

Tribes That (Possibly) Used The Vore Buffalo Jump

By Gene Gade

They called themselves, *“People of the Willows”* and *“Children of the Long-beaked Bird.”* In the less poetic translations in our history books, they are known respectively as the Hidatsa and the Crows. Thus far, the evidence connecting them to the Vore Buffalo Jump is entirely circumstantial and pretty thin, yet it’s interesting and merits further investigation.

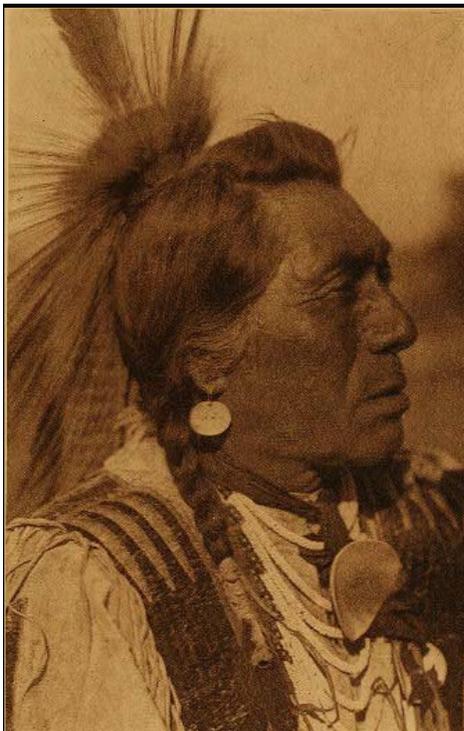
Hidatsa

The Hidatsa were the parent tribe from which the Crows later branched. They lived in large earthlodge villages along the Missouri and Knife rivers. Their economy was based on cultivation of corn, beans, squash and sunflowers. They also hunted buffalo and other game, fished, harvested many wild plants and were avid traders. They made baskets and pottery, fished with bone hooks, and used snares, bows and arrows.

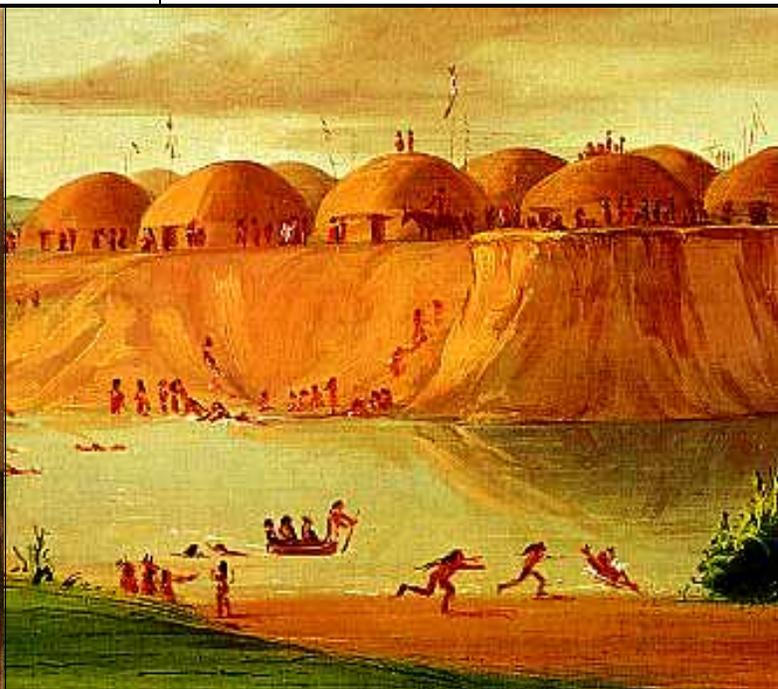
It’s not certain where the Hidatsa originated. They speak a variant of the Siouan language family. Some aspects of their culture suggest a relationship with the Woodland culture that was widespread in North America from about 2,000 to

about 1,200 years ago. However, they placed their dead on scaffolds instead of the mass mound graves typical of the Woodland culture. It is known that there were people living in log house villages along the Missouri at least 900 years ago—most probably the ancestors of the Hidatsa and Mandan. The Mandans were also Siouan speakers who lived in earthlodge villages and farmed along the Missouri close to modern-day Bismarck, ND. They called the Hidatsa, *“Minitari”* which means those who live *“across the water.”*

When written history first records them, the Hidatsa were living in three villages of 40 to 100 earthlodges each, near the junction of the Knife and Missouri Rivers in what is now



Rabbithead—Hidatsa
Photo by Edward Curtis circa 1908



A Hidatsa earthlodge village near the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers as painted by George Catlin in the early 1830’s

Hidatsa-Crow Continued:

north-central North Dakota. In addition to providing excellent farm ground, hunting and fishing, the location gave the Hidatsa control of the quarries of Knife River Flint, one of the most sought after stones for tool making in North America.

Knife River Flint is a distinctive dark-brown stone composed of microscopic quartz crystals. Like most stones that Indians used for making projectile points and cutting tools, flint is hard, forms a very sharp edge and conchoidal ("shell-shaped") flakes. Flint from Knife River has been valued by Native Americans for a very long time. Archaeologists have found 11,000 year old Clovis points fashioned from it. Not just the local tribes valued it. Knife River Flint became a trade item and it has been found over 500 miles from the quarries. Certainly it was a much valued resource for the Hidatsa while the Vore site was being used.

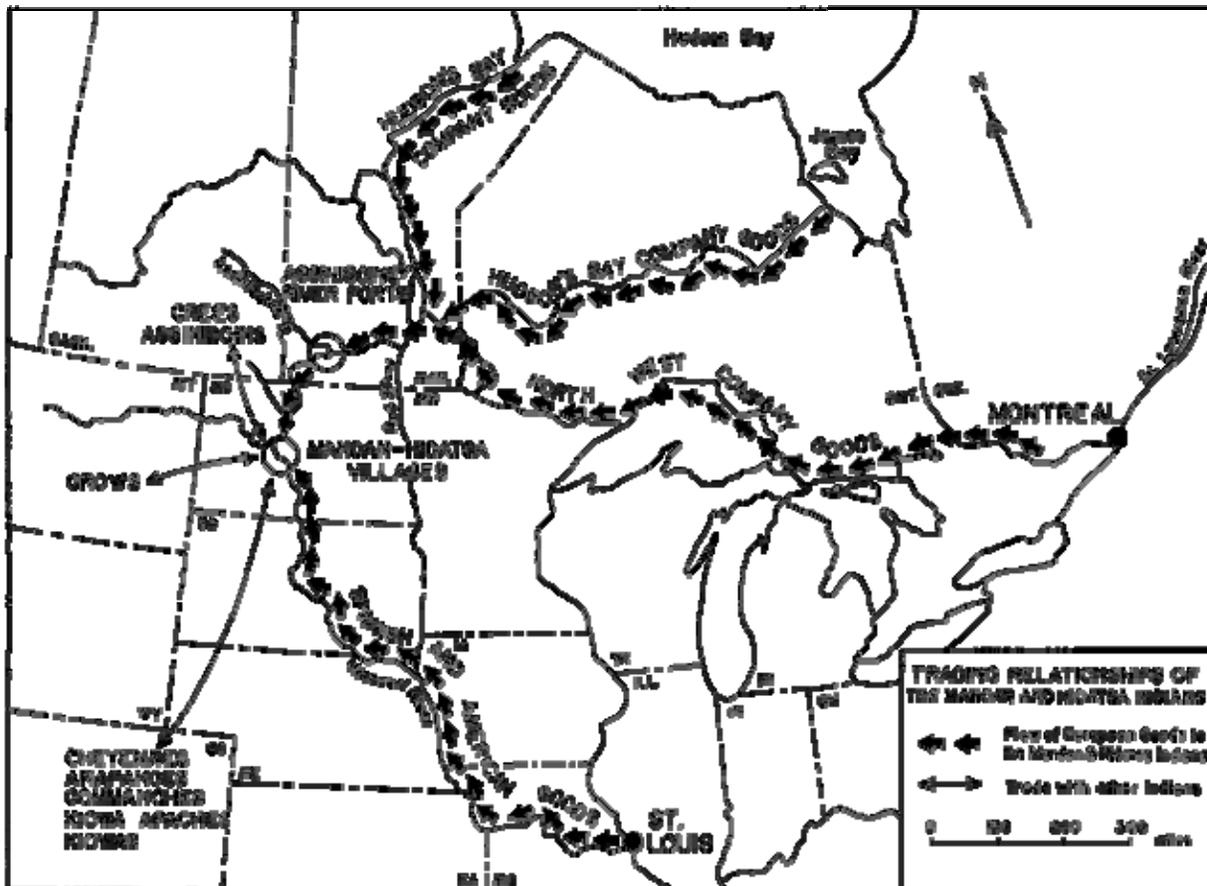
Absoraka or "Mountain Crows"

The people who became known as the Crow tribe branched off of the Hidatsa some time in the 1500's and migrated slowly south and west. Sources vary as to how abrupt the break with the Hidatsa was, but clearly they shifted from a horticultural economy to a nomadic society based on bison hunting. By 1750 they were recognized as a

separate tribe, the Mountain Crows. Their name is variously spelled, Apsaraka, Absoraka, or Ap-solookee. Whether "Crow" is even a correct translation of their name for themselves is a matter of debate. The "long-beaked bird" might have been a crane or heron. In any case, 19th Century historians called them "Crows," and the name stuck.

About 1700 A.D., another group separated from the Hidatsa villages and moved west along the Missouri and Yellowstone in Montana. They are referred to as the "River Crows" and were probably not Vore site users. Both Crow groups continued to visit and trade with the Hidatsa well into the 1800's.

There is no doubt that the Mountain Crows spent time in the Black Hills area. They are known to have contested with the Cheyenne and Lakota for the rich northern Plains hunting grounds as far south as the panhandle of Nebraska. They are also known to have fought with the Blackfoot tribes in Montana and sometimes with the Shoshone. When they weren't fighting the Shoshone, they were trading with them and with the Flathead tribe of western Montana. It is thought that the Crows first acquired horses from the Shoshone (who, in turn, got horses from their



Comanche relatives on the southern Plains).

By the time most written history was recorded, the center of Mountain Crow territory was in the Bighorn/Little Bighorn area of Montana. They hunted, traded and raided in all directions from there. By that time, the Cheyenne and Lakota were in control of the Black Hills.

Hidatsa-Crow and the VBJ ?

Evidence that the Crows or Hidatsa used the Vore Buffalo Jump (VBJ) is a bit tenuous, but intriguing. The Hidatsa are known to have hunted bison in various kinds of traps and jumps, but the consensus is that they probably preferred to hunt closer to their villages than the VBJ if they could. However, they were certainly capable of long-distance travel. It's known, for example, that the Hidatsa frequently raided the Shoshone in western Montana, over twice as far from their villages as the VBJ. On one such raid they captured a Shoshone girl named Sacagawea and walked her all the way back to North Dakota. Lewis and Clarke found her a few years later in the Knife River villages with her husband, the French trader, Charbonneau. The rest, as they say, is history. If Hidatsa could walk to the Three Forks of the Missouri to capture a teenage girl, they were clearly capable of traveling to the VBJ (1/2 the distance) to hunt.

Apparently some artifacts found in recent excavations at Williams Spring (about 10 miles south of the VBJ) and some sites in the Powder River basin show Middle

Missouri affinities (The Hidatsa are a Middle Missouri culture.) The Mountain Crows are definitely known to have hunted and fought all over the northern Great Plains, at least as far east as the Black Hills.

Six or seven per cent of the stone artifacts recovered at the VBJ in the 1970's excavations were made from Knife River Flint. It's possible that these tools found in the Vore site were left there by tribes who traded for the stone, but it's at least as likely that the Knife River artifacts were brought directly by the Hidatsa or, more likely, their Crow relatives.

Likewise, the Powder River porcellanite, another distinctive gray stone type that is prominent among the artifacts at the VBJ, is found in the homeland of the Crows... the Tongue, Powder and Yellowstone River basins. It seems reasonable to conclude that the Crows brought some of it to the VBJ. More research is needed.

