

Unit 2 Document Set 2: The Little River Women Society

THE LITTLE RIVER WOMEN SOCIETY

This article was taken from Densmore, *Mandan and Hidatsa Music* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923)

Young girls 12 to 18 years of age joined this society by purchasing the songs from women who had been members for about 10 years and who thereby retired from participation in the ceremony. A woman who "sold the songs" received valuable gifts from the young girl to whom she sold them, such gifts usually including a horse or a buffalo robe. She also made the headdress worn by the girl at the first meeting of the society which she attended. Meetings of the society were always held in the spring or possibly in the fall. Scattered Corn, who recorded the ceremonial songs of the society and contributed many details to the accompanying description, was a member of the society from her sixteenth to her twenty-seventh year. In describing the society she mentioned the names of 37 women who were members during the term of her own membership.

ORIGIN OF THE LITTLE RIVER WOMEN SOCIETY

On the west bank of the Missouri River is a bare peak known as Eagle Nose*, and on the opposite bank of the river is another peak. In Eagle Nose Peak, as well as in all the buttes and in the trees, there used to live certain strange beings called "spirit women."

Long ago two Mandan women were taken away by the spirit women. One came back, but the other lived in Eagle Nose Peak, and it was through her help that the Mandan women received the Little River Women Society. All the spirit women who lived in the buttes and the trees once met together and decided to teach a society to the Mandans. Then this woman said she would go as their interpreter, because she understood the language of the spirit women and also that of the Mandan people. The spirit women planned this society in order to give it to the Mandan, and while they were in the bare peak planning the society each woman wore as a headdress one of the bright green snakes that are sometimes found in the buttes.

When all was ready, the spirit women started for the Mandan village, still wearing the bright green snakes twined around their heads. After they had gone a little distance they met an eagle, who said, "Let me go with you, and I will give you one of my feathers to add to your headdress." The spirit women took one of the feathers and let the eagle come with them. For this reason a feather was always worn in the front of the headdress of this society. Next they met a coyote, who said, "If I do not belong to your society it will not succeed." The coyote gave them a song which was always sung at the close of the ceremony, and asked them to add to their headdress a wreath of plummy grass which resembled his fur. In return for this he was allowed to go with them and share the feast. As they came to a creek they met a bear, who said, "You may meet trouble on your way. so you must wear claws to protect you from enemies you meet and from those who may follow you." The bear also gave them a song. For this reason the bear was allowed to go with them and share the feast, and when the ceremony was held there were two women who wore necklaces of bear's claws.

The spirit women came to a creek and there they saw an otter and a flat clamshell. Both wanted to join the new society, so the spirit women allowed them to come. For this reason, when the ceremony was held, a woman walked in the middle of the procession wearing the fur of an otter ornamented with a polished clamshell. The song given the women by the shell is fourth in the group of ceremonial songs.

When the spirit women entered the Mandan village they were still wearing the bright green snakes twined around their heads, together with the eagle feather and the wreath of plummy grass. They also wore the bear claws, the otter fur, and the polished shell. Their feet did not touch the ground as they entered the village because they were spirit women. They said, "We bring the society because you are the people of the Missouri River," and they told the young women to bring food for a feast. The young women took food and gifts into their lodge. The spirit women ate but did not talk— they only whispered to each other. After the feast they taught certain songs, including the Missouri River song, to the maidens. The spirit women also taught them the Little River Women ceremony in which the songs were to be sung. Around their heads the spirit women still wore the living snakes, but they taught the Mandan maidens to braid grass to resemble snakes and told them to make and wear such headdresses whenever they held a ceremony of the society.

* The butte is located about 15 miles below the present site of Mandan, N. Dak.

Then the spirit women went away, but the Mandan women did everything as they had been instructed by the spirit women.

CEREMONY OF THE LITTLE RIVER WOMEN SOCIETY

This ceremony took four days and during the intervening nights the women slept in the ceremonial lodge. They could go to their homes during the day, and usually worked in the gardens in the mornings. A procession was held in the early evening, the crier summoning the women to their lodge to prepare for it. At the time of the procession the men singers, usually five in number, took their places at the drum in the center of the village. The Little River women formed in a line within their lodge. All wore headdresses of braided grass representing snakes and having an eagle feather in the front. At the head and also at the end of the procession walked a woman wearing a necklace of bear claws and midway the length of the line was a woman wearing an otter skin ornamented with a polished shell.⁸⁹ The procession passed around the village circle, moving from east to west, and at the cardinal points the maidens paused and danced for a few moments. When they, had completed the circuit of the village they formed a circle outside their lodge and danced, singing the four principal songs that were taught them by the spirit women. Then they danced into the door of the lodge, two by two, singing a dance song. After entering, they danced around the lodge singing the same song, then rested a while.

The drum was brought into the lodge, the singers took their places, and many spectators came to watch the dancers. After a short time the singers at the drum started the Bear song and all the Little River Women rose and danced. The two women who wore the bear-claw necklaces danced near together and close to the fire. After the song was finished the dancers remained standing and the women who wore the bear claws gave presents to those from whom they purchased their membership in the society; they also gave gifts to all their relatives and friends. This was followed by the singing of the Shell song, and the woman who wore the polished shell gave gifts as the women with the bear claws had done. The four principal songs taught by the spirit women were sung several times during each evening. At the close it was customary to sing the song of the coyote, which also marked the end of the entire ceremony. All danced and the singing was peculiar in that it began slowly and accelerated in tempo. Each night a rawhide thong was stretched across the lodge and on it the headdresses were hung. If the women awoke and found that one of their number was missing they at once instituted a search and compelled her to return. As they went about the village seeking for her they sang the following Mandan words:

i'mupa_----- my companion

wa'ani_----- hear

wahu'na----- come

At the end of the fourth day the women who had taken part in the ceremony were "cleansed" by an old man who had "eagle medicine." Their bodies were brushed with a spray of wild peppermint dipped in water, the old man meantime singing his own medicine song.

The casting away of the headdresses marked the conclusion of the ceremony, all the headdresses being placed together.

It is said that once a member of the society would not believe that the braided grass represented a snake. After a ceremony she did not put her headdress with those of the other women but threw it carelessly aside, Later a friend saw it and placed it with the others. After a time the first woman went to the place where the wreaths had been laid and instead of braided grasses she saw a heap of living snakes.

The principal songs of the spirit women were recorded by Scattered Corn in 1912 and again in 1915.

⁸⁹ Scattered Corn said that the spirit women came to the Mandans when they were living in two villages, both of which seem to have had the ceremony at the same time. Some said, however, that " as the real Mandans lived at Deapolis the spirit women probably went there and the women from Deapolis took the ceremony to the women at the Fort Clark village." At a later time one of the villages was destroyed and the societies of the two villages combined, so that there were twice as many wearers of bear claws and special ornaments as were indicated by the spirit women. Thus in later years there were four women with necklaces of bear claws and two with ornaments of otter skin and polished shell. This narrative, however, gives the original number. Scattered Corn was one of the women who wore a bear-claw necklace.