

SECOND EDITION

INDIANS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

DANIEL J. GELO

Indians of the Great Plains

This book provides a thorough and engaging study of Plains Indian life. It covers both historical and contemporary aspects and contains wide and balanced treatment of the many different tribal groups, including Canadian and southern populations. Daniel J. Gelo draws on years of ethnographic research and emphasizes that Plains societies and cultures are continuing, living entities. The second edition has been updated to take account of recent developments and current terminology. The chapters feature a range of illustrations, maps, and text boxes, as well as summaries, key terms, and questions to support teaching and learning. It is an essential text for courses on Indians of the Great Plains and relevant for students of anthropology, archaeology, history, and Indigenous studies.

Daniel J. Gelo is Dean of the College of Liberal and Fine Arts, Stumberg Distinguished University Chair, and Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA.



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Second Edition

Daniel J. Gelo

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Preface

This second edition of *Indians of the Great Plains* continues with the purpose of providing a concise yet complete and up-to-date study of Plains Indian life past and present, in both the United States and Canada, for use as a college text and general reference.

This new version contains several improvements, most of them recommended by readers and instructors. The discussion of oral traditions has been moved from Chapter 8 to Chapter 2 to emphasize the importance of Native views of the past. Recent and current topics have been updated, as have statistics and any names of groups and places that have changed in recent years. The content is enhanced with vocabulary lists and boxes that summarize complex ideas or expand on the main text. There are more tables and maps than in the first edition, and some fresh illustrations. Most basically, paragraph and sentence structure, and word choice, were simplified throughout to improve readability and comprehension.

The author's viewpoint remains that of a non-Indian cultural anthropologist with 35 years' experience in fieldwork and archival study. The book is structured according to the syllabus of the undergraduate Plains Indian survey course that I have taught many times at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA).

My understanding has been strongly shaped by my graduate mentors, William K. Powers, Marla M.N. Powers, and David P. McAllester, and by many Indian people who have been friends and consultants, most notably Margaret Thomas and Carney Saupitty, Sr., and their families, of the Comanche tribe. I am forever indebted to these teachers, and their influence is prominent in the book, although I take full responsibility for what is written.

I also wish to thank those who helped me conceive the second edition, especially Robert M. Hill, II of Tulane University, William C. Meadows at Missouri State University, and Joaquín Rivaya-Martínez at Texas State University. There were also several anonymous referees for Routledge who provided essential critiques and recommendations, and I am grateful for their advice. At Routledge, Louisa Vahtrick, Katherine Ong, and Marc Stratton never failed with encouragement and practical guidance. James Calder of the UTSA Political Science and Geography Department was of constant help in providing references on contemporary tribal affairs. Leonard Kemp of the UTSA Center for Archaeological Research did an excellent job drafting new maps. Special thanks are owed to Deborah Moon of the UTSA Anthropology Department, who worked as research assistant, obtaining updated information and illustrations, crafting sample boxes, tables, and maps, and providing an ongoing critical dialogue about content and presentation. Deb's perspective as a college instructor who assigns the book each year was invaluable as we sought to improve it. Work on this new edition was completed with financial support from the Stumberg Distinguished

University Chair endowment, and I thank Mary Pat Stumberg for her continual generosity and inspiration.

In defining the Plains culture area and naming its tribes, this book follows Smithsonian Institution practice as reflected in the *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 13 (Sturtevant 2001). This results in use of the term “Blackfoots,” which sounds wrong to some ears, but which is the modern local standard for the plural of Blackfoot, and preserves the name Blackfeet (plural Blackfeets) specifically for the branch living in Montana, as those people prefer (see Dempsey 2001, 623). In naming the people generally, the terms (American) Indian, Native (American), First Nations, indigenous, and Aboriginal are all used as appropriate to the immediate context. Finally, it should also be noted that the population numbers given are drawn from disparate sources and are often only estimates, as it is quite difficult even today to find dependable counts for many groups.

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The Great Plains

The Plains landscape

Knowledge of the environment must be the basis for any discussion of Plains Indian culture. In Plains landforms, weather, animals, and plants, we see the origins of Indian migration patterns, adaptations, tools, hunting practices, and house styles. And, it is not too much to say that language, thought, and religious symbolism—elements often included under the term “worldview”—are also influenced by natural surroundings.

The early Plains anthropologist Clark Wissler (1870–1947) noted that culture “approaches geographical boundaries with its hat in its hand.” Recognizing the influence of geography or environment on culture requires caution, however. It would be a mistake to think that surroundings *strictly* determine the cultural development and customs of a people, when humans show great adaptability and their prior customs can persist under new circumstances. Another pitfall is the concept that certain people have a unique relationship to nature resulting from some exclusive mystical or spiritual outlook. It is possible to appreciate Indian knowledge and respect for nature without regarding them as superhuman. Like any environment, the Plains region presents a distinct set of opportunities and limits to the humans who encounter it. Exploring the physical characteristics of the region is a good way to start understanding those who live there.

Where and what are the Plains? There have been several attempts to determine the boundaries of the region in geographic and ecological terms. A good starting point is the outline offered by the historian Walter Prescott Webb in his classic work *The Great Plains* (1981; orig. 1931). Webb tells us that a plains environment has three characteristics: 1) it is a comparatively level surface of great extent; 2) it is unforested; and, 3) its rainfall is not sufficient for ordinary intensive agriculture. In North America, a level surface extends for the most part between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains. The unforested area of the continent, however, is mostly west of the Mississippi. It begins at the timber line, an artificial boundary where deep woods yield to brush and grass, running on the east generally between the 94th and 98th meridians (east Texas and Oklahoma, western Missouri and Minnesota) but veering east to the 87th meridian around 40°N, or the area around Iowa and Illinois. Not counting the timber of the Rocky Mountains, this unforested zone extends west to the Sierras and Coast ranges of California, Oregon, and Washington. The dry zone of the continent extends from the 20-inch rainfall line, the so-called **humid line** running roughly along the 98th meridian, again west to the Pacific ranges excepting the Rockies.

The area where all three key characteristics come together—the dry, untimbered, level land between the 98th meridian and the Rockies—is known as the **Great Plains**. The

wetter untimbered level land east of the 98th meridian is also of interest as a zone showing related Indian cultural adaptations; this area is referred to as the Central Plains, Central Lowland, or simply the **Prairie**. Both the Great Plains and the Prairie are considered in this book (see Map 1.1). Elevation as well as moisture distinguishes the Great Plains from the Prairie, with the Lowland rising no more than 1,500–2,000 feet above sea level and the Great Plains rising from this elevation to around 5,500 at the foot of the Rockies. Thus another name for Great Plains is “High Plains.” Transition between Lowlands and High Plains is gradual, but abrupt between the Plains and Rocky Mountains. The entire Great Plains grassland region is bounded on the north by the forests and lakes of subarctic Canada, and the conventional boundary on the south is the Rio Grande.

The most noticeable difference between the Great Plains and Prairie is in the kinds of grasses that are dominant in the groundcover under natural conditions. Short-grass species are characteristic in the Plains. Short grasses often form a mat of tangled roots, although this sod gives way to separate tufts or **bunch grass** toward the drier west. Blue grama and



Map 1.1 The Great Plains

various other types of grama and buffalo grass are common, along with little bluestem, western wheatgrass, galleta, needle-and-thread grass, mesquite grass, and three-awn grass. The Prairie, by contrast, contains taller grasses, some growing to six feet or more by autumn: big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, switch grass, needle grass. Dense sod develops in the moister east, and a square yard of Prairie turf contains literally miles of roots. The transition between tall and short grasses is actually gradual, and many ecologists see at the heart of the mid-continental grasslands a mixed-grass zone featuring the medium-sized little bluestem plus shorter species. The main grass types in any area coexist with one another and several others in a number of patterns depending on local conditions. Tall-grass outliers have been found far to the west, while rivers, pond areas, and sand hills harbor atypical communities. Each grass community has its own character as well because of the particular forbs (broad-leaved weeds and wildflowers) that it hosts.

One of the reasons tall grass thrives toward the east is that the soil is deeper and richer there. Mid-continental soils lay on a foundation of marine rock sheets, which are uplifted to varying degrees and which generally slant toward the east. One can see in road cuts in central Texas, for example, thick limestone beds chock full of oceanic fossils, mere inches below the topsoil. At a macro level, the soils have been deposited on the rock sheets through the ages as streams from the eroding Rockies carry mineral and organic debris eastward and, losing energy along the way, drop their sediments in alluvial fans. These huge deltas have spread, overlapped, clogged their streams and been recut in a continuous process. In addition, gravel left by Ice Age glaciers is found in parts of Montana and the Dakotas, and silts from the Appalachians have been washed westward onto the eastern Prairie. Wind and local runoff further distribute the soils, and they are enhanced with decaying plant matter. These workings have combined to produce a relatively barren Great Plains and a Prairie region with some of the richest dirt on the planet.

The western soils based on soluble limestone drain quickly and dry out, although water may be held deep below. Sedimentary sandstone, siltstone, shale, and gypsum all occur in formations on a local and regional scale. There are also remnants of ancient volcanic activity—granite, quartzite, rhyolite—on the High Plains. Huge deposits of soft coal of various grades underlie sections of the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Oil and natural gas are widespread, with important producing areas around Williston, North Dakota, Denver, and the Permian Basin of West Texas. Metals are absent, with one important exception: gold is mined in southwestern South Dakota, and its discovery there in the 1870s sparked U.S. government efforts to seize the area from Native peoples. The Homestake Mine near Deadwood is the site of the greatest known U.S. gold reserves.

Toward the west, in the shadows of the Rockies, where erosion is greatest, and in other transitional areas the land surface is heavily scarred, with lone hills and plateaus, large canyons, and narrower ravines that are known regionally as **arroyos**, **gulches**, or **draws**. An old saying of the Comancheros, the Hispanic traders in the Texas Panhandle, had it that “There are mountains below the Plains,” describing what it was like to come to the edge of a large canyon like Palo Duro and seeing within it a range of hills whose crests were below the horizon. Areas of massive erosion that occur where one geologic zone gives way to another are often called **badlands** or **breaks**.

Weather works on the landforms and soil, and works with these features to influence the course of life. The meteorological forces shaping the Plains are among the most remarkable anywhere. Webb noted long ago that the wind blows harder and more constantly on



Figure 1.1 Short grass and playa on the Staked Plains near Amarillo, Texas.

Source: Daniel J. Gelo



Figure 1.2 Big bluestem grass on the prairie.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Resources Conservation Service

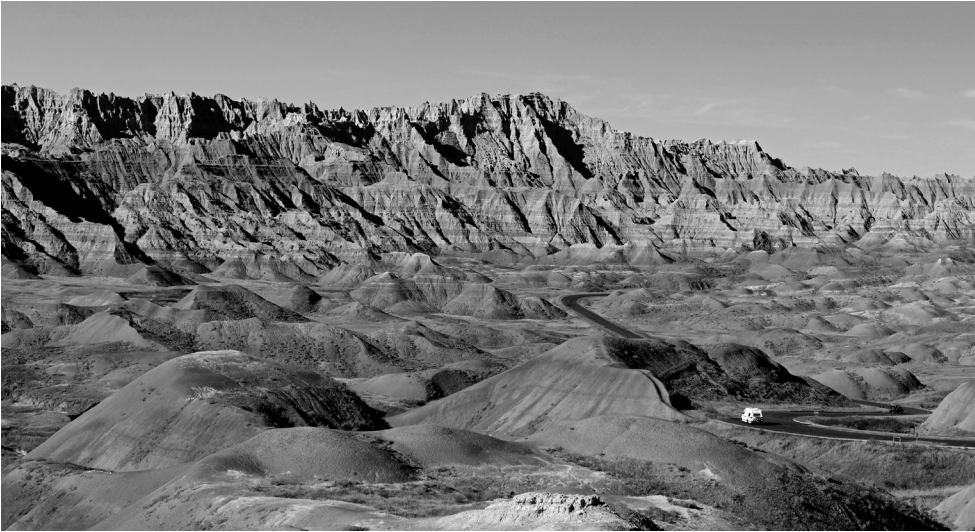


Figure 1.3 Badlands in South Dakota.

Source: Peakpx

the Plains than any place in the U.S. except for some Pacific Coast areas. Winds blow mainly from the west with average hourly speeds of as much as 10–14 miles per hour (mph), comparable to the Outer Banks of the North Carolina shore and twice the rate found in the western mountains and deserts. The winds are of high speed, with special erosive power resulting from the abrasive sediments they carry.

The wind is everywhere, and the humming telephone wires and waving grass can be more ominous than comforting for those who know how powerful it can be. The **chinook** is a warm, dry wind plunging from the east slopes of the Rockies at 70–100 mph that can raise the temperature by 40°F within a day. The chinook may lessen harsh winter conditions, exposing grass for hungry grazing animals, but the rapid thawing of snow and flash flooding can be dangerous as well as helpful. Polar air masses descending in winter toward the southern Plains, called **northers**, cause temperatures to plummet rapidly. Blizzards, intense snowstorms characterized by snowdrifts and sub-zero temperatures, are another winter weather hazard. During drought the wind blows yellow and then black with dust, producing **rollers** or enormous clouds that cover and sandblast the landscape. Dust storms are most common after spotty rainfall has promoted the buildup of loose sediments. Dust carried by a Great Plains storm can be deposited 1,800 miles away.

The most dramatic windstorms are the tornados. These whirlwinds occur mainly in the spring and summer, in the imaginary 500-mile-wide corridor called **tornado alley**, running from Texas to the Dakotas or Illinois, depending on the yearly pattern. Southwestern Oklahoma sees the greatest frequency. Winds rotating to form the tornado funnel reach speeds of 100–300 mph. The funnel can be very fickle in the way it does damage, removing the roof from a house without upsetting the breakfast dishes, imploding the house next door, and missing the next house altogether. Most tornados run briefly across open lands, but about 20 every year do significant damage to communities. In their artwork and stories, the Kiowas still vividly recall the twister that flattened much of Snyder, Oklahoma on



Figure 1.4 Roller approaching Stratford, Texas, April 18, 1935.

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

May 10, 1905, claiming at least 97 lives. Three tornadoes that dropped from the sky near Wichita Falls, Texas on April 10, 1979 cut paths as much as a mile wide and 60 miles long, killing 56 people, injuring 1,916, and causing losses for 7,759 families. Prior to dense Euro-American settlement, tornados would not have exacted such a heavy toll, but they must still have appeared awesome to Plains inhabitants. Even their smaller cousins, the dust devils that arise in the midday sun, are often regarded as dangerous spirits in traditional Indian belief.

Winter on the Plains in general is bitterly cold, producing some of the continent's lowest temperatures, as low as -60°F . An old saying on the Plains is that "there is nothing between Texas and the North Pole but some barbed wire." There are no great elevations to block the descent of polar air masses, or large bodies of water to store and release heat that would moderate winter temperatures. The daily average temperature in January is between 0°F in the Canadian provinces to 50°F in Texas. Summers are also extreme, with daily average temperatures in July ranging from 60°F in Canada to 85°F in Texas and record highs of 120°F . The normal absence of cloud cover allows radiational cooling at night, and low humidity (except in Texas) also helps make the heat tolerable. But the overall picture is one of wide seasonal swings in temperature. North Dakota experienced its record high and record low in a single year, 1936, and has a greater spread of monthly average temperatures (89.5°F) than any state but Alaska.

Dryness is the most critical Great Plains weather characteristic, as understood by the Anglo settlers who called the region "the Great American Desert." Rainfall ranges between 24 and 16 inches annually (for comparison, 128 inches is the heaviest annual rainfall in North America, occurring in the Pacific Northwest). The effects of low rainfall are

magnified because a good part of the yearly rain total may come in only a few storms. Also, high wind speeds and little cloud cover in the region mean a high rate of evaporation, so the effective moisture is even less than the rainfall rate might suggest.

Dryness promoted the wildfires that roared over the grasslands periodically in former times, blackening sometimes thousands of square miles. Pioneers describe the blast of superheated air, choking smoke, and a rain of blazing tinder that could trap anyone trying to outrun the inferno. Normally started by lightning or a stray campfire spark, prairie fires were sometimes also set by Indians on purpose to flush out the enemy during battle (a legend common to several tribes tells of the “Black Legs” or “Burned Thighs,” warriors who bravely withstood such a blaze). Whatever the cause, fire was a basic factor in the balanced succession of plant and animal species, and, at least to some extent, responsible for the continuing dominance of grasses in the landscape. Flames cleared the weakened sod-bound grasses and killed off saplings intruding into the prairies from the forest margins. New grass would sprout from protected roots and rhizomes. Prairie dogs, mice, and rats, with their underground refuges and food supplies, then took the lead in reclaiming the land for animal life. Scientists now realize that burned prairie produces twice the biomass of unburned grassland.

Trees and shrubs nevertheless make their stands along streams and steep slopes. Aspen and ponderosa pine intrude from the west in the hills of the northern Plains. The juniper known as red cedar is common in uplands and overgrazed areas, and pinion is found along with cedar on the volcanic mesas. Post oak, blackjack oak, and mesquite are common in the south. Chokecherry, sand plum, and haw are among several shrubs that provide edible fruit. Willow, elm, ash, walnut, and hackberry are common floodplain species, along with the cottonwood, which is the classic Plains tree. In some Indian languages “tree” and “cottonwood” are simply the same word.

Rivers of the Plains rise in or towards the Rockies (see Map 1.2). They have several characteristic features. Since they flow over level land, they tend to meander and clog with their own silt; they often become **braided**, with multiple channels crisscrossing over the sediments. The soft banks are liable to cave in, taking along entire trees that are carried downstream as driftwood. Sometimes huge logjams develop, and these can divert the flow to create lakes, swamps, and floodplain. The Great Raft was a solid entanglement of cottonwood, cedar, and cypress logs, 30–40 feet deep, which in 1806 stretched for nearly 100 miles along the Red River in northwest Louisiana. Quicksand is found on the Arkansas River, as trader Josiah Gregg noted in 1844, and along many other streambeds. The sands and gravels forming a Plains riverbed may be 40–60 feet deep, with water flowing through them even when the surface is dry, and travelers in the old days knew it was possible to find water by digging in a “dry” riverbed. And indeed, rivers can run dry for part or much of the year, especially in the south, although flash flooding is also common. In all, the rivers are unpredictable, sometimes difficult to cross, and generally not good for shipping or as sources of drinking water.

Looking from north to south, major rivers include the Saskatchewan, Qu’Appelle–Assiniboine, Red River of the North, the Missouri, Yellowstone, Cheyenne, Niobrara, Platte, Republican, Kansas, Arkansas, Cimarron, Canadian, Red, Brazos, Colorado, Guadalupe, Pecos, and Rio Grande. The Saskatchewan, Assiniboine, and Red of the North drain into Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay; otherwise, Plains rivers drain into the Gulf of Mexico, either through the Mississippi–Missouri system or, in Texas, directly. One effect of this arrangement is that riparian zones extend like fingers westward into the Plains, hosting

grasses, trees, and animal life more characteristic of areas to the east. These river corridors are also friendlier to agriculture, and so have been especially important as avenues of human occupation.

Perhaps the most important water on the Plains is underground. The High Plains aquifer system made up of the Ogallala, Arikaree, and Brule formations underlies about 174,000 square miles from lower South Dakota far into the Texas Panhandle. This system supplies about one third of all the groundwater used for irrigation in the United States. The draw rate on the aquifers was low until after World War II but has increased as much as sevenfold since that time, outstripping the rate of recharge by precipitation. Formerly, the water table was high enough that the aquifers would discharge from the ground at the eastern edge of the High Plains, but numerous lush springs that would have marked the landscape in Indian days are now vanished. Modern Indian populations are among those facing projected declines in irrigation.

Ironically, given the dryness, the Great Plains and Prairie are frequently likened to a sea. The vast rolling ground, waving motion of the taller grasses, immense sky, steady wind, and sense of openness and vulnerability all contribute to this picture. Josiah Gregg and many others remarked on the oceanic vistas. The covered wagons that carried settlers west became known as prairie schooners. Many observers have commented on what a visual environment the open country is, a place where, as on the sea, the sense of sight is paramount. Yet in order to understand human adaptations to the Plains, it is best to move past the image of a uniform ocean of grass and appreciate the diversity of environments and the landmarks presented in the lands under consideration. Oklahoma alone has been divided into nine distinct natural regions on the basis of geology and vegetation. And if “sea” is an apt image, then “islands” are bound to be significant.

The unusual land features that today are valued for their scenery have long served as ecological islands, hosting unusual plant and animal species and providing shelter for humans. There are countless small sites, such as buttes, knolls, and springs, that were and are of interest to Indian people; here it will do to mention, in order from north to south, a number of larger features that give variety to the Plains landscape (see Map 1.2).

The north has several isolated low mountains appearing in belts or singly, such as the Cypress Hills straddling the border in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, Wood Mountain in southern Saskatchewan, the Bear Paw Mountains in Montana, and Turtle Mountain on the North Dakota–Manitoba border. These hills were formed by ancient volcanic activity or uplifting and they rise a few thousand feet above the plains. The general area of plains and hills covering the western Dakotas and eastern Montana is known as the Missouri Plateau. Peaks reaching over 7,000 feet occur in the Black Hills of southwestern South Dakota and nearby areas of Wyoming. The Black Hills catch rain and thus feature heavy pine forest and many streams; the hills figure in the history of several tribes as a refuge and sacred place, and are the location of the major gold deposits previously mentioned. Around the Black Hills to the east, south, and west is an area of heavily eroded clay beds cut into beautiful shapes, part of which is now protected as the Badlands National Monument. Sand hills and dunes cover about 24,000 square miles of northern and west-central Nebraska, and less extensive dune areas are also found in southern Saskatchewan, central Wyoming, northeast Colorado, and central Kansas.

Mesas of tough volcanic rock such as Black Mesa and Raton Mesa mark the country where Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma join. Oklahoma also contains the distinctive Antelope Hills area and two Plains mountain ranges of note: the Wichitas,



Map 1.2 Plains natural features and landmarks

with isolated peaks rising up to 1,000 feet over the plains, and Arbuckles, with peaks to 400 feet. These eroded ancient granite and limestone systems are the oldest on the Plains, deriving from the same geologic events and predating the Rockies. Further east, in eastern Kansas and northeast Oklahoma, the Flint Hills present a low ridge running north to south for 220 miles. The shore of an ancient ocean became the soil base for a band of dense oak thickets called the Cross Timbers, 5–30 miles wide and running north–south for 400 miles through Oklahoma and into north-central Texas.

The Llano Estacado or Staked Plain(s) is a remarkably bare and flat region in the Texas Panhandle and eastern New Mexico. Escarpments bounding the Staked Plains on the west and east may have given rise to the name, which suggests palisade walls, although an improbable legend says that Coronado marked his path across the treeless wastes with sticks. Seasonal ponds called **playas** dot the Plains in this region. To the southeast lies the Edwards Plateau of central Texas, featuring limestone uplands with little overlying soil. The Edwards is treated as part of the Great Plains, but has more relief, more trees, and milder winters than the rest of the region; it was a significant foraging area for prehistoric peoples and a retreat for horse Indians and their herds. The Edwards Plateau gives way to the coastal plains at the Balcones Escarpment.

These many subregions have hosted a fascinating variety of wild animals. Aside from the bison, which will be discussed separately because of its central role in Indian life, five other ungulates populated the Plains. The wapiti or American elk used to be abundant as far south as the Red River. Two deer species occupied the region—the mule deer of the west extending its range into the High Plains in the northwest and Oklahoma/Texas panhandles and the smaller whitetail of the eastern forests covering the whole area. The huge numbers of pronghorn in former days rivaled those of the buffalo. This “American antelope-goat” (*Antilocarpa americana*) was found throughout the region. With an ability to graze on the coarsest plants and its great speed (it is the fastest of all American mammals, reaching speeds of 55 mph), the pronghorn was well suited to its surroundings. All four animals were essential in supporting human life, providing meat and skins, and were nearly wiped out by 1900. Since then, whitetail deer have returned in great numbers, mule deer have retreated to upland areas, pronghorns have made a moderate comeback, and elk persisted in the north and were reintroduced to reserves in Oklahoma. A race of bighorn sheep also grazed in the grasslands and hills of the Dakotas and western Nebraska, but by the start of the twentieth century hunters and livestock diseases killed it off.

Wolves were the main animal predators on the Plains. The gray wolf depended on small game for some of its diet, but also worked in packs to isolate and attack the weak members of bison, deer, elk, and pronghorn herds. When the packs turned to domestic stock, the American wolf felt full bore a legacy of hatred that was part of Euro-American culture, and commercial wolfers cleared the Plains states of the animals with their rifles, traps, and poison between 1865 and 1895. The wolf’s smaller, adaptable relative, the coyote, remains resilient despite similar bounty campaigns and has even spread beyond the Plains in recent decades. Other large carnivores that were present on the Plains had more restricted habitats. The black bear and the larger, more aggressive grizzly were most common in forested bottomlands and broken country. Mountain lions, favoring remote, high areas, were probably never plentiful; now they are protected in most areas and are making a comeback on the western and southern Plains fringes. More usual, but seldom seen, are bobcats. Jaguars and ocelots occasionally ranged north into the Southern Plains in earlier times.

Several small animals are notable either because of their unusual character or because they have been important to humans. The badger is a small but tough carnivore burrowing on the open Plains, where it preys on prairie dogs and other ground-dwelling squirrels. Prairie dog "towns" or burrow systems attract a great number of other species, and their eradication by farmers has altered the animal life of the Plains and caused the near extinction of one prairie-dog predator, the black-footed ferret. Red, gray, and swift foxes remain, along with raccoons, ringtails, and three kinds of skunk: striped, spotted, and hog-nosed. Beaver, muskrat, otter, and mink are common around water. Cottontails and jackrabbits are plentiful, and there are many mouse and rat species such as the hispid cotton rat and prairie vole. Josiah Gregg reported in 1844 that rattlesnakes were "proverbially abundant upon all these prairies." States in the region have listed from 50 to 135 fish species, a surprising variety for arid country and just one example of how Plains animal life can be complex beyond expectation.

Bird life on the Plains is diverse and of special interest because of the use of feathers and bird forms in Indian symbolism. The whooping crane lingers on the verge of extinction, the 440 or so remaining wild ones migrating over the Plains between the Canadian bogs where they breed and wintering grounds on the Texas coast. At five feet tall with a 7½-foot wingspan, the whooper is the tallest North American bird. The great blue heron and sandhill crane are among the more common waders, sharing the prairie potholes and river margins with various ducks and geese. Ground-dwelling prairie chickens and grouse hold courtship rituals at **booming grounds** where the males pose, strut, hop, fan their feathers, and drum the air with rapid wing beats. Turkey vultures, and black vultures in the south, wheel in the sky looking for carrion. The burrowing owl is a daytime hunter of mice, lizards, and grasshoppers; larger nocturnal owls are also common. Other birds of prey include several kinds of hawks, such as the Swainson's and ferruginous hawks, which are primarily Plains species, and the bald and golden eagles, the latter considered the preeminent animal in Indian belief.

Plains animal life of earlier days was bound to capture the imagination. Josiah Gregg wrote of the animals as "companions" who constituted "the society of the traveler" crossing the lonely grasslands. Lewis and Clark were less friendly when describing their first of repeated encounters with fierce grizzly bears. They also noted how the common plains marmot (large ground squirrel) was called "prairie dog" because of the barking sound it makes. This tendency of Plains animals to wind up with misleading names was noted by Webb, who lists "buffalo" for bison, "jackrabbit" (from "jackass rabbit") for a large hare, and "antelope" for the pronghorn; we could add "horned toad" for the squat lizard, and others. In these names we see how pioneers from the east struggled to make the strange familiar. Indians were far more familiar with, but equally fascinated by, these life forms.

Animals no longer furnish quite so much companionship, for the present mid-continental landscape shows dramatic alterations, most in the name of intensive agriculture and ranching. Native grasses have been either eliminated or eaten short. In particular, less than 1 percent of the original tall-grass prairie vegetation remains, mostly in small, isolated patches. The only larger tract left is a strip 2 × 50 miles long in the Flint Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma. As a functioning ecosystem, the tall-grass prairie is extinct. Much of the Cross Timbers plant life has also been cleared away. Fire is kept under control. Rivers are channeled and dammed, and the water table drawn down, to water towns and fields. Rock outcrops have been quarried flat for building stone and road material.

The Plains environment

Landscape: flat and rolling plains, mesas, hills, playas, braided rivers

Weather: dry, windy, wide seasonal temperature ranges, sudden weather changes, blizzards, northers, tornados

Plants: short grasses on western plains, tall grasses on eastern prairies, trees and forbs

Animals: bison, elk, deer, pronghorn, wolf, bear, mountain lion, badger, fox, prairie dog

Today, the landscape might be best understood as a mosaic of agricultural land use patterns. Spring wheat, planted in spring and harvested in the fall, is planted in the Dakotas; winter wheat, planted in fall and harvested in late spring, dominates from south Nebraska to the Texas panhandle. Barley is raised in the wheat areas too. In the eastern part of the former grasslands the main crop is corn grown to feed cattle and hogs. South of this **corn belt** is a **cotton belt**. Alfalfa for livestock feed is grown under irrigation in the drier west, and the driest areas are given over to pasturing cattle, sheep, and goats. Other important crops include flax and sugar beets in the north and peanuts in the south.

Despite the often high productivity of farms on the Plains, it remains questionable whether agriculture is really sustainable there. The region has always been subject to sharp boom and bust cycles. Economic downturns hit in the 1890s, the Dust Bowl 1930s, and the 1980s, which was an era of foreclosures and “Farm Aid” benefit concerts. Prolonged droughts in Texas during the periods 1949–57 and 2010–15 put many ranchers out of business. In the past century many Plains towns have lost more than 50 percent of their population, entire counties have been virtually abandoned; bank failures, poverty rates, and dependence on federal subsidies have increased. Regardless of occasional upturns, many analysts think there is an inevitable trend toward the failure of agriculture and depopulation of the Plains.

Two Rutgers University social scientists, Frank J. Popper and Deborah E. Popper, a land-use planner and geographer respectively, have recommended a radical solution: abandon farming and the market towns that support it and let the Plains revert to their natural state. In their controversial **Buffalo Commons** concept, sections of ten states would compose an enormous nature preserve managed by the federal government. Bison, elk, and wolves would be restocked; wildlife and solitude would be the commodities in a mixed-use economy of recreation, tourism, and retirement. The reintroduction of wildlife is not a purely romantic gesture, but a matter of efficiency. Bison, for example, have a slightly more efficient digestion rate than cattle and can live on coarser plants. The fate of American Indians under this plan is not clear, but it is suggested that they might receive parts of the new commons in payment for tribal land claims, or at least enjoy preference of employment as stewards and guides. While it remains doubtful that all of the Plains agricultural infrastructure will be undone purposefully, there are in fact already many small experiments throughout the Plains in reversion. These include preserved areas of vegetation such as the national grasslands (reclaimed from farmlands abandoned during the Dust Bowl), protected Indian sacred sites, and reintroduced buffalo herds.

The Plains culture area

The Plains make up a particular cultural setting as well as a distinctive natural environment. They form one of the major culture areas that anthropologists recognize in North America.

“[A] **culture area** is a geographical area within the boundaries of which similar cultures or life styles are found” (Howard 1975, 22). More technically, “[c]ulture areas are geographical territories in which characteristic culture patterns are recognizable through repeated associations of specific traits and, usually, through one or more modes of subsistence that are related to the particular environment” (Ehrich and Henderson 1968, 563). A complete listing of North American culture areas might look like Table 1.1 (there are multiple variants of this scheme but all are similar).

Each of these areas has a characteristic (if easily oversimplified) array of Native American cultural adaptations. For example, the temperate Woodlands features a mixture of forest hunting and gardening of corn, beans, and squash in cleared plots, villages of wigwams and longhouses (pole frame, bark-covered dwellings), pottery, birch or hickory bark canoes and containers, soft-soled moccasins, and so on. The dry, rugged Great Basin area called for dependence on rabbits and seeds, residence in small mobile groups for much of the year, baskets but virtually no pottery. The rainy Northwest Coast is an area of large rectangular timber and plank houses, totem poles, long ocean-going dugout canoes, abundant salmon, and whale hunting.

The Plains culture area is normally defined by the following traits:

- dependence on bison hunting
- lack of agriculture
- limited use of gathered foods
- nomadism
- dependence on the horse for riding and traction
- dogs for traction
- travois (wood frame for dragging possessions)
- tipi (moveable skin dwelling)
- general lack of boats and fishing
- lack of or only simple pottery and weaving
- bison and deerskin clothing
- highly developed work in skins and rawhide
- little work in wood, stone, or bone
- beadwork
- geometrical art
- bilateral descent (tracing ancestors and relatives through both mother and father)
- band-level social organization
- warfare
- sodalities (men’s and women’s clubs)
- Sun Dance (major religious ceremony)
- sign language
- platform burials

These traits pertain to the High Plains subarea specifically. Since this volume includes populations living east of the High Plains in its definition of the Plains culture area, the following traits relevant to those groups are also noted:

- corn gardening
- semi-permanent settlements

- horses, dogs, and travois
- occasional bison hunts
- mutual relations with High Plains nomads
- massive sod houses (north) or large grass houses (south)
- tipi used for hunting trips
- hand-molded pottery
- some fishing
- large seasonal ceremonies
- elaborate sky mythology
- clan social structure

Although this book assumes the existence of the Plains culture area, it is important to question the validity and utility of this construct. We should consider the history of the idea, and its pros and cons for understanding Native peoples.

The culture area concept grew out of two related intellectual trends: the rise of scientific classification and the development of modern museums. Early museums looked like an eccentric person's attic—a hodgepodge of curiosities with little apparent rhyme or reason. The emerging standards of science, however, required above all else classification, the grouping of items according to similarities and differences. The first published classifications of North American tribes circa 1830–80, such as Albert Gallatin's *Synopsis of Indian Tribes* (Gallatin 1973; orig. 1836), grouped them according to shared linguistic backgrounds, although this procedure did not yield a distinct Plains area. Then, during the latter nineteenth century, major museums such as the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and the Columbian Exhibition (1893 Chicago World's Fair) began grouping objects in exhibits according to teachable themes, such as object type, patterns of technology evolution, geographic origin, or linguistic stock of the makers. The main advocates of organized exhibits in the United States were Otis T. Mason (1838–1908) of the Smithsonian, and Clark Wissler, Pliny Earle Goddard (1869–1928), and Franz Boas (1858–1942), all at the American Museum. Each of these scholar-curators was interested in what Mason called the “Influences of Environment upon Human Industries or Arts” (Mason 1896), and soon this became the dominant idea behind museum displays. The idea of culture areas such as the Woodlands and Plains came most directly from this practice of displaying material objects together to suggest environmental conditions and the cultural adaptations that went with them.

As anthropologists, historians, and other researchers tried to make sense of the large variety of Indian cultural practices, they found comfort in this classificatory framework. The Plains culture area, among others, became the subject of much attention and attempts at refinement. When patterned variations became apparent within the proposed areas, the areas were subdivided to reflect them. Wissler sought a center for Plains Indian culture from which the archetypal traits diffused, and he defined a core High Plains area with two secondary areas to the east and one to the west. Alfred Kroeber (1876–1960) was more exacting, proposing eight subareas with names like “Northern Plains,” “Central Prairie,” and “Red River.” Kroeber, however, noted the inadequacy of such categories and suggested that the best approach would be a color map showing the intensity and shadings of the definitional culture. These early efforts focused on environments and material items when weighing the similarities and differences between tribes. George Peter Murdock (1897–1985) looked

Table 1.1 Culture areas of North America

<i>Area name</i>	<i>Range and characteristics</i>
<i>Woodlands</i>	Southern Maine and Ontario to Florida, westward to the Mississippi and eastern Texas. This region encompasses coastal plains and swamps, the Piedmont, Appalachian Mountains, Great Lakes region, and easternmost tall-grass prairies, but the overarching factor is forested land, in contrast to open grasslands or desert. It is often subdivided into northeastern and southeastern areas.
<i>Plains</i>	The dry, short-grass High Plains extending west of the 98th meridian to the Rocky Mountains. This area runs from the southern prairie provinces of Canada (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) southward to Texas and is wider in the north than in the south. This area sometimes also includes the tall-grass prairies east of the High Plains—in Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri—which are otherwise assigned to the Woodlands area.
<i>Basin and Plateau</i>	Includes the Rocky Mountains and neighboring ranges and deserts. The Great Basin includes most of Utah, Nevada, western Colorado, western Wyoming, southern Idaho, and southeastern California. The Plateau covers most of Idaho, western Montana, eastern Oregon and Washington, and interior British Columbia. These two are often treated as separate areas.
<i>Southwest</i>	Corresponds to the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts in New Mexico and Arizona and closely adjacent parts of Utah, Colorado, Texas, and Mexico.
<i>California</i>	Corresponds to the modern state excepting the extreme northwest and southeast. Landforms include the Sierras and Coast Ranges, Central Valley, northern lava fields, and coasts.
<i>Northwest Coast</i>	A long narrow area between the coastal mountain ranges and shores, plus islands, extending from northern California through Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and the Alaskan Panhandle.
<i>Subarctic</i>	The lands spanning the north of the continent from Northern Maine and Newfoundland to interior Alaska, composed of coniferous forests, bogs, lakes, and taiga, and excepting the Arctic coast.
<i>Arctic</i>	The strip of land 100–200 miles wide, and islands, along the coast of the Arctic Ocean from Labrador to Alaska.

instead for clusters of social and linguistic traits and proposed seven major subareas that differed from prior classifications and produced a less unified image of the Plains. Harold E. Driver (1907–92) and associates sought statistical correlations among 35 groups previously identified as “Plains” tribes, using an index of similarity called the phi coefficient. A phi coefficient of 1 between two tribes would mean they were identical, and lesser numbers indicated degree of difference. Across all 35 tribes Murdock found a phi coefficient of .35. This was about the same degree of difference evident across all of North America, suggesting a weak case for internal consistency in the Plains culture area. Driver did, however, find higher coefficients, in the .50s and .60s, within four proposed subareas: the (High) Plains, Prairie, Northeastern Canadian Plains, and Shoshonean area west of the High Plains.

The culture area approach does offer benefits for study. It simplifies learning about many diverse cultural groups. A good degree of knowledge about Native people of the Plains can be gained by learning the general features of the culture area, without having to study every tribe and every ceremony. And culture areas illustrate the broad patterns of human adaptation to particular environments.

Approaches to the culture area concept

Clark Wissler: a culture center from which archetypal traits diffused

Alfred Kroeber: eight subareas, colored/shaded maps showing intensity of definitional culture

George P. Murdock: clusters of social and linguistic traits with seven major subareas

Harold Driver: statistical correlations among 35 Plains tribes

Source: Scaglion (1980)

There are, however, also many drawbacks to a reliance on culture areas. The basic problem is that the areas are arbitrary. The term “area” suggests a fixed and bounded territory, but culture areas are theoretical constructs with no strict borders. Disagreement can occur not only about the centers and boundaries of areas, but about which cultural traits should be considered essential in defining them. The choice of diagnostic traits determines the apparent degree of similarity between tribes. Thus, there is never a single indisputable scheme of culture areas, but rather different possibilities that claim researchers’ allegiance. Sticking to one or another scheme may cause researchers to overlook, ignore, or misinterpret information that does not fit with expectations. Another problem is that culture areas are static concepts that assume long stability of populations and cultural practices and do not reveal processes of culture change. Furthermore, they are asynchronous—they do not occur at the same time. North American culture areas generally refer to the time of early Indian–white contact, and since this time was different across the continent, the areas taken together do not form a simultaneous picture; even within the Plains area, contact times varied significantly. A final and perhaps obvious weakness is that the standard culture areas tell us very little about the realities of contemporary Indian life.

Anthropologist James H. Howard (1925–82) mounted the most forceful criticism of the culture area approach. Howard, who worked among several Plains tribes, called the approach “a foul deed” committed against Indian people by members of the anthropological profession. Although useful as a crude rule of thumb, Howard wrote, culture areas had become so pervasive in general discussions, in textbooks and grade school instruction, that non-Indians and even many Indians alike had come to believe that Native cultures were fixed in these rigid categories. This inflexibility contradicted what Indian people knew from their own tribal traditions about the continuous mixing and blending of cultures. The insistence on fixed categories can cause stress for living members of Indian cultures, such as the contemporary man of a Woodlands tribe who was scolded for wearing a Plains-style feather war bonnet because it was not from his own culture area. Also, Howard noted, because they are based on the presence of particular traits, culture areas amount to a set of requirements such that tribal groups having more prescribed traits are “proper” members of the area while those with fewer traits are considered “marginal,” less authentic or worthy of consideration.

The culture area concept therefore must be used advisedly, although it is both convenient and so ingrained as to be unavoidable. In defining the member tribes of the Plains area this book follows the *Handbook of North American Indians* (Sturtevant 2001). It includes societies of both the High Plains and Prairie. Discussions will also occasionally include other groups that ventured onto or influenced the Plains area, especially the Shoshones



Map 1.3 Plains culture area with neighboring tribes

and Utes centered just west of the High Plains who are often assigned to the Great Basin culture area, the Apache groups living southwest of the High Plains, and the Caddos living just southeast of the Plains in Texas and Louisiana, frequently considered a Southeast Woodlands group. The area and tribes covered in this volume are shown in Map 1.3. The origins of these societies according to Native tradition are explored in the next chapter.

Sources

Allan and Warren (1993); Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992); Beck and Haase (1989); Boyd (1981); Caire et al. (1989); Callenbach (1996); Chadwick (1995); Costello (1969); DeMallie (2001b); Driver (1962); Driver and Coffin (1975); Driver et al. (1972); Ehrich and Henderson (1968); Flores (1985, 1990); Gallatin (1973); Gelo (1993, 1994, 2000); Gilbert (1980); Gregg (1967); Horgan (1979); Howard (1975); Kroeber (1939); Lynch (1970); Mason (1896, 1907); Murdock (1967); Pirkle and Yoho (1985); Popper (1992); Popper and Popper (1987, 1988); Scaglione (1980); Sturtevant (2001); U.S. Department of Commerce (1980); Webb (1981); Weeks et al. (1988); Wissler (1917).

Chapter summary

Knowledge of the Great Plains landscape is critical to the understanding of Plains Indian culture. The Plains environment presents a unique set of limits and opportunities for human occupation. The region considered in this book encompasses lands between the Mississippi River and Rocky Mountains, and between the Canadian subarctic and Rio Grande. It is a region of comparatively level grasslands, including the tall-grass Prairie and short-grass High Plains. Within the grasslands are geologic features that contribute to habitat diversity, and a series of rivers flowing from west to east. Peculiarities of climate, weather, vegetation, and animal life also add to the distinctive character of the Great Plains. The region encouraged development of a human adaptive regime involving bison hunting, horsemanship, and other traits related to a mobile lifestyle. In eastern parts of the region, gardening and fixed villages were also possible. Indians of the region are said to belong to the Plains culture area. The idea of the Plains as a uniform cultural area is helpful to learning but must be used carefully so as not to mask significant variation.

Key terms

humid line: the line between areas receiving more or less than 20 inches of rain annually

Great Plains: the dry, untimbered, level land between the 98th meridian and the Rocky Mountains

Prairie: the untimbered level land east of the 98th meridian

bunch grass: grass growing in isolated bunches in drier areas

arroyo: a narrow ravine on the Great Plains; also **gulch** or **draw**

badlands: an eroded area in the western High Plains; also **breaks**

chinook: a warm, dry, strong wind plunging onto the Great Plains from the Rocky Mountains

norther: a polar air mass that descends toward the southern Plains

roller: a huge dust cloud

tornado alley: the region of frequent tornados

braided: meandering, silt-clogged, with multiple channels; said of Plains rivers

playa: a seasonal pond on the high plains

booming grounds: the courtship areas of ground-dwelling Plains birds

corn belt: the region where the main crop is corn

cotton belt: the region where the main crop is cotton

Buffalo Commons: a plan to allow the Plains region to revert to its natural state

culture area: a geographical area in which similar cultures are found

Key questions

- (1) How is the natural area called the Great Plains defined?
- (2) Describe the distinctive natural features of the Great Plains, including climate and weather, land features, and plant and animal life.
- (3) What are the characteristic traits of the Plains culture area? What traits distinguish the Prairie from the High Plains?
- (4) Explain the origin of the culture area concept, and comment on its strengths and weaknesses.

Oral traditions

Every Plains Indian society has its own accounts of the past. Origins and history were saved and passed down through the generations in orally transmitted stories and, sometimes, via drawings on skin or rocks. Indian stories reveal ways of thinking about the past that may be different from the linear parade of events, names, and dates that compose history according to non-Indians. The Native past may be thought of as cyclical and continually relevant to present-day life.

Despite centuries of disruption, oral traditions have been one of the more enduring aspects of culture on the Plains. The continuation of tribal stories is closely related to the survival of native language, although many of the stories are still retold by tribe members in English along with or instead of those in the original language. Scholars are thus able to continue collecting and analyzing traditional stories for historical, linguistic, and cultural studies, adding to a body of recorded material that has been accumulating since the late 1700s. In recent years a number of tribes have put oral traditions at the center of their own preservation efforts because of their value in maintaining history, language, and cultural knowledge. Several tribes now have programs for collecting tribal stories from elders, publishing them, and placing them in local school curricula.

For many Indian people, keeping tribal stories alive is critical for self-definition and self-determination. Roger C. Echo-Hawk (Pawnee) has rightly noted how the distinction between “history” and “prehistory” as drawn in the scholarly literature is an imposed non-Indian framework that suggests a strict divide between what is more or less knowable. But rather than thinking of their oral narratives as some less dependable vision of the remote past, Indians may see them as their own authoritative ancient history, of equal value to the written records of non-Indian deep time (and a record that can and should be linked with other records, such as those from archaeology). Indeed, many Indian storytellers regard their tales simply as history rather than, say, literature, art, religious doctrine, or folklore.

Some non-Indian scholars have struggled with the historical value of Native oral traditions. As anthropologist Douglas Parks has pointed out (Parks 1996, 1), anthropologist James Mooney’s *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* (Mooney 1898) was the first full attempt to combine Native and non-Indian sources to construct an American Indian tribal history. Mooney worked from two Kiowa “calendars” or “winter counts,” series of pictographs drawn on hide and paper (described in Chapter 7). Each pictograph was a reminder about certain stories to be told by the elders, and the order of pictures provided a consistent timeline of Kiowa history. Mooney was able to match the pictograph stories with information from other sources, both Indian and non-Indian, toward an even stronger

account of Kiowa history. Not all Plains tribes encoded their histories in pictograph calendars, but all kept alive a body of oral traditions that serves as a rich basis for understanding their past.

Blackfoot origins

Old man was walking south to north creating the landscape, plants, and animals. He decided to make people and shaped them from clay. After bringing them to life, the woman asked if they would live forever or be mortal. Old Man pondered, and decided to use chance to answer the question. He told her, "I'll throw a buffalo chip into the water; if it sinks your people will be mortal, if it floats they will die for four days and then come back to life." The woman replied, "No, I will throw a rock in the water, and if it sinks we will be mortal, if it floats, we will live forever." She threw a rock in the water and it sunk.

Later the woman had a child who died, so she asked Old Man to reverse the rule of mortality. He replied that the law must remain. Old Man showed the people how to survive on the land, what to use for food, and how to use plants to heal. The buffalo were stronger than the people, who had no way to defend themselves, and the buffalo were eating the people. Old Man said, "This will not do; I will change this." He taught the people how to make and use weapons, and tactics for hunting. He taught them how to make fire and cook. He instructed them to pay attention to what the animals tell them to do in their dreams.

Old Man continued to travel north, making more people and buffalo, and he showed the people how to run the buffalo over a cliff, and to use their hides to make shelter. He continued his journey, always going due north, making people and teaching them how to survive. Eventually he ended his journey and marked off a line on the ground, and told the people not to let others come into their homeland, that they should use their weapons to "battle and keep them out." He warned the people that letting others into their space would bring trouble.

Source: Grinnell (2003, 137)

Beyond the historical worth of Indian stories, they are also widely appreciated for their artistic qualities, as entertainment, and for their ability to condense and transmit life lessons, morals, and values. Indian narratives therefore may be regarded as oral literature as well as oral history.

Plains Indian stories conform to different types. Since the days of the German folklorists the Brothers Grimm, distinctions have been made between myths, legends, and folktales, and this typology captures some of the differences among Indian stories, although not exactly. According to the folklorists' definition, a **myth** is a narrative that deals with some major existential question such as how the world was made or where people go when they die. Myths include characters and actions that are outside of normal experience; they take place in a different dimension of time and space, and while fantastic and improbable, these stories are regarded as serious and true by those who tell them. Because myths concern creation and fate and demand belief, they are associated with the sacred and religious ideology.

Legends, on the other hand, tell of actual persons and events that are believed to have taken place in ordinary time in the past, although they may include exaggerations and unlikely outcomes. Legendary characters may have started out as real historical persons, but their exploits have become magnified. Therefore, legends can sometimes include some of the serious concerns and fantastic elements found in myth. Legends contain the heroic history of a group of people. Believability of legends is negotiated—the listener is not quite sure if every part of the legend is true, but is willing to go along.

A **folktale** is accepted by everyone as imaginary. In European folktales, for example, the beginning phrase “Once upon a time” actually cues the listener that what follows never really took place, but is a made-up story for entertainment and perhaps moral education.

Other types of narratives can be added to this basic scheme. Sometimes people just tell others what happened to them in the recent or distant past in a conversational way. Such stories can be called unpolished reminiscences. When people tell about the same happening repeatedly they may standardize the way they deliver it, forming a kind of narrative called a **memorate**. These kinds of stories are also extremely important in preserving and transmitting tribal knowledge, but have not been recorded as much as myths, legends, and folktales. One can also imagine how a legend or myth could form over time from a memorate, as the story is repeated by others over generations, gains significance, and becomes more distant from the original source and more communal. Perhaps sometimes too a story that once had mythic significance could lose its importance over time and survive only in a reduced, more casual form. These processes of narrative formation are evident among all people, Indian and non-Indian alike.

Kiowa origins and migration

The first ancestors emerged from a hollow log at the bidding of Creator. He tapped on the log and they came out one at a time, until a pregnant woman got stuck and blocked the way for any more; this accounts for the small number of the Kiowa tribe. Creator gave them the sun, created day and night, tamed ferocious animals, and taught the people how to hunt, before taking his place among the stars.

A boy hero, son of the Sun and an earth woman, did many miracles for the people. Later, he transformed himself into two, and gave himself to the Kiowas in the form of a tribal medicine, which they still have.

The Kiowas first remember living far to the north, near the mountains of western Montana, a region of great cold and deep snows. Two chiefs on a hunt quarreled about ownership of an antelope udder, a prized delicacy, and the people split. Part headed southeast toward the plains. Another version says they were driven from the cold country by wars. In those days they moved with dogs and dog sleds.

They went ever southward to live on the south fork of the Platte River, then to the Arkansas River. From there they moved to the headwaters of the Cimarron River. This became their home, and through much fighting they secured the country south of the Arkansas and north of Red River.

Source: Mooney (1898, 152–4)

Tribes have their own schemes for classifying stories. The Oglala Sioux recognize two genres, *ohunkanan*, which they liken to myths and fables, and *wicooyake*, the telling of war adventures and local events that are deemed “true” in the sense that they are part of immediate human experience. Similarly, Arikara storytellers note two classes, *naa’iikáWlš*, which they translate as “fairy tales,” and “true stories” with no special native term. Both classes cover different kinds of stories, but generally Arikara fairy tales are stories about the trickster and other fanciful creatures, and true stories include those concerning mythic times, legends, historical and supernatural events, and the origins of ritual. The Comanches also use two different words to denote narratives. One, *narumu?ipu*, refers to any kind of narrative, while the other, *narukuyunapu*, is reserved, according to one storyteller, for “old time stories—some of it’s facts, it may be something somebody saw in a vision, things that the people used to know that might be forgotten” (quoted in Gelo 1994, 302). (The element *naru* in both these words means “exchange,” for that is how storytelling is conceived, and by custom Comanche and other Plains storytellers may receive small gifts in trade for their stories.) Each of these Native sets of categories, like the non-Indian distinction between myth and legend, distinguishes between the supernatural and everyday human domains.

Oral narratives have many essential qualities that can never be adequately captured in writing. Yet unfortunately so much of what remains of Plains Indian oral traditions is in the form of stories collected, printed, and reprinted over many years. And normally these stories have been saved in a form in which the native language has been translated freely into English. Free translations vary greatly in quality, from those intent on making the story conform to English literary standards of grammar and plot sequence to those, more recently, rendered by literary scholars trained to be sensitive to Native forms and meanings. For convenience, the present discussion does rely on free translations and summaries to illustrate features of narrative. It must be recognized, however, that narratives in these forms are imperfect and often just rough approximations of what was originally being said and meant.

One practice that helps address weaknesses of the printed narrative is interlinear translation. Translation lines can be inserted directly between the native text lines or gathered in a parallel paragraph. For example, the following story told by Comanche elder Emily Riddles in the 1950s is given as she spoke it in Comanche with a literal English translation in parallel, numbered so that each sentence and word are directly glossed (after Canonge 1958, 31–3):

1. soobe?suksatsa?1 raa2 ahtakí?2 tmmumi?anu4. 2. – ibu1 nu?2 tabe3 ikahpetu4 manak-wahu5 nana?atahpú6 naboori7 kwasu?i8 tmmukwatu?i9, – meku10. 3. u1 pía?kuse?2, – tua3 unu4 o?ana5 manakwu6 miasuwaitu?i7, – me8 u9 niikwiiyu10. 4. situkuse?1 ahtakí2, – natsatsa3 taa4 nomia?eku5, u?ana6 esitsunu?ikatu7, tahu8 na?nmmunukabaiki9 nu10 yutsumia?eeku11. – 5. situkuse?1 si?anetu2 yutsuhkwa3 tmmumi?atsi4. 6. situ kuse?1 yutsiimi?aru2, yutsiimi?aru3, u4 biarupinoo?karaku5, uma6 karuhúpiitu7. 7. maa1 ma2 karukukuse?3 piawosa?áa?ra?4 mawakatu5 to?ihúpiittu6, – hina7 unu8? – me9 u10 niikwiiyu11. 8. surukuse?1 – tsaa2 nu?3 naboori4 kwasu?i5 suwaaitu6 – me7 u8 niikwiiyu9. 9. situkuse?1 nana?atahputi2 tttetapihta3 himanu4 uma5 sihka6 esi?ahtamúu?a7 tu?ekanu8. 10. – meeku1 nabuuni2 – mekuse?3 suru4 u5 niikwiiyu6. 11. situkuse?1 si?ana2 wunaru3, nabuihwunubuni4. 12. – nohi?1 tsaa2 nabuniyu3, nuu4 – mekuse?5 suru6 esi?ahtamúu?7. 13. – usu?1 nu?2 buesu3 tsaa4 naboori5 nu6 suwainihti7 kwasu?utua?i8 miaru?i9 nu?10 – usu?11 mekuse?12 suuru13. 14. si?anetukuse?1 suru2 pitu3 yutsunukwa4, so?ana5 sehka6 esi?ahtamúu?a7 pukuhu8 sooyori?ikahtu9 pitnu10. 15. surukuse?1 esi?ahtamúu?nuu2, – osu3 hakaru4 nanisuyake5 nabooru6

uk₇ taməkaba₈ kaht₉ – 16. s₁m₂ʔkuse₁, – ur₂ u₃ r₄m₅u₆koʔi₇ʔ₄ – me₅ y₆kwi₇y₈.
 17. surəkuse₁ p₂m₃i₄ ur₅i₆ nasuyakeku₄, p₂n₃ihku₅ uhka₆ p₇ naraʔurak₈ʔi₉ha₈ ur₁₀i₉
 t₁ʔawek₂n₃u₄. 18. setəkuse₁ esiʔahtamú₂ sebut₃ tabeʔikahpetutu₄ s₅m₆yori-
 nukwa₅, tsuʔnikat₆, set₇ s₈m₉əkoyaman₈, nanan₁₀isuyake₉, set₁₀ naboo₁₁hka₁₁. 19. suk₁
 sehka₂ naboori₃ ahtamú₄ʔa₄ naahka₅, atanaiht₆ ur₇u₈ku₇ bit₉n₈. 20. surəkuse₁, –
 m₂n₃u₂ esiʔahtamú₃n₄ hakanihku₄ nanan₅isuyakeku₅ naboo₆hka₆ʔ – me₇ ur₈i₈ niik-
 wiiy₉. 21. sur₁u₂ku₃se₁, – t₂m₃u₄y₅kar₆ n₇n₈u₃ us₄ subeʔs₅ suhka₆ esiʔahtamú₇ʔa₇
 t₂m₃u₄koʔikat₈ nihán₉, tsaa₁₀ naboori₁₁ u₁₂ kwasuʔut₁₃m₁₄u₁₅hka₁₃ – me₁₄ y₁₅kwit₁₅.
 22. subet₁.

1. Long ago₁, it is said₂, a grasshopper₃ went to buy₄. 2. – I₂ will go to buy₉ (a) different kind of₆ designed₇ coat₈ (I will go) far away₅ this way₁ towards (the) going down₄ (of the) sun₃, – (he) said₁₀. 3. His₁ mother₂ said to₈ 10 him₉, – You₄ continually₃ want to go₇ over there₅ far away₆. – 4. This₁ grasshopper₂ (said), – No matter₃? When₅ we₄ move₅, when₁₁ I₁₀ fly₁₁ among₉ our₈ relatives₉, there₆ (I) appear grey₇. – 5. This one₁ at this place₂ flew off₃, /going/ to buy₄. This one₁ goes flying₂, goes flying₃, where that big rock hill sits₄, (it) stopped and sat₇ on it₆. 7. As₃ he₂ sat₃ on it₁, (a) big grasshopper₄ climbed₆ towards him₅ and stopped₆, – What₇ (do) you₈ (want)? – (he) said to₉ 11 him₁₀. 8. That one₁ said to₇ 9 him₈ – I₃ want₆ (a) nice₂ designed₄ coat₅. – 9. This one₁ took₄ different kinds of₂ little stones₃ with it₅ [them] (he) painted₈ this₆ grey grasshopper₇. 10. – Now₁ look at yourself₂, – that one₄ said to₃ 6 him₅. 11. This one₁ stands₃ here₂ looking at himself much₄. 12. – I₄ look₃ very₁ nice₂, – said₅ that₆ grasshopper₇. 13. – Already₃ I₂ received₈ that₁ nice₄ designed₅ coat₈ (the) way I want₆. I₁₀ will go₉, – thus₁₁ said₁₂ that one₁₃. 14. At this place₁ that one₂ flew/off₄/ back₃; (and) arrived₁₀ there₅ (at the) place₈ (where) those various₆ grasshoppers₇ are flying a lot /to₉/. 15. Those₁ grasshoppers₂ (said), – Who₄ (is) that₃, (who) looks₆ pretty₅, (who) here₇ among us₈ /is/ sitting₉? – 16. One₁ said₅, – It₃ (is) that one₂, returned from buying₄. – 17. As₄ they₃ wished for₄ that₂, that one₁ told₁₀ them₉ in that way₅ [how] he₇ met₈ that one₆. 18. These various₁ grasshoppers₂ all flew off₅ (in) various ways₃ towards the going down (of the) sun₄ (and they) stay₆ (and when) these various ones₇ all returned₈, these various ones₁₀ are designed₁₁ pretty₉. 19. As₅ those various₂ designed₃ grasshoppers₄ are living₅ there₁, one from a different kind₆ came up₈ to them₇. 20. That one₁ said to₇ 9 them₈, – How is it₄ all you₂ grey grasshoppers₃ are designed₆ pretty₅? – 21. Those ones₁ are saying₁₄ 15, – We₃ shopped around₂. Thus₄ at that time₅ when₁₃ he₁₂ bought₁₃ the nice₁₀ designed₁₁ coat₁₃ (someone) named₉ that₆ grey grasshopper₇ “Is Returned from Buying₈.” – 22. That is all₁.

Stories reproduced this way are harder to read than simple translations but provide a much richer sense of what is being communicated. First of all, the Native voice is recorded, and even someone who does not know the native language can see the vocabulary and grammar (word order), and gets some sense of pacing, vocal quality, and the nuances of meaning. In this case the conversational pace is highlighted by the transcriber using dashes to set off alternating quotations. Several narrative devices, in this case ones that are customary in Comanche storytelling, are also evident. The quotations are important because Comanche stories, and all Plains stories, rely heavily on character dialogue, even expressing the thoughts of characters as statements from them. There is very purposeful use of the pronouns “this” and “that” and the word “here” to distinguish between the first grasshopper and the other grasshopper he meets, making the main character and his experience more immediate to

the listener. Repetition of words (Sentence 5, “goes flying, goes flying”) is a common way of emphasizing extended or continuous action in Comanche, and Comanche storytellers use this device whether telling stories in Comanche or English. (Similarly, Comanche speakers sometimes repeat the initial sounds when pronouncing motion verbs, for emphasis.) Here the teller creates a sense of significant distance by repeating the reference to flight.

The decisive moment for the adventurous grasshopper takes place as he sits on a “big rock hill.” Such allusions to high landmarks as points of revelation are a common element in Comanche stories. Also notable are the opening and closing formula phrases, “Long ago, it is said . . .” and “That is all,” which again are customary in Comanche storytelling. These phrases are similar to the “Once upon a time” and “happily ever after” in English fairytales in that they serve to mark off the story from other kinds of speech and cue the listener. The phrase “it is said” distances the narrator from the events she is about to relate, in effect declaring “this is something I heard about, not saw directly,” which is the common subject position for Indian storytellers.

Beyond these structural characteristics, it must be understood that a storyteller and listeners make all sorts of linguistic and cultural connections that would not be apparent to someone outside the culture. The Comanche story makes more sense if one knows that there is a great variety of grasshoppers found on the open plains of Comanche country (more than 100 species) and that many of these types when viewed close up display distinctive body features and colors, sometimes vivid markings arranged in marvelous geometric patterns. Although interesting in and of itself, the variation of grasshoppers may have been interesting because in the past Comanches ate grasshoppers as an emergency food. But aside from this factor, variations in natural forms are important in teaching young people to be observant of their surroundings, a common lesson in storytelling. In the story above, the main character is introduced as *ahtakūʔ*, a generic grasshopper term that means “horn,” in reference to the insect’s horny face, and probably *-kū* is an onomatopoeia element. The big grasshopper that he meets is a different kind, *piawosaʔaaʔraʔ*. This name refers to a very large green variety and literally means “big suitcase uncle,” after the notion that it wears large saddlebags or parfleches. Further along, the main character is called *esiʔahtamūuʔa*, a more specific term for a grayish grasshopper, literally, “gray horny nose.” This plain grasshopper is then transformed in the story into another recognized variety, the multicolored *tumūukoʔikatū*, “is returned from buying,” also called *tumūukoʔiʔ*, “to buy” or “to trade.” In the traditional Comanche frame of reference colorful textiles for clothing are gotten through trade. So the tale is in part a simple story about the origin of one colorful variety of grasshopper. Listeners might know that the kinds of grasshoppers mentioned exist within an even larger semantic field that includes the red *ekawi*, the yellow *ohawi*, the *pasia* with yellow thighs, and the *kwasiṭuna*, a type with a straight tail.

There is even more cultural significance in this story, however. The little grasshopper goes on a long, intentional journey to a hill to find what he is looking for. Hill landmarks such as Quitaque in Texas were used by the Comanches as the meeting places for trade with other tribes and the Comanchero merchants who brought colorful cloth from New Mexico. Moreover, the word for the “big rock hill” used in this story, *biarupinoo*, is also the Comanche name for the sacred cliffs called Medicine Bluffs north of Lawton, Oklahoma where people went on vision quests; so there is some suggestion of the supernatural in the grasshopper’s adventure. This meaning is heightened by other details. The grasshopper flies toward the sun to obtain his colors. Throughout the Uto-Aztecan world (Comanche is a language in this family) the bright colors of flowers, birds, and insects are regarded as

signs of the power of the shining sun. A sacred complement to this formula is the medicine power of the earth, as represented in mineral paints such as red and yellow ochre applied to the body, and indeed the little grasshopper is anointed by the big one with earthen paint ("different kinds of little stones"). Also within the story are more general notions about the importance of trading and the value of beauty and personal adornment, and the ideal way to acquire personal names—through notable deeds and adventures. Thus, the story touches on several aspects of Comanche natural history, religion, and social custom, and in doing so it teaches cultural knowledge in a way that appeals to listeners, especially children. All this is not to say that a teller or listeners always has all of these meanings in mind, but they are embedded there and perpetuated nonetheless.

Another aspect of narratives not easily captured in writing is the way in which they are delivered and received. The performance of narratives as a communicative act involving the teller and audience is an important consideration in understanding meaning and function. On the Plains, performance practices are fairly standardized. Usually stories are told by one or more of the elders to a group of people. It is best not to tell them off the cuff, but always when the time and setting feel appropriate. It is a universal belief among the Plains tribes that traditional stories are supposed to be told during the winter and preferably after dark. This rule applies especially to myths, since stories having to do with the correct order of the cosmos must reflect the concern for order in the way they are told.

When a reason is given for this belief, it is usually said that winter evenings are when families are gathered for safety and warmth around the fireplace and have the leisure time away from buffalo hunting and related chores. It is often said that telling stories out of season can invite supernatural punishment; telling one in summer might cause the sudden appearance of a dangerous snake. Making the hearth the ideal setting for storytelling shows again that passing down tribal knowledge is a serious social duty placed on the family and kin group.

The techniques of oral narrative delivery are also typically not captured in written form, but when reading texts it can be imagined how the storyteller uses body posture, gestures, and shifts in tone of voice to indicate different characters speaking, and sound effects to enhance the dramatic quality of the stories. Continuous reactions and comments thrown in by listeners are also part of the total performance.

Another common belief among Indian storytellers is that they should not tell the same tale more than once in a season. This belief comes from the notion that the tales, myths in particular, are part of a long cycle of related stories describing the continuing adventures of the main characters, which should be delivered in proper sequence to complete the cycle. Viewed together, it is clear that certain individual narratives may form a series. Often, however, in practice it is not possible or practical for storytellers and their listeners to complete a cycle. Time is limited, the stories are long, people are on the move, and the storyteller might not know all the stories in a cycle. A "correct" sequence of stories is often lost, especially since parts of stories are recombined in various ways in a natural process of variation as they are repeated within and between generations. Sometimes, however, story cycles are maintained with a strong commitment and respectful attitude.

The modular quality of oral narratives has led to the classification of narrative motifs. A **motif** can be any element that recurs across stories: a character, kind of character, object, action, concept, or structural feature of narrative. In the Comanche story given above, some of the motifs are the young adventurer, the mother, the journey of discovery, the anointing with earth pigments, and the vision in a high place (which functions both as a location and plot apex). Such elements can be found in many other stories. Although Native storytellers