*, living harmoniously together in villages scattered along the shores of the Missouri river, in North-western Dakota, occupying dome-shaped mud houses all of similar construction, gaining their living by hunting and fishing, all much in the same way, and yet each tribe speaking its own distinct language.

At that time the *Hidatsas*, who were the largest of the three allied tribes, were said to number 2500; now they have become reduced to one-fifth of that number. The Indian Bureau Report for 1888 places them at 502—men, women and children, all told. They still occupy the same locality that they did at the beginning of the century, the present Indian Agency at Fort Berthold being within a short distance of the original *Hidatsa* village. In Catlin's time (about 1830), the *Hidatsas*, or *Minatarees*, as he calls them, numbered about 1500 and occupied three villages of earth-covered lodges on the banks of Knife river; he regarded them as a part of the tribe of the *Crows*, who were then living further west at the base of the Rocky Mountains, and thought that at some remote period they must have had their retreat to their own people cut off by the enemy, and so travelled eastward and joined themselves to the friendly *Mandans*. In language and personal appearance as well as in many of their customs, says Catlin, they resemble the *Crows*. Dr. Washington Matthews thinks it is fully two hundred years since the *Hidatsas* separated from the *Crows*. A Crow legend accounts for the separation in this way. During a season of scarcity, while yet they were all living together, a single buffalo wandered into a camp and was killed by a *Hidatsa*, who offered the paunch to the *Crows*. The