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Omaha, Oto, and Missouri

From the Missouri Valley to the Rocky Mountains ranged the Indians of the plains. Siouan they were in the main, though several tribes of Algonkian stock held part of the territory. In western Iowa and eastern Nebraska lived the Omaha, Oto, and Missouri. The Oto and Missouri, with the Ioway, formed the Chimere group of the Sioux nation: the Omaha were more closely related to the Osage. Once upon a time they were woodland Indians but in the course of their westward migrations all had acquired the characteristics of the plains type.

According to an ancient tradition related to Prince Maximilian in 1833, the band which continued westward on the great Siouan migration after the Ioway halted on the banks of the Mississippi eventually reached the Missouri River where they were known as the Missouri. In the course of time two of the chiefs quarrelled on account of the seduction of the daughter of one by the son of the other, and the tribe separated. One division, the Oto, moved farther up the river.

The Omaha came from the mouth of the Ohio, where they were located in the seventeenth century. The route of their migration lay up the Missouri and Des Moines rivers — hence the name “upstream people” or “those going against the wind”.

At last they found a home in the Missouri Valley north of the Platte.

The story of these Indians is not a happy tale, being little more than a record of their migrations and of their struggles against more powerful enemies. Conquered by Sacs and Foxes, and again by the Osage, scourged by successive epidemics of smallpox, the Missouri dispersed, some going to live with the Ioway, but most of them joining the Oto in their earth lodges near the Platte. In 1885 only forty individuals of the tribe remained.

Both Marquette and La Salle refer to the Oto as being situated at the headwaters of the Des Moines. Later, in order to be near the Omaha, they moved to the Missouri River, though it would seem this was an unfortunate step for there was continual friction between them. On a high bluff, the present site of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, Lewis and Clark held a council with fourteen Otoes and Missouris. The Indians promised peace and received medals and presents in return for which they gave the white men watermelons.

In truth they were not war-loving peoples. It was the Oto who, because of their industrious agricultural habits had been invited with the Ioway by Le Sueur to settle near his Fort l'Huillier on the Blue Earth River in 1700. The Omaha were continually evading conflict with the Sioux.

Other troubles fell upon them. Grasshoppers destroyed their crops. Whisky and smallpox, both in-

roduced by the traders, reduced the associated tribes to a mere remnant of their former strength.

Lewis and Clark spoke of those they saw as being almost naked, having no covering except a breech clout and a loose blanket or painted buffalo robe thrown over their shoulders. Maximilian described them as pock-marked, with eyes filmed or missing, their faces striped with red, and their hair hanging disorderly to the neck.

The Omaha were particularly miserable. "Unprotected from their old foes, the Sioux, yet forbidden to enter into a defensive alliance with them, they were reduced to a pitiable handful of scarcely more than a hundred families, the prey of disease, poverty-stricken, too cowardly to venture from the shadow of their tepees to gather their scanty crops, unlucky in the hunt, slow to the chase, and too dispirited to be daring or successful thieves."

The one outstanding figure produced by these tribes was Blackbird, chief of the Omaha. The fame of his fearsomeness and cruelty endures to this day. He it was who poisoned the men who were threatening his power, first effectually sealing the lips of the agent from whom he had obtained the arsenic by giving him a dose while a guest at dinner. Depressed finally by his life of crime he allowed himself to die of hunger. He was buried, at his request, seated on his favorite horse high on a hill overlooking the Missouri, where his spirit might watch over the lands of the Omaha.

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