

Historians believe that prior to the colonization of the United States that the Omaha and Quapaw tribes, comprising one tribe, were located near the Ohio and Wabash rivers. During their westward migration, the Tribe split into smaller groups. The Quapaw settled on the west side of the Mississippi River in the present state of Arkansas. The people known as the Omaha—"those going against the wind or current" moved in the opposite direction, north along the Mississippi reaching the mouth of the Missouri River. During their early history, the Omaha tribe included the Ponca nation. The Omaha tribe lived across the Missouri River in the northwestern quadrant of Iowa for a number of years and hunted in the regions north to Pipestone, Minnesota. Due to conflict with the Sioux and the separation of the Ponca, the Omaha retreated to the area around Bow Creek, Nebraska.

When French fur trappers first entered the region in the middle of the 17th century, the Omaha resided on the eastern side of the Missouri River above the Big Sioux River. Upon reaching the Big Sioux River, the Tribe settled down and lived there for many years. Among their close neighbors were the Iowa, Oto and Winnebago. During this time, it is believed that the Omahas roamed the lands from the Cheyenne River in South Dakota to the Platte River in Nebraska. Lewis and Clark found the Tribe across the Missouri to the south of Sioux City.

Omaha villages were temporarily established for an eight- to fifteen-year period. Disease or attacks from the Sioux often necessitated the village's relocation. Omaha villages were established near Bellevue, Homer and on the Papillion. Fifty to a hundred dwellings comprised the village which was usually located near a stream. The Omaha borrowed the use of the tipi and earthen lodges from the Sioux and Pawnee, abandoning their use of bark huts of their former woodland culture. Women were responsible for setting up tipis used primarily on the buffalo hunts. Construction of earthen lodges was a task shared by both the men and women.

The division of labor between men and women was clearly defined. In addition to their responsibilities on the hunt, women were responsible for all food preparation, making skins suitable for clothing and fashioning tools from bones. Women, along with the children, tended the family garden plots after the men had cleared them in the spring. The two- to three-acre lots contained beans, corn, melon and squash.

As to all plains tribes and cultures, buffalo were essential to the tribe's survival and livelihood. Almost every part of the buffalo was utilized: awls, needles and ornaments were made from bone; skins were used for clothing and tipis; rope was made from buffalo hair and buffalo fat was used for hair dressing and hand lotion. As the large herds of buffalo vanished from the plains, the plains cultures had no choice but to abandon some of their means of self-support, consequently developing a fatal dependency upon the government and the dominant culture.

With the formal removal of British influence in the states the United States negotiated treaties with the tribes, recognizing the peaceful relations between the government and the tribes. The treaties further stated that the tribe acknowledged the United States government as its "protecting power." The Omaha Tribe signed a similar treaty with the government at Portage des Sioux in July of 1815, thereby allowing the government to establish a strong foothold in tribal affairs.

The second treaty between the two nations was signed in Council Bluffs some ten years following the first treaty agreement. In the second treaty, the government guaranteed the protection of white trappers and traders, thereby authorizing the United States to send in troops at their own discretion. Through the treaty, the Tribe also authorized the United States to prosecute criminal offenses committed by tribal members. In the same treaty, the Omaha agreed not to sell ammunition to "hostile" tribes.

A third treaty was imposed five years later at Prairie du Chien. Along with the

Omaha Tribe, Sac and Fox Tribe, certain bands of the Sioux, Iowa, Oto and Missouri Tribes ceded their respective territorial claims in the state of Iowa (or east of the Missouri River). The treaty also established a reservation in southeastern Nebraska, currently Nemaha County for the half-breed relatives of the tribes signing the treaty.

Leaders from many tribes were invited to Washington, D.C. in 1854. Between March and June of 1854, Omaha leaders were among nine tribes summoned to Washington to conclude treaty negotiations which would give the government the tribal lands they desired. The Omaha Tribe ceded all their land save for 300,000 acres bordering the Missouri River. The treaty also authorized the government to survey a portion of the Omaha reservation for the purpose of making allotments to individuals.

1865 marked the last treaty negotiation between the government and the Omahas for the sale of the northern portion of their land. The government gave the land to the Winnebagos who had shared the Crow Creek reservation in South Dakota with the Santee.

Subsequent land cessions and negotiations were conducted through legislation with the consent of the tribe. In 1872, the tribe sold an additional 50,000 acres from the western part of the reservation. In lieu of receiving individual annuities in return, the government granted the tribes' request that their payments be earmarked for fencing farms, building houses, purchasing farm implements and livestock. Additional acreage was sold to the Winnebagos in 1874. In 1882, Congress placed the Omaha people under the states' jurisdiction in both civil and criminal matters. The act also allotted 160 acres per head of family. Orphans and single persons over eighteen were given eighty acres; persons under eighteen were awarded forty acres to be held in trust by the government for twenty-five years. By a clause in the Sevelty Act of 1887, the Omaha, as allotted Indians, became citizens of the United States although citizenship was not uniformly applied until 1924.

Dramatic changes occurred in the Omaha culture and lifestyle in the years following their first contact with white traders and settlers. With the influx of settlers throughout the 19th century, the Tribe increasingly adopted white instruments, clothing and economic systems, thereby weakening their culture and value system. Traders and settlers introduced the tribe to metal implements and utensils. The use of metal knives replaced the old flint knife that was retained for use in religious and ceremonial rites. However, as other metal implements were adopted, the art of shaping tools from stone and bone was lost. Culture, values and beliefs were likewise seriously affected by increased contact with whites; first with trappers and traders and then with the settlers. The trappers and traders particularly introduced the tribe to commercial values and the art of bartering goods. Some feel this exposure and gradual acceptance further helped to weaken the Omaha culture and beliefs. For example, hunting game and crop cultivation always was of some religious significance and accompanied by ceremony or ritual. Initially introduced to the value of trapping animals for profit and barter, the tribe quickly learned that crops raised in addition to those needed for self-sufficiency could be sold for profit. Many religious and ceremonial rites formerly used upon these occasions were subsequently lost, as the reason for planting and harvesting took on different meanings.

Clothing made from animal skins were gradually replaced by strouding, broadcloth and later calico. Likewise the buffalo skin tent cover was replaced by canvas as the buffalo vanished from the plains.

Other white treasures, such as rifles, did not reach the Omahas until the 1860s to 1870s which replaced the need for the construction of bow and arrows. Omaha pottery, wooden bowls and cups were likewise replaced by copper kettles, tin and iron utensils. The only use for such handcrafted items were for sacred tribal ceremonies.

The Omaha like many other cultures which had originally been a part of the eastern woodland cultures were nearly always caught between two aggressive forces—white settlers and the western plains tribes. Both groups held little regard for the Omaha tribe's attempts to adopt white economic and social customs. In spite of their attempts to live by peace and the newly imposed laws of the United States, they incurred the wrath of both whites and neighboring tribes. The advancing white population contributed to the depletion of the game and wildlife upon which the tribe had once been dependent—both spiritually and materially. The severe lack of rifles and other arms prevented adequate defense against well-armed Sioux war parties. It was noted by one observer at the time that during this period the Omaha Tribe "endured with heroic patience."

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