

## THE SAHNISH (Arikara)

The oral history of the Sahnish people is taken from sacred bundles and is verified by archeological findings. Ancient objects and ceremonies are part of the oral history of the people. The Sahnish history has its roots in eastern Nebraska where numerous village sites were found. Oral history tells of a person called "Chief Above" who brought these villages together in a union for protection against warring tribes. Archeologists confirm there was a drawing together into large villages on the Elk Horn River in what is now called Omaha, Nebraska, at the end of the prehistoric and beginning of the proto-historic period.

In 1714, explorer "Etienne Veniard de Bourgmont, who spent several years with the Sahnish, described three Sahnish villages on the west bank of the Missouri above the Niobrara River and 40 villages still farther up river on both banks. By 1723, the Sahnish had gone up the Missouri into South Dakota near the Arickara River (called Grand River today).

In 1738, Pierre de Vamesse Gaultier de La Verendrye, a French fur trader from Montreal, seeking a route to the Pacific Ocean, reported villages of the Panaux and Panai (Sahnish) living a day's journey from the Mandan villages near the mouth of the Cannonball River. In 1743 La Verendrye's son arrived at the Sahnish villages at the mouth of the Bad River and was met by the Little Cherry Band of Sahnish. La Verendrye commemorated the event by planting a tablet that today is kept in a museum at Pierre, South Dakota. Jean Baptist Trudeau, a French fur trader, found the Sahnish living at the mouth of the Grand River around 1794-95. Trudeau was the first trader to live with the Sahnish for a long period of time.

Their westward movement has sometimes prompted historians to promote the myth that the "Arikara seemed to have wandered aimlessly up the Missouri River." According to Sahnish oral historians, the extensive movements of the tribe were not at random or without purpose, but was the westward migration in fulfillment of the directive given to them by Neesaau ti naacitakUx, Chief Above, through an ancient tradition and from a sacred being called "Mother Corn." (Dorsey, 1904). Lewis and Clark encountered the Sahnish people at the mouth of the Grand River in 1804, and found them living in three villages that numbered about 3,000.

The first village was on an island two miles above the Oak Creek and contained about sixty lodges. The whole island was under cultivation. The other two villages

were on each side of a creek, which from its references, appears to be the Cottonwood Creek of today. On June 10, 1833, George Catlin passed the Sahnish villages at the Grand River but did not come ashore because he considered them hostile. He sketched their villages from the deck of the steamer "Yellowstone." That same year, the Sahnish left the banks of the Missouri River after two successive crop failures and conflicts with the Mandan. They rejoined Pawnees in Nebraska on the Loop River, where they stayed for three winters. Because this location made them susceptible to attack by the whites and the Sioux, after only a few years, the Sahnish moved back to the Missouri River area. Upon their arrival back to the Missouri River area, they were stricken with an old enemy, smallpox. In June 1836 and into 1837 the Sahnish people were decimated by the third epidemic of smallpox at their village below the Knife River near Ft. Clark.

In 1856, the fourth smallpox outbreak occurred in the Star Village at Beaver Creek. The smallpox outbreak and the constant raids by the Sioux forced the move in August of 1862 of some Sahnish to Like-a-Fishhook Village, while some remained at Star Village at Beaver Creek. Their bout with smallpox was the final blow that left the Sahnish people weak. They lost almost half of their population. Later, fire destroyed the old Mandan lodges, and they built a new village there and remained until the abandonment and destruction of Fort Clark in 1861. In 1862, the Sahnish moved up to join the Mandan and Hidatsa at Like-A-Fishhook Village.