

Assiniboine Polity

Traditional Assiniboine Government

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CONFIDENTIAL

Acknowledgements

This report has been prepared for The Carry The Kettle First Nation (Chega AK?I) of Saskatchewan. The author for the past four years was the director and past chairperson of the Department of Native American Studies at Ft. Peck Community College, Fort Peck Indian Reservaation, Poplar, Montana, U.S.A.

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Dr. Ryan.'s career includes a wide variety of program and-administrative experiences to include: Tribal Chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes (2 years); Tribal Chairman of the Ft. Peck Assiniboine Tribe (4 years); Tribal Manager of the Fort Belknap Tribes (4 years); Administrative Officer and Acting Superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Rocky Boy's Agency, Southern California Agency, Riverside, California and Fort Peck Agency, Poplar, Montana (4 years).

Dr. Ryan is a recognized Tribal Historian and Religious and Cultural Leader of the American Assiniboine Tribes. Dr. Ryan is a pipe carrier of the Assiniboine. He has an intimate knowledge of Assiniboine history, culture, language, and government. He developed the first Assiniboine Orthography (alphabet) and has developed and taught accredited college level classes in the Assiniboine language. He has taught at the college level for seven (7) years.

The conclusions reached in this report are the result of 28 years of research which has been conducted by the author in formal university setting as well as amongst Assiniboine speaking elders who resided upon reserves and reservations in the Canadian Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan and the State of Montana, U.S.A. The conclusions reached are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent the position of the Department of Native American Studies or Fort Peck Community College. Any inadvertent mistakes are the sole responsibility of the author and should not be a reflection upon the Carry the Kettle First Nation.

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Introduction

This report will identify group decision making processes of the Assiniboine Tribes in the time period prior to the 20th Century. Assiniboine Tribes' social organization, traditional governmental structures and traditional Assiniboine practices will be examined.

History

Nakoda Oyadebi (The Assiniboine People or Nation) were historically noted for the first time on September 10, 1640 in the documents of a Catholic Religious Order, the Society of Jesus.

(Thwaites, Jesuit Relations, 18:231 1896-1901). For the next 50 years the historical view of the Assiniboine is sparse. For a closer look at the Assiniboine we must turn to other diverse historical writers and sources of the time such as the Mendicant Priest Father Louis Hennepin (Thwaites, 1903); Medart Chouart, Sieur Des Grosseilliers (Nute, 1943), and further writings in the records of the Society of Jesus (Thwaites, Jesuit Relations, N.S. 42|54, 1896-1901).

It is not until fifty years after the Nakoda Oyadebi or the Assiniboine People were first mentioned by the Priests of the Society of Jesus that we finally begin to obtain a larger view of who these people (Nakoda Oyadebi) are. For this more close and intimate view we must turn to the historical record which has been left to us by the then young Hudson's Bay Company Employee and Explorer Henry Kelsey. (Doughty and Martin, 1929).

Henry Kelsey was ordered by his employers, the Hudson's Bay Company to accompany the Assiniboine Trading parties back westward into the hinterlands of what is now the Canadian Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta to "bring the Indians 'to a commerce' at the bay" (Doughty and Martin, p. XXXIV, 1929). The Assiniboine Trading Parties had gone to Hudson's Bay to trade their processed beaver pelts (*Castor Canadensis*) for European goods

such as the firearm, metal pots, metal knives, Brazil and Virginia tobacco, brandy, needles, awls, mirrors, gun powder, metal shot, trade cloth, beads, paint, and other European trade goods (Ray, p. 66 & 67, 1974).

From the month of July, 1690 to the early spring of 1692, Henry Kelsey roamed the Northern Great Plains of North America with his Assiniboine hosts. During his two year sojourn with Nakoda Oyadebi (The Assiniboine People), Henry Kelsey traveled throughout Assiniboine Territory which historical writers such as Alexander MacKenzie (Lamb, 415:1970) and geographer Arthur Ray (Ray 1974) have identified as the Great Plains of Southern Alberta, Southern Saskatchewan, and Southern Manitoba. (See Appendix I).

Later explorers, trappers, and traders such as Pierre Gaultier des Varennes, Sieur de la Verendrye in 1842 (Burpee, 1927), and Alexander Henry, The Younger in 1805 (Coes, 1965), later identified Assiniboine Territory as the same area as that which had been identified earlier by Henry Kelsey. From Alexander Henry, The Younger (Coes, 1965), (Ray, p.95:1974), we obtain a very precise geographical location of the different bands of the Nakoda Oyadebi (The Assiniboine People). From Alexander Henry, The Younger, we also learn that bands of the Nakoda Oyadebi were found to inhabit lands and additionally roam throughout what is now the the American States of North Dakota and Montana. (North of the Missouri River Valley). (Coes, 1965).

Additional ethnographic information regarding the Nakoda Oyadebi (The Assiniboine People) is obtained from the historical

work of Assiniboine Historian James L. Long (Kennedy, 1961) and David Rodnick (American Anthropologist, N.S., 39, p408-416, 1937). From the works of Long and Rudnick we can identify the historical tie of Today's (1995) Nakoda Oyadebi to those of history.

Band names which translate into the English Language as Paddling, Canoe, Foot, Stone, Mountain Village, Fat Horse, Red Root, and The Quiet People, and People of the North continue to exist to this day. These bands (Dagugichiyabi) continue to exist and thrive 355 years later in such places as Carry The Kettle First Nation, Ocean Man First Nation, Pheasant's Rump First Nation, Mosquito First Nation, Red Pheasant First Nation and Paul's Band, reserves in Canada and upon the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Montana, U.S.A. It should not be surprising therefore to find Nakoda Oyadebi continuing to live within the same geographical locations much as they did 305 years ago.

Nakoda Oyadebi came to be located at or near their aboriginal lands because of Inter-Governmental Agreements that the different bands signed with the different governments of Canada and Great Britain (Treaty Number Four, 25 Sept., 1877, Adhesion to Treaty) and the United States of America (Treaty of Fort Laramie with the Sioux, etc. September 17, 1851).

Nakoda Oyadebi Polity and Politics

The Assiniboine term, Nakoda and Nakodabi seems to be derived from the original Assiniboine word, Onakodabi or "Peace." Assiniboine Tribal Elders such as the late George Shields, Sr. of the Watopaxnatuwa Band of Fort Belknap Assiniboine, U.S.A. told of

an earlier historic time on the Northern Great Plains which Assiniboine Elders from his youth referred to as Onakodabi Zheha - (When There Was Peace). This was an allusion to an earlier time when none of the tribes on the Northern Great Plains were at war. All tribes were at peace with each other. (Personal Communications with informant, April 1982).

The term Nakoda and Nakodabi may in fact not even be an original Assiniboine word. The word Koda or "friend" is in fact a Dakota word. Nakoda or Nakodabi is in all probability a Dakota characterization of the Assiniboine. Both contemporary and historic Assiniboine speakers would never willfully use the term Koda to characterize or identify their kins people. Any Assiniboine speaker who called a kins person, Band member, or fellow tribal person "Koda" would be derisively referred to as a member of the Dakota or Sioux Tribes.

The Assiniboine term would be Mitakona - my friend, Nitakona - your friend, or Takonagu - his/her friend. Throughout Assiniboine Country the Assiniboine phrase is spoken properly as, "Nakona Iabi Oyagihi?" - "Can you speak Assiniboine" or "Nakona Iabi Nayaxzu" "Do you understand Assiniboine?"

The Bands of Assiniboine (Dagugichiyabi) that early trappers, traders, and explorers encountered were formally organized and led by a person whom the Europeans and later Canadians and Americans called a Chief (Ray, p.18, 1974). When speaking of the term "Chief," non Native peoples or people with a Western European, Western civilization orientation tend to view such a person (Chief)

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as a ruler, a king, a despot. Daughters of Chiefs are likewise characterized historically as princesses. Amongst the Assiniboine, the daughters of chiefs were called "daughter" by the Chief. There were no "royal" families amongst the Assiniboine.

In beginning discussion about the political structure and status among the bands of the Assiniboine Indians, we find that the Assiniboine Nation (Nakoda Oyadebi) was comprised of at least thirty-three known bands (Kennedy, p.190, 1961). (Appendix II). Alexander Henry, the Younger in 1807 identified eleven bands (Rodnick, p.411, 1937). Edwin Thompson Denig identified six (6) Assiniboine bands in 1854. (Bureau of American Ethnology, 46th Annual Report, p.431, edited by Hewitt, 1967). In 1935, David Rodnick identified seventeen (17) Assiniboine Bands (Rodnick, American Anthropologist, p.411 and 412, 1937).

From the writings of Denig, (1854), Rodnick (1937), and from the-Nakoda Oyadebi, themselves we learn that:

"In each and all the bands mentioned, there are several men bearing the character rank, and name of Chiefs. But he only is considered as chief of the band who heads and leads it. Yet this power does not give him a right to tyrannize over any of the other chiefs, or dictate to them any course they would not willingly follow... In fact, these bands are nothing more than large families... These are the elements of the bands."

Hewitt, 1954

David Rodnick in his 1937 Article entitled: Political Structure and Status Among the Assiniboine Indians (American Anthropologist N.S.39, p.408, 1937) further expanded upon the importance of Assiniboine Bands when he wrote:

"The Band was the political unit in Assiniboine life. It was autonomous in nature and completely sovereign. Individual affiliation within the band was loose, since it was relatively simple to form new bands, or for an individual to leave one and join another. An individual called himself a member of the band in which his parents had lived at the time of his birth. Upon marriage he could either elect to remain in his own or else join the band of his wife's people. Due to the fact that such affiliation was not too infrequently changed, the members of a band were normally related to one another." (Rodnick, p.408, 1937).

Rodnick further wrote:

"The band was primarily territorial in character. Each band hunted over a different portion of territory; the bands coming together only at certain seasons of the year when the important ceremonials were given... Over and above the cohesion of the individual band was a feeling of nationalism based upon relationship, either near or distant with members of the other bands." (Rodnick, p.408, 1937).

Nakona Governmental Structure

From Tribal Elders and from the writings of Edwin T. Denig, The Bourgeois or head of the American Fur Company Trading Post at Fort Union, which was located a quarter of a mile east of the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers in extreme Northwestern North Dakota, we learn the following information regarding Assiniboine Governmental structure.

(1) The principal leader in Assiniboine camps was called a Hunga. (Denig, p.411, 1854). Rodnick identifies the behavior necessary for a chief as that of "A 'good man' ." (American Anthropologist N.S., 39, p.412, 1937). James L. Long identified the requirements to be an Assiniboine chief in the following manner:

"A Chief-to-be must have a good war record, be a successful hunter, and possess many horses for

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domestic use and fast horses for use as buffalo runners. He must also, at least on one occasion, have brought back an enemy's scalp and presented it to his mother-in-law. On his hunting trips he must have killed more game than his household required, so that he might distribute the surplus to the poor." (Kennedy, p.18, 1961).

When a chief was being selected, the Band Council or Hungabi (Little Chiefs) would meet. Rodnick writes:

"The duties of the chief were similar to those of a presiding officer. Decisions on important matters were made by the Band Council, not the Chief." (American Anthropologist, N.S. 39, p.413, 1937).

The limitations of an Assiniboine Chief are described in relation to his Assiniboine people. Denig writes:

"There is...but one nominal chief to each band, and it is he who leads it. Yet this position does not destroy nor militate against the will of several others in the same band whose voices are as much entitled to a hearing and sometimes more so than his.

Their government is pure democracy. Their consent to be governed or led by any man is voluntarily given and likewise withdrawn at the discretion of the person. But their existence as a people depends on forming themselves into bodies capable of defense. These bodies must have leaders and these leaders must be brave, respected, followed, and supported." (Denig, p.435, 1854).

The Assiniboine Historian James L. Long next takes us to the investiture of an Assiniboine Chief. He writes:

"When a new chief was suggested, the council talked the matter over. If they arrived at a favorable decision, the group went in a body, singing to the prospective chief's lodge and the spokesman delivered the message." (Kennedy, p.19, 1961).

After describing at great length the traditional procedure which the Assiniboine utilized in naming and installing a new chief, Long concluded:

"After that the old chief took the headgear off the guest, and with the two pipes, a bundle was made and presented to the new chief as his sacred bundle. He was also given the new lodge and many horses..."

The next step in Assiniboine Tribal Government to be described was the structure of the Hungabi, the Hunga, and the manner in which an Assiniboine Council Lodge functioned. Mr. Denig illustrated rather nicely the seating configuration of an Assiniboine band council. (Appendix III). (Denig, p.437, 1854) . To further illustrate the power of the council and the concept of pure democracy and majority rule, Denig cited a peace overture to the Gens du Canot (Wadopana) band of Assiniboine by the Crow Tribe of Indians.

Though the Chief was in favor of effecting a peace with the Crows, a majority of those present at the council were very opposed to the peace overture and as a result, the peace overture was rejected. (Denig, pp's 438-440, 1854). From these descriptions we once again are reminded that an Assiniboine Chief was not a tyrant, despot, or absolute ruler.

Major tribal decisions were made by the Hungabi - Little Chiefs - Council. The recognized chief had the administrative responsibility of overseeing and taking care of the day-to-day welfare of his band. "His interest in himself, or in his family, had to be submerged in his general reference to group welfare." (Rodnick, American Anthropologist, p.412, N.S., 39, 1937) .

Denig, in his writings, identified the fifteen social categories of a large Assiniboine camp. We also learn from Denig that the soldiers or Agichida were responsible for the enforcement

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of band law as legislated by the Hungabi and directed by the Hunga - Chief. (Denig, p.440, 1854).

Other Assiniboine band officers as identified by Denig included in addition to the Hunga - Chief and Hungabi - Little Chiefs the following positions:

3. Chief of the Soldier's Lodge - Agichida Hunga
4. Cook of the Soldier's Lodge - Wohenah and Wayutena
5. The Soldiers - Agichida
6. The Public Crier - Bangewichakiya and Hunkiya
7. Master of the Park - Wo Wina
8. Young Men - Koshgabi, and
9. Religious Leaders - Waka Winchasta

What all writers to date have missed, omitted, or overlooked was a group of people who were entitled: X70KABIS or singers. In pre-modern times and as late as the 1950's, each Assiniboine Band member had their own individual Indian, name, and their own song or songs. The author was privileged to have had a grandfather (Clarence Fear Bear, A.K.A. Waka Tatanga -Sacred Buffalo D.O.D. - 1965) who personally knew in excess of 800 individual songs for over 800 individual Assiniboines.

Clarence Fear Bear along with the late John Adams - (Washiju Togapa - Leading White Man D.O.D. - 1963) literally knew thousands of Assiniboine songs including give-away, grass dance, sun dance, war dance, owl dance, love songs, ghost dance, and individual Assiniboine personal songs.

Given the identified officers of a typical Assiniboine Band, the author has developed an organization chart which would fit such an organization. (See Appendix IV). In constructing this organization chart, the author has intentionally deleted the 1854

office of Wowina or "Master of the Park." The author has taken this liberty because in 1854, the Buffalo (Bison Bison'Americanus) were hunted almost to the point of extermination.

The Office of Wowina - Master of the Park - was a religious position which was held by gifted individuals who had the religious, spiritual power to summon the buffalo (Bison Bison Americanus) into surrounds or buffalo pounds (Kennedy, pp 100-103, 1961). This position has been removed from the organizational structure since the Buffalo (Bison Bison Americanus) has ceased to play a significant physical role in the lives of Nakona Oyadebi (Assiniboine People). Though there are people capable of performing these feats today, there are not enough Buffalo (Bison Bison Americanus) for people to hunt and gather their food.

Denig also wrote that the components of a large camp included:

12. Very Old Men - We-Chappe
13. Young Women - Wikoshkebi
14. Old Women - Wagangabi
15. Middle-Aged Women - Wi Yabi
16. Boys and Girls - Hokshibi, Wichiyabina
17. Very Small Children - Daguskibina

(Denig, pp441,1854)

The functioning of the Council as described by both Denig and Rodnick agree on the importance of the Band Council. Denig stated quite clearly in 1854 that the democratic element was strongly implanted. He wrote:

"The whole is a pure democracy, as has by this been developed." (Hewitt, pp445, 1854).

Denig also noted:

"The leading chief does nothing in advance of public opinion." (Hewitt, pp446, 1854).

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Regarding the Band Council functions, Rodnick wrote in 1937:

"The Council was the legislative body of the band, no decisions being final unless made by it."
(American Anthropologist [N.S., 39, p.410, 1937]).

Concluding actions by the Band Council, Denig noted:

"A decision by the body of the council is carried into effect by the soldiers, by force if necessary..."

(Hewitt, p.448, 1854).

Conclusions

. Based upon the existing historical record and conversations with Assiniboine (Nakona) speaking elders, the conclusion can be drawn that the Assiniboine people (Nakona Oyadebi) were politically organized. That their political organization was formal and ,that

- it was a pure democracy is not disputed.

The Assiniboine Bands (Nakona Oyadebi) had no royalty or royal family members. Leadership was earned by displaying quality hunting skills, amassing a respectable war record (group self defense), and displaying the traits of generosity and kindness towards fellow band members.

We also learn that the band affairs were conducted by a formal band council. No tribal or band business could be conducted without Band Council approval. Actions of the Band Council were carried out by the soldiers of the Band. We also learned that the chief had no authority to act upon important Band business without first taking it to council.

An Assiniboine Chief was therefore no absolute ruler, monarch, or benevolent despot. A chief was in fact a band administrator

with his authority based in his pipe and the legislative authority which had been given to him along with the decisions of the band council.

In this manner, Nakona (Assiniboine) polity was structured.

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Appendix

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Migrations, epidemics, and population changes g5

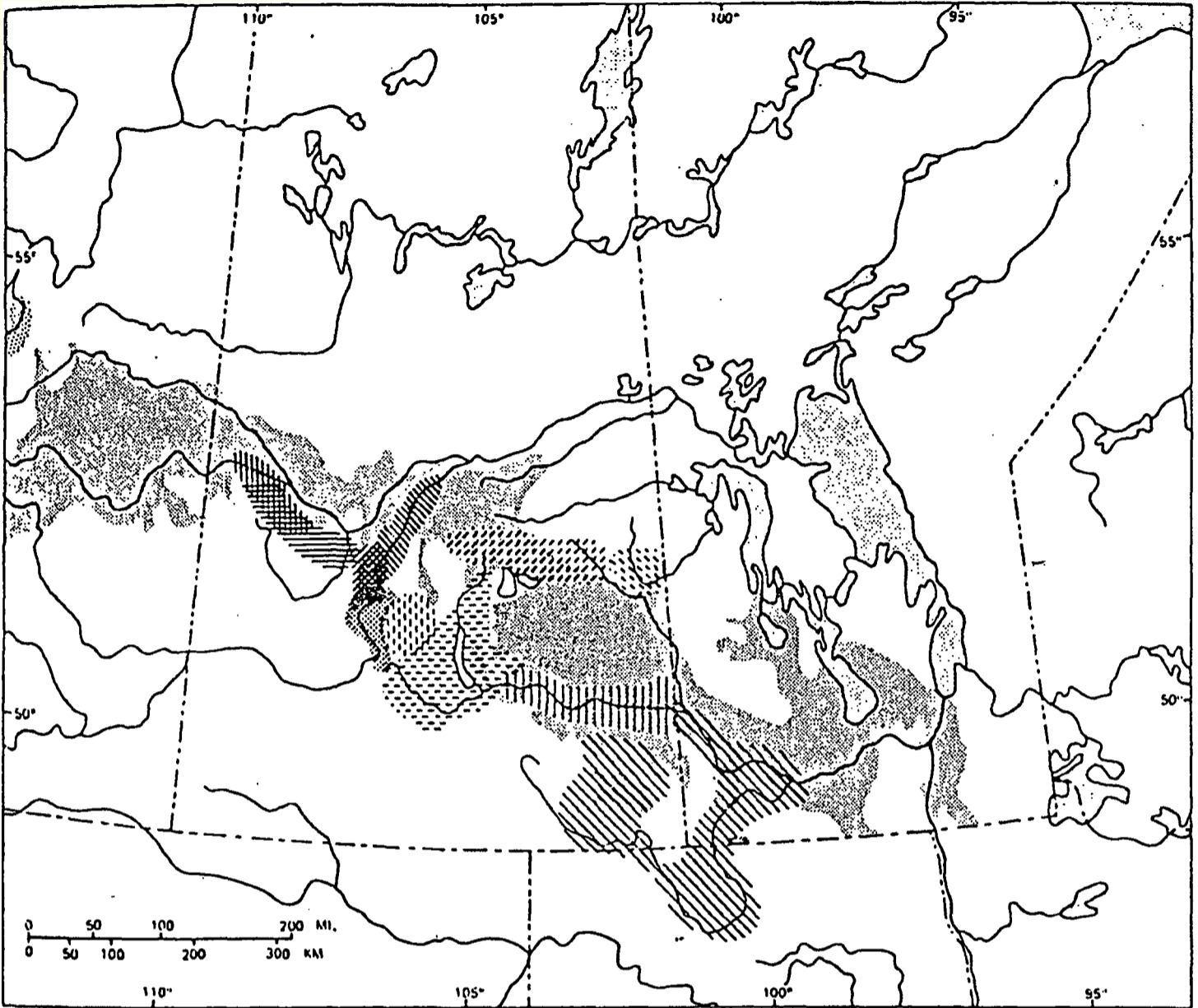


FIGURE 30 DISTRIBUTION OF THE ASSINIBOINE IN 1808 ACCORDING TO ALEXANDER HENRY THE YOUNGER

WOODLAND BAND:

Woi Swampy Ground Assiniboine (30 lodges)

PARKLAND-GRASSLAND BANDS:

I These are primarily winter locations.)

>\$\$\$ Little Girl Assiniboine (200 lodges)

HUH Paddling & Fool Assiniboine (200 lodges)

jXXH Canoe Assiniboine (160 lodges)

•!!!!!! Red River Assiniboine (24 lodges)

WM Rabbit Assiniboine (30 lodges)

i;;U Siony or Rocky Assiniboine (40 lodges)

////. Those Who Have Water For Themselves Only (35 lodges)

^^ Eagle Hill Assiniboine (38 lodges)

§<§!§ Saskatchewan Assiniboine (50 lodges)

=== Foot Assiniboine (33 lodges)

IHIJIII Strong Wood Assiniboine (40 lodges)

EM PARKLAND BELT
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Source: E.Coues.'New Light'. Vol.2, pp.522-523

Source: Indians in the Fur Trade, By Arthur J. Ray,
V. 95 University of Toronto Press, 1974

ASSINIBOINE BANDS

APPENDIX A

JAMES L. LONG DEEMED that this list of thirty-three bands, comprising the Assiniboine Nation, is the only complete one ever recorded.

Acgilitui—Camp Moves to the Kill.

***Bizebina*—Gophers.**

Cepahubi—Large Organs.

Canhdada—Moldy People.

Canheioincasta—Wooded-Mountain People.

Cmiknuhabi—Ones That Carry Their Wood.

***Ilutlsabina*—Red Uoltoin.**

Iicbina—Rock Mountain People.

Iluhumasmibi—Done Cleaners.

***'Huhuganebabi*—Bone Chippers.**

***Iiciulomvanb'ma*—LiMc Rock Mountain People.**

Inyimlomcanbina—Stone or Rock People.

Inninaonbi—Quiet People.

Insnaovibi—The Ones Who Stay Alone.

***Indogahwlncasta*—East People.**

ASSINIBOINE BANDS

M/n/«wc-Sun&cc&/-Missouri River Dog Band.

***Minisatonwanbi*—Red Water People.**

Osrrri&i-People of the Cold.

Pf egabirw-Swamp People.

***Sunkcebi*—Dog Band.**

***Sahiyaiyeskabi-Cree* Speakers.**

Snugafci—Contrary People.

Sihabi—Foot People.

ranWafet—Buffalo Hip.

To&anbi—Strangers.

Taminape&ina—Owners of Sharp Knives.

C/asfca/ia—Roamers.

Warfo/jefcfna—Paddlers.

YVWopa/mafomttm—Paddlers Who Live on the Prairie

Wictya&ina—Ones That Go to the Dance.

Wnziyamtoincai/a—People of the North.

***Wasinazinyabi-Fat* Smokers.**

***Wokpanbi*—Meat Bag.**

Source: Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri, By Edwin T. Denig, The Bureau of American Ethnology Forty Sixth Annual Report, Edited by J.N.B. Hewitt P. 437, 1928-29

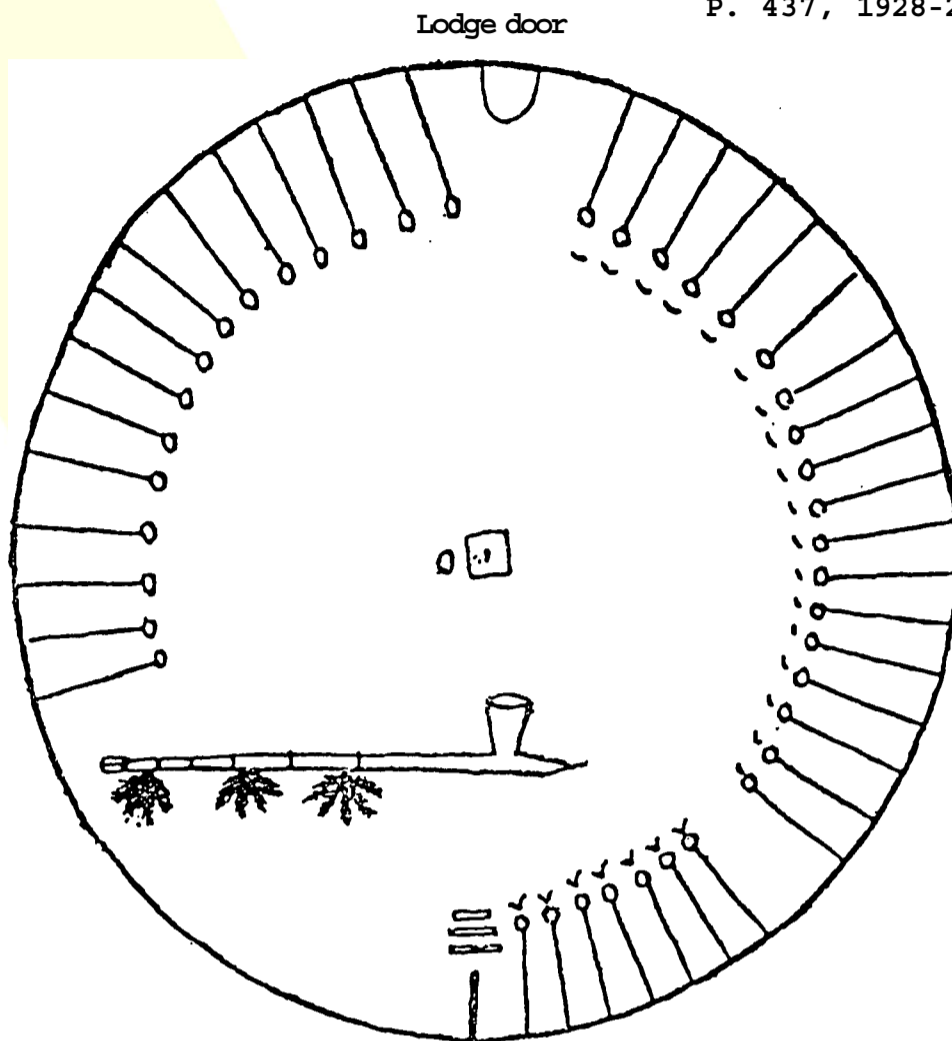


FIGURE 31.—Diagram of a council lodge, representing the interior of a council lodge in which Mr. Denig met the Assiniboin leaders to discuss peace overtures made by the Crow Indians to the Assiniboin at the instigation of Mr. Denig. At a point directly opposite the doorway Mr. Denig sat with the proffered tobacco of the Crow Indians lying in front of him, denoted by 3 parallel marks; at Mr. Denig's right sits the leading Assiniboin chief; to his right sit 10 other chiefs and councillors; next are seated 18 so-called "soldiers," i. e., official guards of the camp; the next 15 figures are 15 principal young warriors. The small square figure with a central dot is a small fire; and the small circle beside the flagstaff is a flagstaff running up through the lodge top, flying a United States flag. The calumet pipe lies in front of the leading chief.

NAKONA OYADEBI

ASSINIBOINE BAND

ASSINIBOINE BAND

NAKONA OYADEBI

