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Intertribal Warfare as the Precursor of Indian-White Warfare on the Northern Great Plains

JOHN C. EWERS

One hundred and seventy-five years ago Alexander Henry, Northwest Company trader, built a post on Park River, a western tributary of the Red River near the present international boundary in eastern North Dakota. Looking westward from that isolated post on September 18, 1800, he saw the plains covered with buffalo as far as he could see. This practical businessman wrote in his journal for that day: "This is a delightful country, and were it not for perpetual wars, the natives might be the happiest people on earth."¹

What Henry observed of the Park River region might have been said of the entire northern Great Plains at that time. The region between the Mississippi and Red River on the east to the Rocky Mountains, and from the valley of the Saskatchewan southward toward the Platte, was rich in buffalo and other natural resources for the support of an Indian population that numbered considerably less than one person per square mile. That Indian population was divided and subdivided into a host of small societies in which the major political unit was the tribe. The sedentary, horticultural tribes were further divided into politically autonomous villages, and the nomadic tribes into hunting bands, each with its chief or chiefs. The individual Indian owed his loyalty to his tribe. He boasted, "I am a Crow," or, "I am a Cree", depending upon his tribal membership.

The roots of intertribal warfare in this region can be found in the very nature of tribalism itself—in the common disposition of the members

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¹ Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Elliott Coues, 3 vols. (New York, 1897), I: 99.

of each tribe to regard *their* tribe as "the people," and to look upon outsiders with suspicion. This is not to deny that other and more specific causes for intertribal conflict existed—competition for choice hunting grounds, capture of women, or horses, or inanimate property, and individual desire for recognition and status through the winning of war honors. But in an atmosphere charged with intertribal distrust even an imagined slight by an outsider could lead to retaliation against other members of his tribe, while more violent acts of aggression could lead to revenge raids in force. The history of intertribal warfare in this region seems to show that it was much easier to start a war than it was to end one, and that hostilities between neighboring tribes persisted from generation to generation.

Certainly the northern Great Plains constituted a vast and complex theater of intertribal warfare from prehistoric times until after the last of the great buffalo herds was exterminated in the western portion of this region during the mid-1880s. Archaeological evidence cannot pinpoint the beginnings of intertribal warfare in this region. But it certainly reveals the existence of warfare in prehistoric times.

Along the Missouri River in the Dakotas numerous pre-Columbian village sites have been identified. Their occupants lived in semipermanent earth lodges, and gained their subsistence by raising crops in the fertile river bottoms and by hunting on the open plains. Painstaking excavations of many of these sites since World War II have revealed that the villages were fortified by ditches and palisades, and that some of them were protected by more elaborate defensive works which included bastions constructed at carefully calculated intervals. A few of these fortified villages were the homes of some of the earliest agriculturalists in the region—settlers who preceded Columbus by four or more centuries. Later prehistoric villages were inhabited by ancestors of the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa, who continued to surround their villages with strong palisades until the end of intertribal warfare in this region. George Catlin and Karl Bodmer pictured the fortified villages of the Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan during their travels up the Missouri in 1832–34. Donald Lehmer has described both the prehistoric and historic fortified villages as they have become known to archaeologists, and has presented typical fortification plans of several varieties.²

² Donald J. Lehmer, *Introduction to Middle Missouri Archeology*, National Park Service Anthropological Papers 1 (Washington, D.C., 1971), 69, 71, 113, 116, 122, 141–42.

Surely the prehistoric villagers would not have taken elaborate steps to fortify their settlements had they not been endangered by enemies. Whoever those enemies were, we can be sure that they were other Indians.

Farther west evidences of prehistoric warfare as practiced by presumably nomadic Indians appear in the paintings of armed warriors on the walls of Pictograph Cave, south of Billings, Montana. These warriors carry large, circular shields which were considerably larger in proportion to the men who bear them than were the rawhide shields used by mounted Indian warriors of this region during the nineteenth century. The shields were decorated with designs that probably represented the supernatural helpers and protectors of the warriors who carried them. William Mulloy, who excavated and interpreted this site, has assigned these shield-bearing warriors to the Late Prehistoric Period, A.D. 500–1800.³

That intertribal warfare was rife in this region at the time these Indians first became known to whites is evident in the writings of the pioneer explorers. French explorers of the western Great Lakes during the mid-seventeenth century heard of Indians living to the west whom the Algonquian tribes called “Nadoessis,” i.e., “Enemies.” That name has survived in the abbreviated form of Sioux for the Dakota tribes. When Father Allouez met some of these Sioux at the head of Lake Superior during the mid-1660s he described them as “warlike” and reported that they “have conducted hostilities against all their enemies, by whom they are held in extreme fear.”⁴

Other whites who met tribes of the easternmost portion of this region before those Indians acquired horses commented upon the intertribal warfare of the time. Henry Kelsey, a young Hudson’s Bay Company employee, was the first white man known to have written an account of his travels with Indians on the northern Great Plains. During the summer of 1691 he accompanied some Assiniboine and Cree Indians onto the buffalo plains west of Lake Winnipeg seeking to extend his firm’s trade to a more distant tribe who were enemies of both the Assiniboine and the Cree—the “Naywatome,” or “Mountain Poets.” The identity of that tribe is still uncertain. Kelsey had difficulty persuading his Indian companions to enter the “Enemies Country,” for those enemies had killed three Cree

³ William Mulloy, *A Preliminary Historical Outline for the Northwestern Plains*, University of Wyoming Publications, vol. XXII, nos. 1–2 (Laramie, 1958), 118–39, figs. 42–44.

⁴ Louise Phelps Kellogg, ed., *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634–1699* (New York, 1917), 132.

women the previous spring. When he met the "Naywatome" chief, that leader protested that the Cree had killed six lodges of his people. But after Kelsey gave him a gun and other presents, the chief agreed to meet the trader the following spring and to go with him to Hudson's Bay to trade. In the end he did not do this because the Cree killed two more men of his tribe before spring arrived.

Brief observations appended to Kelsey's journal mention two specific war customs of the Assiniboine and Cree—the wearing of a feathered bonnet which "they put to use when the enemies are in sight believing yt will save ym from being killed," and the carrying of a sacred pipe stem "upon any expedition as when they go to seek out their Enemies' tracks." Mention of these items by Kelsey in 1691 assures us that war medicines played important psychological roles in the intertribal warfare of this region at the time of first Indian-white contact.⁵

Pierre La Vérendrye, the French trader from Montreal, had tried unsuccessfully for several years to end the warfare between the Assiniboine-Cree and the Sioux before he wrote in 1743, "It will take a long time to pacify all these tribes who from time immemorial have been deadly enemies."⁶

Some idea of the scale of this intertribal warfare during the early 1740s may be gleaned from Father Couquart's report of an attack on the "Sioux of the Prairies" by a combined Cree-Assiniboine force in 1742. In a four-day battle more than two hundred Cree and Assiniboine warriors killed seventy Sioux, "without counting women and children." Their Sioux captives "occupied in their march more than four arpents," i.e., over eight hundred feet. Even if those captives were marched in single file as much as four feet apart that would yield a figure of some two hundred captives taken in a single battle. The 270 or more Sioux killed or captured in that action may have equaled or exceeded the entire population of a hunting band of thirty lodges.⁷

The Blackfoot tribes farther west had acquired horses when David Thompson first met them in the shadow of the Rockies during the 1780s.

⁵ Henry Kelsey, *The Kelsey Papers*, eds. A. G. Doughty and Chester Martin (Ottawa, 1929), 19-20.

⁶ Pierre La Vérendrye, *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye and His Sons . . .*, ed. Lawrence J. Burpee, Champlain Society Publications, vol. XVI (Toronto, 1927), 418.

⁷ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The French Regime in Wisconsin . . . 1634-1760*, 3 vols. (Madison, 1906), III: 418.

But older men told him of Piegan warfare with the Shoshoni in the days when their people were still afoot. They said that the greatest damage was done when a large war party surprised, attacked, and wiped out a small hunting camp of ten to thirty lodges, but that casualties were few in pitched battles between relatively equal numbers of warriors. There was no close contact in those larger battles. The opposing forces formed lines facing each other, barely within arrow range. They protected themselves behind large rawhide shields, and shot arrows from their long bows. They also wore body armor of several thicknesses of rawhide which restricted their movements. Darkness generally brought an end to the battle.⁸

During the middle decades of the eighteenth century the tribes of the northern Great Plains began to acquire horses from the south. After the nomadic tribes gained enough well-trained horses to enable them to ride to battle, the static, primarily defensive action became obsolete. No longer could warriors hide behind their shields in safety. Cumbersome hide armor was discarded; shields were reduced in size to cover only the vital parts of the body of the mounted warrior; and bows were shortened for easier use on horseback. The mounted charge brought combatants quickly into close contact, where they wielded lances, clubs, and knives in man-to-man combat. Warriors had more opportunities to distinguish themselves—to win coveted war honors, or to be killed. And casualties increased.

Even so, large-scale battles between nearly equal forces, numbering more than one hundred on each side, do not appear to have been very common in nineteenth century intertribal warfare in this region. Reliable figures on casualties in those battles are almost impossible to find. Indians tended to overestimate the numbers of the enemies and the damage they inflicted upon them. Body counts may have been even less accurate in this warfare than in actions in Vietnam. Nevertheless, there were some battles that have been fairly well documented from both sides, battles in which Indian losses probably exceeded the Indian casualties in the oft-described tragic action at Wounded Knee in 1890.

In a battle near the Cypress Hills during the summer of 1866 the Piegan are reputed to have killed more than three hundred Crow and Gros Ventres. Shortly before that engagement the Gros Ventres had killed Many Horses, the Piegan head chief. His followers were seeking

⁸ David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*, ed. J. B. Tyrrell, Champlain Society Publications, vol. XII (Toronto, 1916), 328-32.

revenge. The ferocity of their charge caused their enemies to panic, and the killing is said to have ended only when the victors decided they had enough of it. Piegan survivors remembered this as a great victory; the Gros Ventres recalled it as their most disastrous defeat.⁹

Horse raids against enemy camps came to be the most numerous military actions. A thorough study of the vast literature on all the tribes of this region would yield references to hundreds of horse raids in which they participated. Even so, the great majority of horse raids probably was never referred to in the literature. Horse raids were well organized, small-scale military expeditions, similar to the commando raids of World War II. Their limited objective was to capture horses from the enemy without loss to themselves. (My elderly Indian informants who had participated in these raids preferred the word "capture" to "steal.") Yet these parties sometimes found more action than they anticipated, either on their outward journey, while trying to take horses from enemy camps, or on their hurried rides homeward. Some whole parties were wiped out; others lost one or more members. Some raiders survived forty or more of these dangerous expeditions; others lost their lives in their first effort.¹⁰

It seems probable that, during the nineteenth century, more Indians of this region lost their lives on horse raids than on large-scale revenge or scalp raids, simply because the horse raids were many times more numerous. Nor is there reason to doubt that, during the historic period, many more Indians of this region were killed by other Indians in inter-tribal wars than by white soldiers or civilians in more fully documented Indian-white warfare.

Had each of the tribes of this region continued to stand alone, fighting all neighboring tribes, it is probable that many of the smaller tribes either would have been exterminated, or their few survivors would have been adopted into the larger tribes, thereby increasing the latter's military potential. Tribes survived, maintained their identity, and strengthened their own war effort by forming alliances with one or more neighboring tribes. The allied tribes had common enemies, and sometimes launched joint expeditions against them. The sharing of common enemies

⁹ John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman, 1958), 242-43; Alfred L. Kroeber, *Ethnology of the Gros Ventres*, American Museum of Natural History Anthropological Papers, vol. I (New York, 1908), 146.

¹⁰ John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, with Comparative Materials from Other Western Tribes*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 159 (Washington, D. C., 1955), 171-215.

appears to have been a stronger motive for some alliances than the fact that the tribes involved spoke related languages. One of the major alliances during the historic period was that of the Siouan-speaking Assiniboine and the Algonquian-speaking Plains Cree. One of the best documented intertribal battles in this region was the Assiniboine-Cree attack upon a small Piegan camp outside Fort McKenzie on August 28, 1833. Prince Maximilian and Karl Bodmer witnessed, described, and illustrated this battle.¹¹

We can better understand the complex history of Indian warfare on the northern Great Plains if we view it in terms of a history of the four major alliances of tribes and their struggles to maintain a balance of power in the intertribal warfare of this region. All of these alliances were established before the United States acquired Louisiana in 1803, and all predate the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Different numbers of tribes were included in these alliances. At its height each alliance may have included tribes totaling from about 15,000 to more than 25,000 people. During the nineteenth century a few tribes, or portions of tribes, changed their alliances in response to changing conditions, such as the threat of remaining at war with an aggressive, nearby enemy alliance. Some tribes tried to go it alone over a period of years with almost disastrous results. The four major alliances are here named after their core tribes—the tribes that remained together throughout the historic period without shifting alliances. But we should understand that other tribes were members of those alliances for extended periods.

On the northwestern Plains were the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance, of which the core tribes were the Piegan, Blood, and North Blackfoot (Siksika), who shared a common language and customs, and were often referred to collectively as Blackfoot or Blackfeet. These tribes moved westward and then southward during the eighteenth century, and in so doing displaced the Kootenai, Flathead, and part of the Shoshoni from lands near the Rockies in southern Alberta and northern Montana. Their alliance, at the height of its power during the first half of the nineteenth century, also included the small Athapascan tribe of Sarsi, and the larger Algonquian-speaking Gros Ventres. The members of this alliance raided the smaller tribes west of the Rockies and tried to prevent them from

¹¹ Alexander Philip Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846 . . .*, 82 vols. (Cleveland, 1904-07), XXIII: 146-53.

hunting buffalo on the plains east of those mountains. They aggressively raided the Crow Indians in the Yellowstone valley; and they stemmed the westward push of the Plains Cree and Assiniboine on their eastern flank. They also made life miserable for white mountain men, who sought to trap beaver in the Missouri headwaters region, and twice drove them from Montana before 1825. There is no indication that the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance coveted more hunting grounds after about 1830 as they then occupied one of the finest buffalo hunting areas on the plains, an area twice the size of New England.

Yet six years after they negotiated their first treaty with the United States in 1855 as members of the "Blackfoot Nation," the Gros Ventres, in a dispute over stolen horses, left the Blackfoot alliance and became allies of their former enemies, the River Crow and Assiniboine.

During the decade of the 1860s small Blackfoot parties attacked miners, ranchers, and freighters in Montana. But after Col. E. M. Baker's punitive expedition killed some 173 Indians of Heavy Runner's peaceful band on the Marias on January 23, 1870, the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance posed no serious threat to white settlement in either Montana or Alberta. Weakened by a smallpox epidemic, and demoralized by whiskey, they were in no condition to organize a war against the whites. Their chiefs found that peace with the whites was in the best interest of their people. The North Blackfoot head chief, Crowfoot, refused both Sitting Bull's invitation to join him against the whites after the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and the Métis' offer to join them in the Riel Rebellion on the Saskatchewan in 1885.¹²

To the east of the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance in Canada and Montana were the tribes of the Assiniboine-Cree alliance. There can be little doubt that military considerations motivated the initial alliance of these core tribes. In 1700 Pierre-Charles Le Sueur, the French trader among the Sioux, explained the formation of that alliance. "The Christinaux (Cree) have obtained the use of firearms before the Scioux did, by means of the English at Hudson's Bay, continually waged war against the Assinipoils, who were their nearest neighbors. The latter, finding themselves weak, asked for peace, and to render it more firm, allied themselves to the Christinaux, taking their women to wife."¹³

¹² Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, provides a history of the Blackfoot alliance.

¹³ Pierre-Charles Le Sueur, *Le Sueur's Voyage up the Mississippi*, Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, vol. XVI (Madison, 1902), 190.

Together these tribes pushed westward, exerting strong pressure upon the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance. The Assiniboine extended their hunting grounds into the valley of the Missouri above the Mandan villages and as far west as Milk River, and the Cree moved up the Saskatchewan north of the present international boundary. These tribes both traded and fought with the Mandan and Hidatsa. They fought the Crow until after mid-century. Until 1851 they were at war with all of the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance.

Then the Upper Assiniboine made peace with the Gros Ventres, and mingled and intermarried with them on Milk River. During the waning years of intertribal warfare these two tribes also were friendly to the River Crow, while they launched joint war parties against the Piegan.¹⁴

The westernmost band of Ojibwa on Red River became part of the Assiniboine-Cree alliance because they shared a powerful common enemy, the Sioux. As these people moved westward to become known as the Plains Ojibwa during the early years of the nineteenth century, they mingled with the Cree and Assiniboine. Some warriors of these three tribes also accompanied the large, well organized buffalo hunting excursions of the Red River Métis southward into Sioux Country during the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of the Cree also aided the Métis in the short-lived and unsuccessful Riel Rebellion on the Saskatchewan in 1885.

During the 1850s and early 1860s, as the buffalo range contracted westward, the Yanktonai Sioux aggressively overran the eastern portion of the Assiniboine hunting grounds in North Dakota and Montana, and some 150 lodges of the Lower Assiniboine living in closest proximity to the invading Sioux found it expedient to make peace with them. Even so, those Assiniboine who came to share the same agency and later the same reservation of Fort Peck with the Yanktonai, did not join their long-time Sioux enemies in their conflicts with the Army of the United States.¹⁵

Doubtless the third alliance, the Mandan-Hidatsa alliance, was an old one which antedated the separation of the Crow Indians from the

¹⁴ David G. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree*, American Museum of Natural History Anthropological Papers, vol. XXXVII, pt. 2 (New York, 1940); David Rodnick, *The Fort Belknap Assiniboine of Montana* (Philadelphia, 1938); John C. Ewers, *Ethnological Report on the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres Tribes of Indians* (New York, 1974).

¹⁵ Edwin T. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arickaras, Assiniboines, Crees, Crows*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman, 1961); Ewers, *Report on the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres*.

Hidatsa and their movement westward to become a nomadic tribe. Tradition has it that the Crow and Hidatsa quarreled over buffalo, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century they certainly had patched up their differences, and during the eight remaining decades of intertribal warfare in this region the Crow and Hidatsa frequently exchanged friendly visits.

South of the Mandan and Hidatsa on the Missouri were the Arikara, Caddoan-speaking relatives of the Pawnee of Nebraska. During the early years of the nineteenth century the Arikara were sometimes friends and at other times enemies of the Mandan and Hidatsa. But they shared one powerful enemy, the Sioux. In their efforts to go it alone against the Sioux, the Arikara failed. In 1832 they were forced to abandon their earth lodge villages, and the Sioux burned them. The Arikara survived by eventually moving up river, and firmly joining the Mandan-Hidatsa alliance. During the last two decades of intertribal warfare in this region the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara shared a common fortified village, Like-a-Fishhook, on the Missouri in North Dakota, where they, with difficulty, survived repeated Sioux attacks.¹⁶

No tribe of the northern Great Plains held a more precarious military position than did the Crow after they drove the Shoshoni from the middle Yellowstone valley late in the eighteenth century. Never a large tribe, the Crow were surrounded by powerful enemies—the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance and the Assiniboine-Cree alliance on the north, the Sioux on the east, the Cheyenne on the south, and the Shoshoni on the west. The Crow were too far from their old allies, the Mandan and Hidatsa on the Missouri, to benefit from their help in the fight for survival. From the 1830s on white men who knew and admired the Crow Indians gloomily predicted their extermination by their more numerous enemies. For several years during the 1850s their country was so overrun by enemies that white traders abandoned their posts in Crow country. Yet the Crow Indians survived, due to their courage and military prowess, and their diplomacy. The Crow succeeded in making their own alliances not only with such tribes as the Nez Percé from west of the Rockies, the Gros Ventres, and the Assiniboine, but also with the whites. Thirty years ago, various elderly Blackfoot informants expressed the opinion that the Crow were saved from extermination by their alliance with the whites.¹⁷

¹⁶ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 41–62.

¹⁷ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 137–204; Ewers, *Report on the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres*, 77, 164, *passim*.

The word Dakota translates as "allies;" the word Sioux as "enemies." During the historic period of intertribal warfare on the northern Great Plains the tribes of the Dakota, or Sioux, alliance came to be regarded as aggressive enemies by more tribes than did any other Indian people of the American West. Close-knit by language, and by the tradition that they comprised "seven council fires," the seven major divisions of the Dakota included about 25,000 people in 1790. The four eastern divisions were known collectively as the Santee. The membership of the middle division consisted of the Yankton and Yanktonai. The western division, known as the Teton or Western Sioux, included some forty percent of the total population of the Sioux alliance.

The Dakota movement—from the time the Dakota first became known to white men in the middle seventeenth century until the decade of the 1870s—was westward from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley across the Dakotas, southward into Iowa and Nebraska, and westward into Montana and Wyoming. Pressures from the Ojibwa and other Woodland tribes, as well as the attractions of buffalo hunting on the Great Plains, encouraged the early Sioux movement westward. The pace of this movement accelerated after the Sioux obtained both firearms and horses. Some of them reached the Missouri before 1750. Some Teton bands may have been hunting as far west as the Black Hills a century before Custer found gold in that region. Before the end of intertribal warfare they were raiding the Shoshoni near the Rockies. During this period of nearly two centuries the Dakota fought at least twenty-six other Indian tribes, as well as the Red River Métis, and the Army of the United States. Their enemies included at least ten Woodland tribes, and all the tribes of the Assiniboine-Cree alliance and the Mandan-Hidatsa alliance, and much less frequently some of the tribes of the Blackfoot alliance. They also fought the Iowa, Omaha, Oto, Ponca, and Pawnee south of the area we are considering.

During their westward movement the Dakota displaced many tribes from portions of their hunting grounds: the Iowa, Omaha, Ponca, Pawnee, Arikara, Mandan, Hidatsa, Assiniboine, and Crow all lost some territory to the Dakota. There can be little doubt that the continued westward push of the Teton and Yanktonai during the 1850s and 1860s was stimulated by the contraction of the buffalo range westward and the increasing scarcity of game in former Dakota hunting grounds farther east. Yet too few historians appear to be aware that this movement onto lands described as Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Assiniboine, and Crow

in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 helped to make a shambles of that treaty. Furthermore, it should be noted that the most dramatic battles fought between the army and the Dakota were on lands those Indians had taken from other tribes since 1851.¹⁸

Actually the Dakota had been allies of the army in its first Indian campaign on the Great Plains—against the Arikara villages in 1823. When the soldiers and the Dakota reached the fortified Arikara settlements the Dakota were eager to attack. But Colonel Leavenworth was reluctant to do so. While he delayed, the Arikara escaped during the night. Edwin T. Denig, who knew the Dakota well for over twenty years prior to 1855, attributed their disdain for the courage of white soldiers to their memory of the army's failure to attack the Arikara villages in 1823.¹⁹

The Teton regard for the Crow Indians as worthy, longtime enemies is revealed in their own records—their pictorial winter counts—in which many years were remembered for specific actions in their prolonged war with the Crow. Indeed, the first entry in the famed Lone Dog Winter Count recorded, “thirty Dakotas were killed by Crow Indians” in 1800–1801.²⁰ In addition to winter counts, the autobiographical drawings by Sioux chiefs and warriors also tell of actions against other tribes. Drawings by Running Antelope, a famous Hunkpapa chief, reveal that he counted coup most frequently upon the Arikara during the decade of the 1850s. In one action he killed two Arikara chiefs, while in another ten men and three women died at his hand.²¹

After the Fort Laramie treaties of 1851 and 1868, chiefs of the Crow and of the village tribes complained repeatedly to their agents of Dakota aggression. These tribal leaders petitioned for the aid of whites to help redress their grievances against the aggressive Dakota. In 1864 the Arikara chief, White Shield, reminded Agent Mahlon Wilkinson that the Arikara and Hidatsa chiefs who had signed the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1851 had since been killed by the Dakota, and called upon the Great

¹⁸ John C. Ewers, *Teton Dakota Ethnology and History* (Berkeley, 1938); Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians from Their Earliest Traditions . . .*, South Dakota Historical Society Collections, vol. II, pt. 2 (Aberdeen, 1904).

¹⁹ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 55–57.

²⁰ Garrick Mallery, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians, Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1888–89* (Washington, D. C., 1893), 273.

²¹ Mallery, *Picture-Writing*, 572–73.

Father to keep his promise of sending soldiers "to help us keep the Dakotas out of our country."²²

At a council with their agent in 1870 two old chiefs of the village tribes called upon the whites to punish the Sioux. White Shield forcefully expressed his opinion that "The Sioux will never listen to the Great Father until the soldiers stick their bayonets in their ears and make them." The Hidatsa chief, Crow's Breast, further advised, "If the Great Father wants to be obeyed by the Sioux he must give them some prompt punishment. We are Indians and know how to deal with Indians. They will not keep the peace until they are severely punished. Either keep them a year without gifts or provisions, or cut off some camp, killing all, and the rest will then listen."²³

In view of these reactions to the Dakota, is it any wonder that the tribes of the old Mandan-Hidatsa alliance became allies of the whites in their wars with the Sioux? On the other hand, is it surprising that the Sioux, unable to induce any of their traditional enemies among the tribes of the Dakotas and Montana to join them, found allies in the Cheyenne and Arapaho farther south?

Most white historians have been accustomed to approach the subject of the Indian wars of the American West from an ethnocentric viewpoint. To them "the Indian wars" have meant only "Indian-white wars"—wars which interrupted the steady flow of the expansion of white settlement. Thus, in 1934, Paul I. Wellman began his *Death on the Prairie* with an account of the Minnesota Massacre of 1862. Dee Brown's better-known *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) began at the same point in its discussion of the Great Plains Indian wars. Even though he subtitled his book "An Indian History of the American West," Brown ignored the fact that Indians of different tribes had very different views of that history. He sought to interpret the Indian wars of the northern Great Plains only as Indian-white wars, and described them only from the viewpoint of the Sioux hostiles. Brown brushed off as "mercenaries" those tribes that became allies of the whites against the Sioux.

To view the Crow and Arikara as "mercenaries" of the whites is to overlook the long history of Indian-Indian warfare in this region. The

²² Mahlon Wilkinson, Report Number 117 of Indian Agent M. Wilkinson in *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1864*, 264.

²³ John A. Burbank, Report Number 67 of Governor John A. Burbank in *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1870*, 209-10.

Crow, Arikara, and other tribes had been fighting the Sioux for generations before they received any effective aid from the whites. They still suffered from Sioux aggression during the 1860s and 1870s. Surely the history of Indian-white warfare of the northern Great Plains cannot be understood without an awareness of the history of intertribal warfare in this region.