

## WHITES AMONG THE INDIANS: CRITIQUING SOURCES FOR MANDAN AND HIDATSA STUDIES

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Henry Boller conceded in his published journal that he enjoyed eating a prized Hidatsa delicacy. He recounted that "the idea of eating such a barbarous dish was at first revolting, but afterwards, when better able to appreciate these Indian luxuries, I found it very palatable, particularly the natural liquor or broth in which it is boiled, which with the addition of salt and pepper made an excellent soup."<sup>1</sup> The meat he described was a young bison fetus. It had to be a winter kill, Boller continued, because in the spring the calf is "too large and coarse."<sup>2</sup> Besides revealing cuisine that probably made many of his 1867 readers cringe, Boller also acknowledged that he found men in what European culture considered barbarous. Today, many scholars refer to this attitude as cultural relativity. After living with the Hidatsa<sup>3</sup> for several years, Boller learned to see pieces of the world through Hidatsa cultural assumptions, even if it was through his stomach. Boller went so far as to proclaim that "Indian (women) are the best cooks of meat in the world."<sup>4</sup> Boller certainly did not become Hidatsa and we cannot take his writings as definitive descriptions of Hidatsa culture. However, his keen and colorful observations make his work an essential part of understanding Hidatsa history.

1 Henry A. Boller, *Among the Indians: Four Years on the Upper Missouri, 1858-1862*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 236.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Throughout his account, Boller refers to his hosts as the *Gras Venire* after the French nickname "Big Bellies." Perhaps an early Frenchman mistook the title of a leader as the name for the whole group. In this paper, the tribe will be called the Hidatsa.

4 Boller, *Among the Indians*, 235.

Much valuable information about the Hidatsa and the Mandan comes from similar Euro-American sources. The available documents range from reports written as business records to narratives published to satiate Eastern curiosity about the frontier. The observers were men who came up the Missouri River in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as employees or explorers for trading companies and various European governments, including the United States. These writings document their contact with and impressions of the American Indians they met during their travels.

The presence of whites among the Indians affected Mandan and Hidatsa culture and society, just as it did all other tribes on the continent. As Europeans and white Americans increasingly intervened in the Northwest, trade, government policy, and infectious disease altered living conditions along the Missouri. The two tribes became increasingly involved in European trade, intertribal warfare, and the encroachment of American "civilization." The writers were in a good position to record many of the dramatic changes that occurred on the Upper Missouri throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

These published documents are wonderful for researchers in part because of their easy accessibility through libraries. With archaeology and oral traditions, two other substantive sources for information, the scholar must do extensive field work to find the sources and interpret the findings. Written sources can often help resolve apparent inconsistencies among archaeological finds or between oral traditions. However, written documents require intense scrutiny. The authors had their own agenda or reasons for writing their observations. Most of them did not intend to be objective observers of Native Americans but were instead diligent and opportunistic recorders of rapidly changing societies. The fact that writers are biased does not invalidate their commentary. A thorough reading of their ideas includes looking at the text on two levels: (1) what they noticed and why, and (2) what they might have overlooked. This paper looks at seven of the writers who left first-hand contributions to Mandan and Hidatsa studies.

The Mandan and Hidatsa have lived for centuries in what is now North Dakota.<sup>5</sup> When whites began visiting, they lived in various villages on the banks of the Missouri River between the Knife and Heart rivers. During the

5 Roy W. Meyer, *The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikasas* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 5, 10-11.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Mandan and Hidatsa were unique societies that lived amicably near each other. However, many aspects of their lifestyles were similar despite their uniqueness. They built their villages on the high banks of the river for access to good crop land and protected home sites. The flood plains in the river valley below offered excellent soil for growing the corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers on which they relied. The terraces and bluffs above the flood plain were ideal locations for secured communities. By the eighteenth century, they frequently selected village sites on points which needed fortification on only one or two sides, with the river providing a protective barrier for the others. The fortifications included palisades with room between the planks for firearms and arrows and ditches inside the perimeter to protect those defending the village.<sup>6</sup>

Inside the village was an assortment of earthlodges, ranging in size from 40 to 90 feet, arranged around a central ceremonial structure and open plaza.<sup>7</sup> The lodges started with a frame of cottonwood posts and rafters which were covered with layers of willows, grass, and earth. These large and sturdy structures could support a big extended family plus some horses and dogs inside as well. A large gathering of people could even sit on top of the roof. Some homes included a rail around the outside for easy access to the top. Inside the homes there were spaces for many beds, cooking, working and storage areas, including underground cache pits, a central fireplace and a shrine. The size of the lodge depended on the size of the family, just as the size of the village depended on the number of lodges. European contact era villages could have from a few dozen to over 150 homes. Scholars have estimated that the eighteenth century Mandan-Hidatsa population was around 12-16,000 or more.<sup>8</sup>

Bison hunting was another major part of Mandan and Hidatsa life. Whereas growing corn and building houses were traditional occupations for women, the men were the hunters and warriors. Men would periodically go on short hunting trips and bring back their pack horses loaded with bison meat, hides, and other products. Once the women got the bison they would cook some meat immediately, fix delicacies for the returning hunters and their guests, save some meat to

6 George F. Will and H. J. Spinden, *The Mandans: A Study of their Culture, Archaeology and Ethnology*. "Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology," Vol. III, No. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1906), 103; Meyer, *The Village Indians*, 2.

7 Will and Spinden, *The Mandans*, 105.

8 Meyer, *The Village Indians*, 13-14.

cut into strips for drying, and later would prepare the hide. The hides provided rugs, clothing, foot covers, rope, and many other everyday necessities of village life.<sup>9</sup>

The attackers of Mandan and Hidatsa villages were various Sioux tribes, especially the Yanktonai and the Teton Sioux, and many other tribes with whom the Mandan and Hidatsa traded. These village communities were opportunely situated to be trading centers between tribes to the north and east and other tribes traveling from the south and west. The Northern tribes could bring hides and British goods, while those from the South brought their own goods along with a few Spanish trade items. In exchange, the Mandan and Hidatsa offered vegetables from their garden, decorated robes, and other goods. The crops were not only food for sustenance, but were a very lucrative currency in the network of Indian markets. Their location and wealth also made them susceptible to raids for horses, goods, or political gains. Groups of Mandan and Hidatsa men would also attack neighboring tribes and traveling trade bands to achieve the same goals.<sup>10</sup> These attacks are one aspect of Missouri River life of which the visitors took particular notice.

The earliest known document describing a European visit to these Missouri agriculturalists was written in 1738. Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, the Sieur de la Vérendrye along with his two sons, François and Louis-Joseph, traveled from their fur trading posts in Canada with a group of Assiniboine traders. Led by descriptions from his Assiniboine hosts, La Vérendrye journeyed to the Mandan expecting to find a culture physically and socially similar to the French. During his two week stay he gained a more accurate understanding of Mandan society. His discussions and observations of these people were hampered by the loss of his Cree interpreter. Vérendrye reported that while the Assiniboines visited the Mandan these visitors ate more than their hosts thought proper and were encouraged to leave by rumors that the Sioux might attack soon. Although he had planned to stay with the Mandan for several weeks, Vérendrye decided to leave after about two weeks (December 3-13). He left behind two men to learn the Mandan language and, in the middle of December, started back north to one of his forts.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Boller, *Among the Indians*, 253-5.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Hair: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains 1738-1889* (Evanston, CO: Coriellera Press, Inc., 1990), 15, 18, 21, 218 n. 1; Meyer, *The Village Indians*, 42, 69.

<sup>11</sup> G. Hubert Smith, *The Exploration of the La Vérendrye in the Northern Plains, 1738-1743*, ed. W. Raymond Wood (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1980), 37.

In December of 1797, another short-term European guest came to the Mandan villages. David Thompson traveled to the Missouri as an astronomer and explorer for the North West Company. Although he worked for the trading company and was accompanied to the villages by traders, Thompson's interest was not in trading goods, but acquiring information for his trading company. His published journal details the number and size of villages and of the lodges within the communities he encountered between December 30, 1797 and January 10, 1798. Thompson was especially interested in their defensive and agricultural capabilities. His expedition purchased over 300 pounds of corn and other vegetables to supply their journey.<sup>12</sup>

The nineteenth century brought many more short and long term European and American visitors to the Missouri village Indians. Trading companies began establishing forts closer to the Missouri and eventually lived right next door to the Mandan and Hidatsa. Another two-week visitor was Alexander Henry the Younger. While working for the North West Company in 1806 he paid a short visit to villages of both the Hidatsa and the Mandan. Instead of traveling in the middle of winter, Henry came in the middle of summer (July 19-29, 1806) and offered some of the first depictions of agriculturalists working in their fields. His commentaries were driven by a pessimistic and not very forgiving attitude about the culture and living conditions he confronted. Frequently, his comments are more useful for understanding the hardships of traveling in the Northwest than of the people and places he saw.<sup>13</sup>

A few years later, John Bradbury stayed for several weeks in the summer with the Mandan and Hidatsa. He was a botanist who accompanied a group of men traveling to Salt Lake and the Pacific coast. A group of traders also joined their party. This time the travelers came by boat along the Missouri from St. Louis. They arrived at a Missouri Fur Company trading fort on June 22, 1810 near a Hidatsa village on the Missouri river. Bradbury stayed collecting plants until the 17th of July. The Pacific voyagers invited Bradbury to continue with them, but he decided to return to St. Louis that summer before water travel became difficult and to insure that his extensive live plant collection arrived in St. Louis alive for further study. As he returned to St. Louis, Bradbury

12 David Thompson, *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*, ed. Victor G. Hopywood (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1917), 162-175.

13 Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson, 1799-1814*, 3 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), 322-366; Meyer *The Village Indians*, 47.

was most disappointed that he did not have time to collect more plants.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most colorful reports of Mandan life came from the paintings of George Catlin. This former portrait artist turned visual ethnologist arrived at the village just in time to see a very important ceremony in the summer of 1832. His view of the annual religious rite of passage and ceremonies promoting communal unity, called the Okipa, was hampered by his desire to find proof that the Mandan were actually of Welsh origin. The creation stories related during the several days of celebration have some concepts similar to those in the Judeo-Christian tradition of Noah and the Great Flood. In between discussing the possible origins of these similarities, Catlin painted and described the intricate costumes, ceremonies, and people involved. His stay was also a short one, lasting only from July to mid-August.<sup>15</sup>

While Catlin visited the Mandan he stayed at the Upper Missouri Outfit's trading post, Fort Clark. Two years after the painter's visit, a man named Frances A. Chardon came to the fort and began to keep a daily journal. Since he was a businessman interested in acquiring wealth by trading, most of his comments concern bison robe inventory, amounts of supplies, and daily operation of the fort. The most dramatic accounts in his journal are the tallies and lists of Mandan and Hidatsa who died during the smallpox epidemic of 1837.<sup>16</sup> His stay near these Indians is the longest of the authors listed so far. His journal encompasses the years 1834-1839. However, he spent much longer working as a trader. Before he came to Fort Clark, he worked at a trading fort among the Osage. After his journal ended he continued at Fort Clark until at least 1843 and returned to the Upper Missouri for periods of time after that.<sup>17</sup>

Another trading post employee who kept a journal during the years of his stay was Henry A. Boller of the Clark, Primeau and Company fur-trading partnership.<sup>18</sup> He worked at Fort Atkinson near a combined Hidatsa-Mandan village (often called Like-A-Fishhook village because of a sharp bend in the river) and the American Fur Company's Fort Berthold. His stay lasted from the summer of 1858 to the spring of 1860. Besides communicating fascinating

14 John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 134-175.

15 George Catlin, *O-KEE-TA: A Religious Ceremony and other Customs of the Mandan*, ed. John C. Ewers (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1976).

16 Francis A. Chardon, *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839*, ed. Annie Heleise Abel (Pierre, SD: 1932), 121-162.

17 *Ibid.*, xv-xlv.

18 Boller, *Among the Indians*, viii.



descriptions of the local food, Boller also gained intimate knowledge of life on the Upper Missouri by leaving the fort and living with the Mandan and Hidatsa in their winter quarters. Although these farming groups were sedentary compared to the nomadic tribes of the Plains, these people actually had two homes in the same area. The summer homes afforded good crop land and fortified protection, while the winter homes offered good woodland protection from winter winds and snowstorms. Winter quarters were usually a few miles away from the river in a wooded area. The proximity of trees made wood gathering easier in winter, a season when most tribes did not conduct raids and defense was not as critical. After spending an intense winter interacting with the community, Boller's descriptions became more detailed and insightful.

Soon after Boller left, the observations of traders and explorers were replaced by the reports of Indian agents and military commanders. Within thirty years, the United States government, through encouragement and force, convinced the Mandan, Hidatsa, and the Arikara who joined them to move out of their village and onto farms on a reservation.<sup>19</sup> Between the years 1738 and 1860, the Mandan and Hidatsa had maintained their political independence and self-determination.

Much modern analysis depends on the European observers for determining the cultures and behaviors of these communities during those years. The documents contain information we could probably never get from another source, but they do not include everything. Since they are not all-encompassing, our assessment of Mandan and Hidatsa life may be missing major components. The most important information they offer may be in discovering why the visitors noticed what they did and what they might have overlooked.

The most important subject for Europeans in the Missouri river villages was trade. The first explorers went there to discover trade opportunities and later travelers could get there because trade routes were established and maintained. The Mandan and Hidatsa wanted the traders to come so they could have access to more European goods. Europeans believed the Indians could not live without those items and could improve their society if they used more of them. However, the process of dependence on European goods was gradual and never completely replaced traditional items. Henry found the corn mill that Lewis and

Clark left for the Mandan in 1804 torn apart and used for points for arrows and one large piece equipped with a handle like a hammer.<sup>20</sup> Other observers found the Mandan and Hidatsa to be shrewd and able traders.<sup>21</sup> Verendrye believed that the Assiniboines were pressured into trading "all they possess, such as muskets, powder, ball kettles, axes, knives and awls." Verendrye placed a higher value on the European, metal trade goods. The Assiniboines apparently did not agree and were willing to trade their European items. If the Mandan and Hidatsa required large amounts of European goods in exchange for their own products, perhaps they did not see them as worth that much either.

All parties did agree that bison products were an important commodity and, for the Europeans, Indian hunters were the most effective source for acquiring them. The traders were interested in noting how many bison the Mandan and Hidatsa killed and how many robes would be available for trade. For the Europeans, the more bison the better. For the Indians, some benefits came with the opposite situation. If fewer surplus hides and meat supplies were available, then each piece had a higher value and the hunters could trade fewer hides for the European goods that they needed or wanted. Part of the reason that the traders so frequently noted the scarcity of bison may have been that the Mandan and Hidatsa were trying to augment the exchange value of hides. During the second winter of Boller's stay, villagers decided that the traders could not move with them to winter quarters unless they promised to raise the amount of goods traded for each hide.<sup>22</sup>

Even Bradbury, who did not come to trade, described trading arrangements in detail.<sup>23</sup> Trading was the reason for contact with the Indians and most meetings focused on trade discussions. When Bradbury was invited to various Hidatsa and Mandan homes, he concluded that the main motive was the Indian's interest in trade. He also commented on how gracious and polite they were as hosts.<sup>24</sup>

Bison hunting was frequently discussed, but most of the writers never went themselves. Chardon noted when bison herds were sighted and recorded how many kills were brought back to the fort and to the village. Although Boller often described his hunting outings, he initially emphasized the sporting

20 Coates, *New Light*, 329.

21 Smith, *Exploration*, 56.

22 Boller, *Among the Indians*, 347.

23 Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 110-116.

24 *Ibid.*, 169.

aspects of the hunt.<sup>25</sup> He was not responsible for feeding the fort. After wintering with the Hidatsa, Boller's attitude changed. "I went out frequently with the hunters," Boller explained, "and the novelty having long since worn off, looked upon it as a regular business and not merely an exciting pastime."<sup>26</sup>

Several of the writers were quite blatant about the fact that they did not trust the Indians and described whenever someone lived up to those expectations. Descriptions of thieving and dishonesty appear frequently. Chardon stated that "they (the Mandan) are so treacherous, that it is impossible to Know Friend or Enemy, however I consider them all the later, and an Indian is soon turned, like the wind, from one side to the other."<sup>27</sup> Vérendryes decided that the "Indian will give service only as long as he is paid, and in advance, and considers promises a subterfuge."<sup>28</sup>

The writers also seldom mention acts of kindness, but they did exist. Bradbury thought that his hosts were "superlatively honest towards strangers" and that "no people discharge the duties of hospitality with more cordial goodwill than the Indians."<sup>29</sup> Boller showed gratitude and friendship for an American friend's Indian wife and their children. He asked his father in Philadelphia to purchase a dress and some toys and send them to the fort.<sup>30</sup> Henry could barely believe the kindness exhibited by his Mandan host, Black Cat. Henry received a horse, supplies, and tobacco for trading, all on the promise of sending furs that fall.<sup>31</sup> What Henry failed to recognize was the importance of giving in Mandan society and the status gained from accommodating foreign guests. Henry's presence probably raised Black Cat's status and the generosity may have been from gratitude and hopes for further political gain. Henry also probably insulted other Mandan and Hidatsa by not staying with them or accepting invitations. By comparison, Henry's actions were not always generous. While traveling with the Hidatsa, Henry grabbed a bladder full of water from a passing woman and after drinking it complained about the quality.<sup>32</sup> These writers too often assumed inherent dishonesty was enough reason for Indian uncooperativeness or hostility without looking deeper into the Indians' motives or their own treatment of their hosts.

25 Boller, *Among the Indians*, 122.

26 *Ibid.*, 228.

27 Chardon, *Chardon's Journals*, 130.

28 Smith, *Exploration*, 61.

29 Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 169.

30 Boller, *Among the Indians*, 49-50.

31 *Ibid.*, 391.

Assumptions about trickery and slyness, and other visitor biases, are evident in Vérendrye's first encounter. His expedition to the Mandan was plagued with minor problems that amounted to major inconveniences. Cree and Assiniboin tribes tried to prevent Vérendrye from traveling to the Mandan and many Assiniboin tribes insisted on accompanying him. In the final days of his trip, Vérendrye lost a box which held important supplies and paper, and his bag of gifts for the Mandan was stolen. When the party finally arrived at the village, the Mandan soon informed them that the Sioux would attack soon. Vérendrye later learned it was just a ruse to get rid of the Assiniboin, but he was surprised at how easily the Assiniboines were duped after they insisted on coming. Before his traveling companions left, an Assiniboin chief informed Vérendrye that his interpreter had run off with a woman he loved and would not be returning. Vérendrye accepted this response and was left in the Mandan village without a means of communicating with his hosts.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the Assiniboines were so willing to leave because they had already achieved their goal of limiting Vérendrye's contact with a potential trading partner. After all, Vérendrye and the traders left after only a few more days.

European assumptions about sexuality may have clouded Vérendrye's judgment in his predicament. He quite readily believed the excuse that the man had followed a woman. Mandan and Hidatsa expressions of sexuality were very different from Christian-European traditions. Both Mandan and Hidatsa spiritual beliefs included ceremonial intercourse as part of their quest for power. Power was a complex concept including ideas about strength, skill, luck, and success. One way of acquiring power was through intercourse. In the ceremony that most writers noticed and disliked, the wives of young men seeking power offered to have intercourse with an older man in the tribe who was successful. The old men could either accept or refuse. At the end of the ceremony, the old man handed the woman a sacred bundle which she held to her chest. The power would then be retransmitted to the man through relations with his wife.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the writers were critical of the women's lack of chastity and the men's seemingly lack of sexual control over themselves and their wives. To be

33 Smith, *Exploration*, 53, 54, 57.

34 Alfred W. Bowers, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization* (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1991), 48, 84, 284-5, 316-19, 335-337.

fair, they were also critical of European visitors who participated in short-term sexual liaisons with Mandan and Hidatsa women. Europeans emphasized the immorality of sex outside of marriage, with consent of the husband, and accepting presents as well. Many of the voyagers and traders took advantage of the women's seeming willingness to have sex for only the price of a trinket. Although these European writers complained about and criticized these practices at great length, they never tried to analyze the practices for motives other than sexual gratification and monetary gain. Bradbury did notice that husbands and wives consulted before she agreed to extend or accept an offer. Essentially, the women were acting as prostitutes in the eyes of our writers.<sup>35</sup>

Besides noticing sexual practices or their cooking abilities, European men had little contact with women. They learned very little about the women's skills, perspectives, and contributions to the community. Even in cooking, the writers notice little beyond the quality and taste. Boller praised the women's cooking abilities and described some recipes in detail. Henry found the food disgusting and described native eating habits as barbaric. Since Europeans tended to mention the lack of salt and pepper frequently, their sense of taste may not have been sensitive enough to detect the variety of ingredients in their dishes besides meat, corn and beans. They also did not seem interested enough to ask about or record that information. Henry demonstrated his lack of understanding when he examined a cooking pot. Some of their cooking pottery was cone shaped. Henry described how the women must carefully (and in his opinion awkwardly) place the pots in a hole of ashes, instead of analyzing the benefits of having more surface area contact with a heat source.<sup>36</sup>

The European men might not have learned much about women because women might not have been very willing to talk to them. Hidatsa and Mandan had very specific ideas about the division of labor between men and women. Each probably did not know too much detail about the others skills. Therefore, the Indian men could not describe the women's jobs at all. Although he might have learned much from the women, who were the farmers and gatherers, Bradbury made friends with the village shaman. Bradbury did not initiate the association, the Hidatsa man did, and no women seemed to find the same

interest in his plant collecting. Bradbury understood enough to know that it was improper to walk through a woman's garden, but never recorded any conversations with them.<sup>37</sup>

Another important factor which affected the Europeans' impression of the Mandan and Hidatsa life was the time of year that they arrived. The wealth of the Indians and the availability of bison herds changed throughout the year. Since Boller arrived in the spring, which are the lean months in these groups' annual food cycle, he noticed their hunger, the lack of bison, and their dependency on roots and berries.<sup>38</sup> Bradbury noticed the scarcity of food when he arrived in the summer, but that year the cause was bad luck and bad weather. The season had been very wet and many of the cache pits, where food was stored, had been water damaged and the food destroyed. However, later in the summer when the corn reached the green stage, the supplies were replenished.<sup>39</sup> Since Catlin arrived during an important ceremony he witnessed many rounds of feasting. The winter diet was different than the summer diet, but Thompson, who arrived in winter, thought that they only ate bison and deer meat because that was all he saw.<sup>40</sup>

Two twentieth century studies fill in many of the details that the European observers missed. Gilbert L. Wilson worked with Buffalo Bird Woman, a Hidatsa living on the Fort Berthold Reservation, to write a book recording traditional farming and food preparing techniques. Buffalo Bird Woman was born in a Hidatsa village soon after the smallpox epidemic of 1837. She remembered moving to Like-A-Fishhook village and living with the Mandan and Arikara. She was raised learning the traditional role for women in Hidatsa society and maintained that knowledge even after she moved to the reservation.<sup>41</sup> The study is unique because it offers a personal account of a Hidatsa woman. She gave detailed explanations of skills and traditions, and told why Hidatsa's did things that way. For women's and agricultural history the work is priceless. Since Buffalo Bird Woman never learned English, Wilson had to translate all of her commentary and, as the writer, he decided what to print. Wilson worked with Buffalo Bird Woman after traditional Hidatsa farming had declined in

37 Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 116, 147, 173.

38 Boller, *Among the Indians*, 35.

39 Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 118.

40 Hopwood, ed., *Travels in Western North America*, 171.

41 Gilbert L. Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), xi-xxiii.

35 Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 125.

36 Coates, *New Light*, 328.



importance and he considered her agriculture to be "primitive."<sup>42</sup> Wilson's stated aim in producing this anthropological study was to let Buffalo Bird Woman inform him and his readers. Unfortunately, it is only one woman's perspective. Anything that she missed was lost, anything she misunderstood was misrecorded, anything she overemphasized in her longing for traditional life was misrepresented. On the other hand, she grew up in an oral society which required a good memory and learned, not from books, but from the community. The smallpox epidemics only served to strengthen the Hidatsa and Mandan desire to keep hold of their traditions.<sup>43</sup>

Another author who took advantage of the living memories was Alfred W. Bowers. In his study, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization*, Bowers consulted Mandans at the Fort Berthold Reservation to augment his previous research of the written descriptions. When Bower's informants disagreed on a particular subject he often included several descriptions of the same story or ceremony. Since his subject was the religious life of the Mandan, Bowers depended on his informants' willingness to disclose personal and sacred information. Bowers selected people, especially Christians, who would divulge the details of ceremonies and ideas.<sup>44</sup> He also admits that many of his informants died before he got the chance to ask all his questions.

There are many questions that the eighteenth and nineteenth century visitors to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages did not ask. They did not notice much about the children, how they were taught, or what their lives were like. The ceremonies focused on men's power and male rites of passage. The women may have had their own rites and means of acquiring power that were just as important. For people to have lived together in a small area, the community must have had social controls that escaped the notice of outsiders. The writers saw extreme violence outside the village, but did not see much, if any, inside and did not ask why. The writings concentrated on the power of men and not the interdependence that accompanies their distinct division of labor. The observations do not reveal much about the women's perspective on their sexuality or the views on polygamy, since sisters frequently married the same husband. These men were

not responsible for examining everything, but it is the reader's responsibility to inquire into what they likely missed.

The subjects featured in these and other documents about the Mandan and Hidatsa may be overemphasized in modern studies. Since the information is easily available, it encourages us to look at those aspects which have culture appear to have clear evidence to explain them. They repeat stories of warfare and aggression. But there is also evidence of peace and cooperation. There is ample information on the trading culture in these societies, and significantly less about them as consumers. Some overlooked ideas may be minor but others have interesting possibilities for further study. Instead of reassessing what the Indians expected from Europeans, there might be some value to looking at what Europeans expected of their hosts. The visitors did not seem to think much about that, but the Mandan and Hidatsa were still willing to offer their hospitality. We will never know everything about these two societies, but looking at the available documents in new ways may provide a more balanced, holistic view of their lives.

42 *Ibid.*, 3.

43 Alfred W. Bowers, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization* (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1991), 75. Originally published in 1950. The research at Fort Berthold was conducted in 1930-31.

44 *Ibid.*, 4.