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Indian Children of the Plains

by Roy D. Bird

The Plains Indians thought that the children of the tribe were the most important things in their lives. The birth of a baby in an Indian village was always a happy time, for life on the flat, grassy Great Plains was hard, and the birth of another child who could soon share in the work of the village meant that the work would be easier for everyone. From a very early age Indian children contributed to the life of the band.

A new baby's grandmother bathed the child

and gave him a small bag filled with the umbilical cord and good luck charms for the baby's life. This bag was tied to the baby's cradleboard. The new baby, called a papoose, was then given a name which he would keep until he received an adult name. The baby was now ready to help his tribe.

The first job of the papoose was to be very quiet. A crying baby was dangerous for the band because it attracted enemies. When an Indian baby started to cry its mother would gently pinch

its nose until it was still. Little Indians soon learned that they should make no noise—even the tiniest infants helped to protect the band.

Small babies were carried on their mother's backs, wrapped tight and warm in blankets. A papoose spent most of its first year strapped to a cradleboard which was decorated with beads or porcupine quills. The baby's mother was proud of the sewing skills she exhibited on her baby's board. While the mother worked the cradleboard hung nearby. As the mother cooked she sometimes popped a bite of meat into the child's mouth.

The band moved its teepees frequently. Plains Indians lived by hunting the multitudes of buffalo which shared the prairie with them. When the buffalo herds moved, the village moved along with them so that hunters could obtain meat. While the band traveled the papoose rode on his cradleboard hanging beside his mother's pony or on the poles of the teepee which dragged behind the pony carrying the family's lodging. A broad hoop of wood was fastened around the top of the cradleboard to protect the papoose's head if the pony spooked or threw the cradleboard to the ground.

The Plains Indian child was quiet and well-behaved. He was hardly ever punished. His parents always asked the child to do something—they never ordered their children about. This showed the great respect that Plains Indians had for their children. The young Indian was never alone, because, besides the parents, there were his grandfather and uncles to help bring up a little boy, and her grandmother and aunts to raise a young girl.

Childhood play provided a vehicle for learning adult roles and skills needed by members of the band. For toys the young Indian boy had a small bow complete with arrows, and his games were similar to the work he would do when he grew up. He pretended to be a hunter, stalking a miniature buffalo carved from wood or made of skin stuffed with grass. He was truly proud when he brought home a rabbit for the cooking pot. The young Indian girl learned housekeeping and child-rearing skills by playing with grass-stuffed dolls in a little lodge made of sewn and painted skins.

As she grew older, however, the Indian girl had less time for play. She began to help her mother work around the teepee, gathering fruit and berries, sewing clothes or watching little ones. Sometimes a baby would crawl too near the fire, but big sister never scolded. She watched quietly but carefully so the papoose learned that the fire was hot, but would not get hurt badly. The older sister let the baby learn to avoid painful things at the price of a little hurt.

A girl was important to the band because she would someday mother other children. Her



“A papoose spent most of its first year strapped to a cradleboard”

childhood was a happy one. She was dearly loved because the band was small and the people of the village were often no more than an extended family, all her aunts, uncles and cousins.

When a girl was old enough to be a mother in her own right, her parents gave a feast in her honor. They gave her beautiful clothes to wear, and her aunts and uncles also gave her gifts. All her relatives proclaimed how fine a young woman she was and what a good wife she would make for some brave and what a fine mother for some lucky papoose. They also praised the skills she had learned while she matured. All the games and work had prepared her to be a good wife and mother. Finally, she marched around the village so all the young braves might see what a fine woman she had become.

Like the girls, Indian boys contributed to the well-being of the tribe. Much of this contribution



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revolved around the tribe's herd of horses. The horse, brought to North America by the Spanish, proved useful in buffalo hunting, and life on the prairie quickly became centered on hunting and the nomadic life. Riding was a valuable skill which the Indian boy learned when he was very young, almost before he had learned to walk. Young Indian boys helped care for the village ponies, at first by taking the horses to water each morning and evening, and later by guarding the herd on the prairie. Because ponies were so essential to tribal life, the ownership of horses was a measure of the wealth of the tribe. The boys protected the herd to prevent the theft of their horses and the consequent weakening of the band.

When the Indian boy was old enough to guard the ponies he was allowed to participate in the buffalo hunt. On his first hunt he only watched and held the horses, but on subsequent trips the young Indian participated more fully. The day that he brought home his first buffalo was a memorable occasion which called for a feast. The Plains Indians, known for their generosity, sometimes gave the meat to the poor of the village.

The principal feature of the transition from boyhood to manhood was the vision. With the help of an uncle, the boy erected a sweat lodge of willow branches and buffalo hides. Large stones

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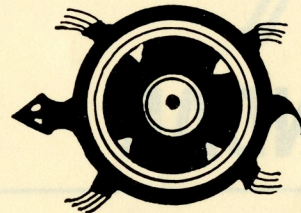
Antonia Quintana Pigno, Director, the Minorities Resource and Research Center. Farrell Library, Kansas State University. 532-6516 Ext. 51.

Beverly Gaines and Anthony J. Seals, Editors

were heated in a fire and carried into the lodge to warm it. As the temperature rose the boy began to sweat, a process which cleansed him inside and out.

The uncle led the youngster to a lonely place and left him there with nothing to eat or drink. Here the lad awaited the vision which usually came after several days of privation. The uncle interpreted the meaning of the dream for him and asked what animals he had seen. From the animals in his vision the boy's adult name was derived. The vision also determined what items would make up the medicine bundle, or good luck bag, which he would carry for the rest of his life. The boy was now a brave, ready to bring home buffalo meat, to ask a young woman to come share his teepee and to father children to continue the tradition of the tribe.

In the days when Indians, ponies and buffalo roved the prairies Indian children grew up with all the love and attention any child could want. They began making a positive contribution to the life of their tribe at an early age and continued to do so throughout their lives.



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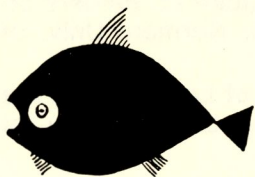
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CALENDAR



Minority Film Festival

Sept. 27—North American Indian Series
7:30 p.m., Room 213, KSU Union. Comments by Dr. Joseph Hawes.

A series of three short films will be presented. The first film, **Treaties Made, Treaties Broken**, traces the struggle of the Nisqually Indian tribe of Washington State to maintain treaty rights awarded them. This film also provides an example of the treatment most Indian tribes have received, thus setting the stage for the historical overview of Indian-White relations presented ironically in **How the West Was Won ... And Honor Lost**. The third film, **Lament of the Reservation**, depicts the present state of the Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Oct. 11—Bilingualism

7:30 p.m., Room 213, KSU Union. Comments by Dr. Virginia Reyes-Kramer and Alicia Opheim.

Bilingualism: Promise for Tomorrow highlights key issues in bilingual/bicultural education. The film discusses the history and actual implementation of bilingual education in the classroom, and its prospects for the future. It includes informative interviews with leading educators, legal scholars, and legislators. **Bilingualism: Right or Privilege in America** deals with such issues as the role of bilingualism in an advanced society, the role of multilingualism in a pluralistic society, bilingualism as cultural enrichment versus educational survival, and judicial and programmatic roles in mandating and implementing bilingual education.

Oct. 24—**From These Roots**

7:30 p.m., Room 212, KSU Union. Comments by Dr. Lucien Agosta.

Nov. 15—**The I.Q. Myth**

7:30 p.m., Room 213, KSU Union. Comments by Dr. James Boyer.