

Backdrop for Disaster: Causes of the Arikara War of 1823

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Rays from the setting sun illuminated the Saint Louis waterfront as the keelboats *Rocky Mountains* and *Yellowstone Packet* pulled away from shore and headed north into the Mississippi River current. With sails in place, flags flying, and hired musicians serenading spectators who lined the riverbank, William Ashley's party of seventy mountain men began its journey on 10 March 1823, heading north and west toward the Rocky Mountains.¹ Weeks passed uneventfully as they toiled up the Missouri River. By late May, they were traveling through present-day South Dakota where events shattered their comfortable routine. Stopping briefly to trade for horses, the whites provoked a fight with the unpredictable Arikara Indians, who were then occupying two villages along the Missouri near the mouth of the Grand River. This incident, labeled "the worst disaster in western fur trade history,"² coupled with the retaliatory expedition against the villagers led by Col. Henry Leavenworth later that summer, came to be known as the Arikara War.

1. Richard M. Clokey, *William H. Ashley: Enterprise and Politics in the Trans-Mississippi West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 88.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

The conflict paralleled many early nineteenth century Indian wars in which, for what at the time seemed unclear reasons, Indian Americans attacked intruding white Americans. With surprise on their side, the Indians won the initial skirmish, driving the trappers from the scene. Once the frontiersmen recovered from their shock, however, an overwhelming force invaded the Indian country to punish the tribesmen. This counterattack succeeded. The Arikara fled, leaving the enraged whites to burn their abandoned villages.

Students of South Dakota history undoubtedly recall these events well. Nevertheless, a few details of the incident may clarify the situation and help to explain how and why this war occurred. Hurrying up the Missouri toward the Rockies, Ashley had not expected to visit the Arikara. In fact, reports of their hostility that spring convinced him that they should be avoided. Just south of the Indian towns, however, he learned that his partners in the mountains needed another forty or fifty horses for use that coming season. Thus, despite misgivings, and with little advance thought, Ashley decided to halt. He hoped that the ninety-man party of trappers and boatmen was large enough to persuade the Indians to trade rather than fight. After a short parley on 30 May, the chiefs agreed to trade the next morning. On 31 May, the trappers and Indians began their barter, but with limited success. Far from other sources of horses, the Arikara demanded top prices for their animals. Since Ashley had not anticipated this trading session, his stock of trade items may not have been adequate. When the trading ended that day, the whites had only nineteen horses, and the Indians had balked at the amount and quality of the whites' trade goods.³

Continuing signs of Indian discontent convinced Ashley that he should move quickly upriver with the few horses he had obtained. Unfortunately, bad weather made it impossible to travel the next morning. The whites were forced to remain, some guarding the animals on the beach while the rest huddled aboard the boats waiting for the storm to pass. At dawn the following day, 2 June,

3. Three nearly similar letters from Ashley to the *Missouri Republican*, 4 June 1823, to Benjamin O'Fallon and Henry Leavenworth, 4 June 1823, and to an unknown person in Franklin, Missouri, 7 June 1823, as well as a letter from one of Ashley's men, 17 June 1823, describe the incident. These letters appear in Dale L. Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley, 1822-1838* (Denver, Colo.: Old West Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 24-33.

the Arikara warriors attacked. In a few minutes, their musket balls and arrows destroyed the horses and killed or wounded most of the trappers on the beach. Caught by surprise and defeated soundly, Ashley's remaining men scrambled aboard the keelboats and fled downstream.⁴

News of the Arikara attack reached Fort Atkinson, just north of present-day Omaha, Nebraska, and set into motion a combination rescue effort and retaliatory expedition. Col. Henry Leavenworth rushed six companies of United States infantrymen upriver, while Saint Louis trader Joshua Pilcher joined the troops with a force of nearly sixty trappers and fur company employees. Along the way, this so-called Missouri Legion recruited a force of nearly seven hundred fifty Sioux allies. By early August 1823, the mixed group of soldiers, trappers, and Indians arrived at the Arikara villages, where the mounted Sioux auxiliaries swept ahead of the foot soldiers and launched a preliminary attack on their long-time foes. A stream of Arikara warriors poured out of the villages to meet them. After spirited fighting, the Arikara saw the regular troops moving up and fled back behind the village palisades.⁵

The next morning, 10 August, Colonel Leavenworth ordered his artillery to shell the villages, but, through ineptitude or carelessness, the soldiers sent most of their shots whistling harmlessly overhead. Seeing this, the colonel ordered an infantry attack on the upper village. Although the soldiers fought bravely, the Indian defenders refused to budge. At that point, fearing both a possible heavy loss of his men and perhaps even the total destruction of the Indian towns, Leavenworth chose to negotiate an end to the fighting. Late that afternoon, the whites persuaded several Arikara chiefs to join them for peace talks. Although divided and bickering acrimoniously among themselves, the invading forces concluded a treaty with the Indians the next day, but the wary

4. Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 94-98. See also Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (1953; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1964), pp. 49-77, for an excellent discussion of the entire encounter.

5. Most of the correspondence that discusses the white response to the Arikara attack is reprinted in Doane Robinson, ed., "Official Correspondence of the Leavenworth Expedition into South Dakota in 1823," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 1 (1902): 179-256. See Leavenworth to Henry Atkinson, 18 June 1823, pp. 181-82, and 30 Aug. 1823, pp. 197-98. See also Joshua Pilcher to Benjamin O'Fallon, 23 July 1823, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 48-50.

Arikara abandoned their villages during the following night. On 15 August, Leavenworth led his force back down the river to Fort Atkinson. No sooner had the soldiers left, than several fur company employees burned the villages to the ground. As a result of this campaign, the Arikara scattered. Many of them moved away from their traditional home for more than a decade.⁶

There is little dispute about these events. Yet, both Indian and white motivations remain murky. To reach an understanding of the forces that led to the Arikara War, several factors have to be considered. The nature of Arikara village life and society provides one clue to the reasons behind the Arikaras' actions. The villagers' pattern of dealing with other American Indian groups in the Missouri Valley likewise offers some insights into their behavior toward all outsiders. Obviously, these Indians had developed a bitter hostility toward the white traders or they would not have risked an all-out war with them, and the growth of anti-white attitudes needs to be examined. At the same time, white ideas about the Arikara and the traders' responses to the villagers provide the other necessary threads in the pattern. When taken together, the Indian and white motivations offer the basis for a clear perception of the conflict. Historical accounts of Indian wars often focus chiefly on white actions. In this circumstance, however, the Indian motivations, attitudes, and actions proved more important than those of the whites in shaping the course of events. The following discussion, therefore, focuses more attention on Arikara actions than on those of Ashley or the Leavenworth Expedition.

Among the developments that propelled the Arikara toward their 1823 encounter with Ashley's trappers were several long-term trends within the villagers' society that played increasingly important roles. A Caddoan people related to, or perhaps part of, the Skidi Pawnee, the Arikara lived in nearly permanent towns on the banks of the Missouri River throughout most of the eighteenth century. There, between the White and Cheyenne rivers in central South Dakota, they fished in the Missouri, farmed its banks and bottom lands, hunted on the nearby plains to the west,

6. "Leavenworth's Final and Detailed Report," 20 Oct. 1823, in Robinson, "Official Correspondence," pp. 202-33; Statement of John Gale to Leavenworth, 27 Nov. 1823, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, p. 57; John E. Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher, Fur Trader and Indian Agent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 44-47; Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 106-11.

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The Missouri River Valley in South Dakota, the longtime home of the Arikara Indians, was painted by artist Karl Bodmer, who took a trip up the Missouri in 1833. His View of the Bluffs near Cedar Island captures the early beauty of a section of the river that is now flooded by Lake Francis Case.

and participated in the existing Indian trade network. The most important long-term trends in their society resulted from their growing role as traders. In that capacity, they increased their corn production and exchanged their surplus harvest with the nearby hunting peoples for meat, hides, and leather goods. This activity tied the villagers into trade patterns that connected aboriginal peoples from central Canada to the borders of Mexico, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi River and beyond.⁷

In the mid-eighteenth century, or earlier, the Arikara traders added European goods to their traditional wares. People from the

7. John C. Ewers, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri before Lewis and Clark: An Interpretation," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 10 (July 1954): 429-46; George F. Will and George E. Hyde, *Corn among the Indians of the Upper Missouri* (1917; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1964), pp. 171-75; James Deetz, *The Dynamics of Stylistic Change in Arikara Ceramics*, *Illinois Studies in Anthropology*, no. 4 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 5-8, 32-37, 101-2.

southern plains offered horses to the Missouri Valley dwellers, while manufactured goods and guns filtered south and west from Canada. Before long, European traders followed their goods into the Indian towns, forever altering aboriginal life. As the century drew to a close, the Arikara economy had undergone fundamental changes. Their earlier trade had been a matter of choice—an exchange of surplus goods with other tribal people. Now, they shaped their economy to reflect their dependence on trading. True, they still hunted, but in most years their catch did not provide enough meat or hides to meet their needs. Nor did exchange of their surplus corn by itself supply these necessities any longer. Increasingly, their aboriginal customers demanded guns, ammunition, and manufactured goods in addition to foodstuffs. By accident or design, the villagers became ever more dependent on their white trading partners for survival.⁸

Within most Indian communities, “trade was embedded in a network of social relations” so that few individuals gained new status because of it.⁹ Direct trade with Europeans, however, brought opportunities for increased wealth within many tribes and bands. Before the fur-and-hide trade, clan chiefs and other village leaders maintained a superior status because of their social functions. Direct trading with whites meant that individual hunters might acquire more wealth than was possible under the aboriginal system. Chiefs might still take a share of this new wealth, but a growing individual participation in the trade with the whites produced new economic pressures within many Indian societies. There is little direct evidence that this pattern was of major importance in the Arikara villages, but the lack of evidence may reflect the inability of white traders, who provided the early accounts of the Arikara, to perceive their own impact on the villagers. This pattern seems to have occurred repeatedly among other aboriginal groups, and there is little reason to dismiss it as a factor among the Arikara.¹⁰

8. Ewers, “Indian Trade,” pp. 436-43; George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), pp. 16-19.

9. Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2 vols. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), 1:64.

10. Preston Holder, “Social Stratification among the Arikara,” *Ethnohistory* 5 (Summer 1958): 212-16. For examples of trading significance in other groups, see Julia Averkieva, “The Tlingit Indians,” in Eleanor Burke Leacock and Nancy Oestreich Lurie, eds., *North American Indians in Historical Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 331-36.

While such changes reshaped the villagers' economic life, even more disruptive events rent the fabric of Arikara society. Soon after the first meetings between European traders and the Arikara, a series of major smallpox epidemics swept across the Missouri Valley and out onto the northern plains. Although the chronology and severity of these epidemics remain shrouded in antiquity, the combined results unquestionably proved disastrous. Modern scholars and eighteenth-century observers agree that the epidemics destroyed nearly three-quarters of all the Indians in South Dakota. The disease struck the Arikara and other sedentary agricultural tribes a devastating blow, one from which they never fully recovered. As the pox swept through their villages, it killed or terrorized most of the inhabitants. Village, band, clan, and even family organization crumbled as aboriginal healers failed to halt the plagues. The result was catastrophic, and by 1795, most of the Indians had died. In that year, a resident trader reported: "In ancient times the Ricara nation was very large; it counted thirty-two populous villages, now depopulated and almost entirely destroyed by the smallpox. . . . A few families only, from each of the villages, escaped; these united and formed the two villages now here."¹¹ When Lewis and Clark visited the tribe in late 1804, they learned that the existing three villages, located near the mouth of the Grand River, included the survivors of some eighteen earlier towns along both sides of the Missouri.¹²

While the smallpox epidemics killed most of the Indians and disrupted or destroyed their social cohesion, the consolidation of survivors in two or three villages also brought unforeseen and continuing problems. Individuals from at least ten distinct bands, each with different leaders and varying customs, as well as major linguistic differences, huddled together in their new settlements. A higher percentage of band leaders and chiefs survived than did the population as a whole.¹³ Pierre-Antoine Tabeau reported that there were more than forty-two chiefs living in the three villages in 1804. Each of the many chiefs, Tabeau noted, "wishes at least to have followers and tolerates no form of dependence" on others.

11. Jean Baptiste Truteau, "Remarks on the Manners of the Indians Living High Up the Missouri," in Abraham P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 1:299.

12. Pierre-Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie H. Abel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), pp. 123-24.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-29. See also Truteau, "Remarks," pp. 299-300, 303-8.

This situation brought nearly incessant wrangling among contending leaders as their factions disrupted village life with "internal and destructive quarrels."¹⁴

Such pressures on the Arikara not only affected the nature and operation of their society, but they also had direct impact on their dealings with other Indians. In particular, their divided and quarreling leadership caused problems and made other situations worse than they needed to be, especially in relationships with the neighboring Mandan, Hidatsa, and Sioux. The Sioux, largest of these Indian groups, threatened all three agricultural village tribes. Although the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara shared a similar function as middlemen in the area trade network and suffered alike at the hands of Sioux raiders, they quarreled and even fought with one another rather than presenting a united front in response to Sioux aggression. Not only did the Sioux "pursue a system of preventing trade to all [Indian] nations up the Upper Missouri," but they also raided the villagers' crops and horse herds repeatedly.¹⁵

In the Arikaras' case, the lack of clear leadership in their fractured society made it difficult for them to pursue any consistent policy toward their neighbors. In fact, it created an instability that caused other groups to see the tribe as dangerous and unpredictable. The Frenchman Tabeau complained that the splintered nature of Arikara village leadership led to endless conflicts as the chiefs and their followers robbed each other and threatened to fight others in their own communities. What was worse, in his opinion, was the Arikaras' continuing inability to settle disputes with the Mandan and Hidatsa so that the three agricultural tribes could unite to defend themselves against the Sioux. Tabeau felt certain that Arikara leaders realized that it was imperative to ally themselves with the Mandans; yet they could not do so. He noted that all their efforts to make peace with that tribe failed because of "individual jealousy" within the villages. Divided leadership or a lack of unity, then, destroyed "all the plans which tend to bring about peace" with their natural allies.¹⁶

The situation also made their response to direct Sioux aggression ineffective much of the time. All the roots of the conflict be-

14. Tabeau, *Narrative*, p. 126.

15. Thomas D. Selkirk, *Lord Selkirk's Diary, 1803-1804: A Journal of His Travels in British North America and the Northeastern United States*, ed. Patrick C. T. White, Publications of the Champlain Society, no. 35 (Toronto, 1958), p. 213.

16. Tabeau, *Narrative*, pp. 128-29. See also Truteau, "Remarks," pp. 303-8.

tween these two tribes are not clear, but certainly the Sioux looked down upon their sedentary neighbors, treating the Arikara as inferior beings who farmed and did other such women's chores for their benefit. Sioux arrogance grew steadily more intolerable, and by the early nineteenth century, they acted as if they were the masters rather than the equals of their trading partners. When they came to trade, Sioux visitors did little bargaining over prices. Instead, they took what they wanted and gave the villagers whatever amount of skins and meat they deemed adequate. To amuse themselves and show disdain for the Arikara, they often pillaged and trampled gardens, beat and insulted Arikara women, and ran off the villagers' horses. Outnumbered, divided, and often leaderless, the Arikara seemed unable to respond effectively to Sioux assaults.¹⁷

Customs related to wealth and status among the upper Missouri Valley tribes also kept their intertribal relationships in turmoil. For young men, status within the village resulted from acts of bravery. Usually, such acts included either stealing horses or fighting men from the surrounding tribes. Once a raid took place, the victims often retaliated, and a cycle of violent competition and warfare continued for generations. The warriors had strong social and economic motivations for their actions, and with village controls weakened among the Arikara, there were few restraints to curb raids against erstwhile allies or friends. Not only did these attacks and counterattacks prevent any lasting peace, but practices related to success and failure on these expeditions also worsened the situation further. If raiders returned home without success, the warriors would " 'cast their robes' . . . and vow to kill the first person they meet, provided he be not of their own nation."¹⁸ This custom explains many incidents that otherwise make little sense — particularly when the Indians visited their wrath on white traders passing through their country. Thus, the situation among the tribes of the upper Missouri region by 1800 was one of uneasy peace and bitter economic rivalry, punctuated by recurring raids and warfare.

17. Roy W. Meyer, *The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 39-40, 42-43; Tabeau, *Narrative*, pp. 129-31.

18. Henry M. Brackenridge, *Journal of a Voyage Up the River Missouri; Performed in Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, reprinted in vol. 6 of *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben G. Thwaites, 32 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904-1907), 6:123.

As long as the Missouri Valley Indians dealt only with each other, matters remained relatively simple, but once white traders and trappers entered the scene, the situation became more complicated. Prior to the 1790s, the Arikara had encountered few whites, but the next several decades brought increasing numbers of Euro-Americans into the region. The presence of white traders aggravated existing stresses and violence among the Indians by accident, and perhaps by design as well. For example, the incident in which Teton Sioux threatened Lewis and Clark during the summer of 1804 resulted directly from the efforts of those Indians to close the upper Missouri to white traders. The Sioux assumed that the explorers carried commercial goods and that the village people would get some of those trade items. In a series of stalling actions and near skirmishes, they tried to prevent the whites from traveling further upstream. At the same time, the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa lived in fear that their downriver rivals would restrict their sources of manufactured goods.¹⁹ Therefore, the village tribes did whatever they could to keep their trade channels open and reacted violently when they thought the whites had cooperated with their enemies or had pursued policies that might hurt them. These intertribal rivalries became so bitter that often the warriors' treatment of whites depended upon whether or not the traders had dealt with their Indian competitors.

Examples of this attitude abound. After Lewis and Clark ran the Sioux blockade of the Missouri in 1804, the Arikara welcomed them enthusiastically. The explorers spent five pleasant days among the villagers and reported that these people "were all friendly & Glad to See us."²⁰ Nevertheless, the explorers' actions while they were with the Arikara triggered a major incident a few years later. Following their orders, Lewis and Clark persuaded Arikara leader Ankedoucharo to join a delegation of Missouri Valley chiefs going east to Washington, D.C. The Indians reached

19. Richard Dillon, *Meriwether Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965), pp. 129-34, 141; Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, p. 34; Selkirk, *Diary*, pp. 212-13; Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, 8 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904-1906), 1:230-31.

20. Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway, Kept on the Expedition of Western Exploration, 1803-1806*, Vol. 22 of *Wisconsin Historical Publications Collections* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1916), p. 149.



Pachtüwa-Chtä, an Arikara warrior, posed for Karl Bodmer in 1834. The Arikara's proud demeanor and his paint and ornaments suggest his successful exploits as a member of many war parties.

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the capital in 1806, and while there, Ankedoucharo and several other chiefs died. It took until the spring of 1807 for the government to inform the uneasy villagers of their chief's death.²¹ The Indians had no way of knowing what had happened and suspected the whites of having killed their chief.

Angered by what they saw as American treachery, the villagers turned violently against the whites along the Missouri in 1807. Saint Louis trader Manuel Lisa encountered their hostility first in late summer, when several hundred armed warriors confronted his party near the villages. The Indians fired a few shots over the boats and ordered the whites ashore, but Lisa relieved the tension and escaped without a fight.²² At this point, the United States government blundered onto the scene in its efforts to return the Mandan chief Shahaka to his North Dakota home. Shahaka had been among the group of Indian leaders taken east a year earlier, and in May 1807, Ensign Nathaniel Pryor started up the Missouri to escort him home. After an uneventful trip, the whites reached the Arikara towns in September, completely unaware of the Indians' anger or the earlier incident with Lisa's party. Pryor found the Arikara sullen and angry. At the upper village, warriors attacked, and after a brief exchange of shots, the unprepared whites retreated downstream. The government officials who dispatched the escort assumed that the Arikara had received news of their own chief's death peacefully, and they ignored or failed to realize that the Arikara and Mandan were at war with each other that summer.²³

It is not surprising that the Arikara met the whites with hostility. The government had only recently notified them of Ankedoucharo's death, and the Americans now arrived escorting an

21. Henry Dearborn to James Wilkinson, 9 Apr. 1806, Dearborn to Thomas Jefferson, ca. 10 Apr. 1806, Jefferson to the Arikaras, 11 Apr. 1806, all in Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 1:303-6; Thwaites, *Original Journals*, 1:181-86, 188, 283-84; 5:383. See also Jackson, *Letters*, 2:437n.1.

22. Richard E. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), pp. 48-49; Meyer, *Village Indians*, p. 48.

23. Nathaniel Pryor to William Clark, 16 Oct. 1807, in Jackson, *Letters*, 2:432-37; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 50-52; William Clark to Henry Dearborn, 18 May 1807, Letters Received, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

enemy chief past their towns. The Arikara's hostile response gave them an early reputation as a dangerous and unpredictable people. They were, after all, the only regional tribe to fight with United States troops up to that time. Their attack persuaded federal officials that they needed a strong force when they next tried to return the Mandan chief to his home village. Two years later, an escort of militiamen under the command of Pierre Chouteau awed the Arikara enough that they apologized and promised to remain at peace.²⁴

Although no other major incidents occurred during the next few years, little happened to change American ideas about the Arikara either. Most traders treated them gingerly, remembering the attack on Pryor and his men. In 1811, however, the villagers appeared as protectors, not attackers, of two large expeditions of whites traveling through their country. That summer, groups of traders led by Wilson P. Hunt and Manuel Lisa raced each other up the Missouri, both hoping to avoid the hostile Sioux. Neither succeeded, but both got past them without bloodshed. Less than a week later, the traders met a combined Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa war party of nearly three hundred men. At first, the whites feared that the Indians would attack, but, to their relief, the warriors escorted them north toward their home villages.²⁵

Once again, the bitter rivalries between the agricultural trading villagers and the Sioux hunters explain much of this apparent dramatic shift in behavior. For a change, the Arikara and their northern neighbors had put aside their differences to form a defensive alliance against the Sioux. They welcomed the traders because the whites carried a crucial supply of manufactured trade items, especially weapons and ammunition. The Indians seemed apprehensive that without the safety their escort offered, the traders might be frightened enough to turn back downstream, as the Crooks and McClellan party had done just two years earlier after an encounter with the Sioux.²⁶ Arikara actions in this inci-

24. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 75, 83-84; "Agreement for Return of the Mandan Chief," 24 Feb. 1809, and Pierre Chouteau to William Eustis, 14 Dec. 1809, both in Jackson, *Letters*, 2:447, 479-82.

25. Brackenridge, *Journal*, pp. 88, 97-99; John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*, reprinted in vol. 5 of *Early Western Travels*, ed. Thwaites, 5:90-91, 103-9, 113-16.

26. Bradbury, *Travels*, pp. 113-17; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 80, 99-100.

dent reflected their determination to protect their economic status through continued trade with the whites. Their actions may also have indicated a growing Indian awareness of their dependence on the whites for the manufactured goods that had come to play such an important role in the upper Missouri trade patterns.

Bitter rivalries and divisions among the chiefs, however, continued to disrupt the Arikara towns and often kept visiting whites uncertain how to approach these people. In August 1812, for example, Manuel Lisa again had trouble with them. A few days before Lisa and his men reached the Arikara settlements, Le Gauche, "The Left-Handed," a hereditary chief, met them near the river. He visited for a short time—just long enough for Lisa to give him a few small gifts—before returning to the village. Lisa's presents to Le Gauche infuriated rival chiefs, and when the whites arrived at the village, they encountered silence and obvious anger. Lisa demanded to know what had happened. Once the disgruntled chiefs explained, he offered enough presents to soothe their hurt feelings.²⁷ While this incident illustrated the continuing importance of internal village divisions in shaping Indian responses to outsiders, the Arikaras' lack of violence in this case showed something else. By this time, they seem to have realized that because they had few furs or hides to offer the whites, they had to remain on their best behavior in order to retain a local trading post. Without such a post, they had no reliable source of white goods.

During the war of 1812 and the confused years after that conflict, few Americans penetrated the upper Missouri region. In fact, before 1818, there seems to have been little regular commerce between the villagers and the Saint Louis merchants. From 1820 on, relations between Americans and the Arikara deteriorated steadily. Time and lack of documentation shroud many of the circumstances, and Indian motivations during that era must remain uncertain. Nevertheless, some patterns continued. By 1820, the Saint Louis traders had moved north to the Big Bend of the Missouri, where they had established a trading post among the Sioux, about one hundred fifty miles south of the Arikara towns. From that location, the whites provided arms, munitions, and other trade items to the hunting bands of the region. The Ari-

27. John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm (1920; reprint ed., New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, 1964), pp. 64-67. See also Brackenridge, *Journal*, p. 119.

kara responded to the new trading activity with violence. In 1820, a large war party attacked and robbed two trading posts along the Missouri.²⁸ Here, one must assume that the villagers struck the whites out of frustration and jealousy. They had no dependable source of manufactured goods, while their Sioux enemies had several.

By the early 1820s, even the most obtuse company trader should have been able to discern the relationships among the Arikara, their Indian competitors, and the white traders. The villagers' actions toward the Americans varied from vicious attacks, through strained relations, to enthusiastic friendship, depending on the internal social pressures on the tribe and the success or failure of their dealings with the Sioux. Instead of acknowledging these pressures, the traders seemed both uninformed and uncaring. Either attitude seems strange because their livelihood and their lives depended upon their ability to understand the situation clearly. Without any firm basis for their picture of the Arikara, most traders seem to have accepted the negative descriptions current about these Indians. Certainly, intermittent violence by the tribesmen colored the whites' perceptions of them, but it seems likely that the negative reports of their customs and appearance fed the traders' fear and loathing of these people. Revulsion at their practice of incest and high incidence of venereal disease, grumbling about the expense of having to maintain an unprofitable trading post in their vicinity, and the confusion and violence resulting from their shattered village society all helped to persuade the traders that the Arikara were indeed troublesome and dangerous.²⁹ Before the 1823 incidents, they had acquired a reputation as the most unpredictable and hostile tribe along the Missouri.

It is only with this understanding of the Indian situation and actions that the Arikara War of 1823 can be understood. The local, or short-range, causes of that conflict began in 1822, when William Ashley and Andrew Henry led a group of white trappers

28. Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 60-61; Meyer, *Village Indians*, pp. 52-53; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 159-67; Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher*, pp. 33-34, 38-39; Joshua Pilcher Statement, 18 Mar. 1824, in U.S., Congress, Senate, *Senate Document*, no. 56, 18th Cong., 1st sess., 1824, pp. 10, 15.

29. Edwin T. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), pp. 52-54, summarizes many negative white views of the Arikara. See also Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher*, pp. 38-39; Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 90-91.

into the northern Rocky Mountains. There, they went into direct competition with both Indian trappers and traders, a move guaranteed to disrupt earlier patterns of Indian trade. The logical result would be that white traders and trappers would supplant Indians in those activities. In the fall of 1822, however, that possibility remained in the future. Ashley's expedition stopped at the Arikara villages in early September to trade for horses. The chiefs welcomed the white men and probably made their usual request—that a trading post be established for them. Ashley, of course, had little interest in beginning an unprofitable trading post, for he planned to avoid stationary trading facilities and, by bringing his men directly to the mountains, to bypass Indian hunters altogether. Nevertheless, as part of his effort to tell the Missouri Valley tribes whatever he "thought most likely to secure and continue their friendship,"³⁰ he promised to supply the goods they wanted from Saint Louis the next spring.³¹ Ashley failed to recognize the significance of his promise to the village leaders and would pay dearly for breaking it. When no trader moved into their vicinity the next year, the Arikara must have realized that the whites had not meant what they said.³²

Had that been the only issue between the village chiefs and Ashley, the 1823 violence might have been avoided. Other problems existed, however. A major cause for Arikara hostility in the summer of 1823 grew out of an incident with some Missouri Fur Company employees. In March of that year, a group of Arikara hunters had met some of these traders riding near Cedar Fort, a trading post established for the Sioux near the Big Bend of the Missouri. The traders were carrying hides to the nearby post, and the Arikara demanded that the whites surrender the goods to them, but the traders refused. Outraged, the Arikara robbed and beat them.³³ Their anger grew out of seeing the traders helping the hated Sioux rather than from any general anti-white feelings. The assault may also have resulted from Arikara frustration over their continuing inability to persuade the whites to keep a

30. Jedediah Smith, "Journal, 1822," in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, p. 14.

31. Ashley to Editors, *St. Louis Enquirer*, 17 Nov. 1823, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, p. 64.

32. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 187-90; Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, pp. 28-29, 37-38.

33. Pilcher Statement, 18 Mar. 1824, pp. 13-14; Ashley to unknown, Franklin, Mo., 7 June 1823, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 29-30; Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, pp. 50-51; Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 90-91.

permanent trading post open near their villages, an ongoing source of friction between the Arikara and Saint Louis merchants.

Only a few days after the fight with the traders, another and larger party of Arikara unsuccessfully attacked Cedar Fort, the Missouri Fur Company post. This time, two of the Indians died and several others were wounded. One of those killed was the son of Grey Eyes, a prominent Arikara chief. Reports of the incident indicated that the Indians' failure to defeat the traders and plunder their goods had infuriated and humiliated the warriors, and that they were not likely to be discriminating in their vengeance against whites.³⁴ Unfortunately for Ashley's men, they ventured up the Missouri just in time to bear the brunt of this anger and frustration.

Ashley's actions toward the villagers almost certainly played some part in bringing about the Indian attack as well. As mentioned earlier, he had, in 1822, pledged to give the Arikara what they wanted most from the whites—undoubtedly a resident trader and thus a dependable supply of manufactured goods. Clearly, he had little intention of keeping his promise. At the same time, he had tried to assure them that his own trappers posed no competitive threat to their efforts as Indian traders. The mountain men would gather and transport the furs themselves, but because the villagers usually traded buffalo hides rather than the pelts of smaller, fur-bearing animals, he hoped that no problems would result.³⁵

Before his ninety trappers and boatmen reached the Arikara towns in late May of 1823, Ashley had learned of the Indians' attack on Cedar Fort, and he reported taking "all the precaution in my power for some days before I reached their towns."³⁶ Once there, he anchored the keelboats in midstream and rowed ashore in a small skiff to meet Indian leaders and get their assurances of peaceful trade. Dissension between the two villages and among Arikara leaders was apparent as the village leaders came down to the shore, for they agreed to talk only "after a long consultation among themselves."³⁷ The trader invited two chiefs, Little Sol-

34. Pilcher Statement, p. 14; Ashley to unknown, 7 June 1823; one of Ashley's men to unknown, 17 June 1823, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 31-34.

35. Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 73, 91; Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa*, pp. 187-90.

36. Ashley to unknown, 7 June 1823.

37. Ashley to Benjamin O'Fallon and Henry Leavenworth, in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, p. 27.

dier and Grey Eyes, aboard his skiff, and, to his surprise, the latter agreed. Grey Eyes was reputed to be the most anti-white of the Arikara leaders and had also lost a son in the abortive raid at Cedar Fort that spring. His cooperation calmed Ashley's fears somewhat. The Indian leaders returned to their villages, and later that evening, Grey Eyes reported that the Indians would be ready to open trade in the morning.³⁸

On 31 May, the barter began, with the Indians bringing horses and buffalo robes to exchange for guns, ammunition, and other trade items. Business moved slowly, and when the whites had nineteen of the forty horses they needed, a dispute arose. Some Indians objected to the number and kinds of guns and the limited amount of powder the whites displayed. It is unclear whether they thought that Ashley's party offered too little for the horses or whether the Arikara merely wanted more guns and powder to use in their own trade with the plains tribes. In either case, barter ceased for the day, and Ashley decided to take the animals they had already acquired and leave the next morning. Bad weather prevented this plan, and the mountain men had little choice but to remain. They could not move upstream against the strong wind and current, and to retreat downstream would only postpone the need to pass the villages. While they waited for the storm to pass, Chief Bear of the upper village invited Ashley to his lodge. The Indians assured the visitors of their friendship, and Little Soldier even warned of a possible attack by other elements in the tribe. His warning proved to be correct. At sunrise on 2 June, a hail of arrows and musket balls drove the trappers back downstream.³⁹

Clearly, divided leadership and conflicting desires within the Indian towns contributed to the attack. By this time, no formal Arikara tribe existed. The villages consisted of survivors of many earlier communities, and the Indians had never managed to restructure their society so that it functioned in an integrated manner. Ashley and his party noted confusion among the Indians over whether to trade or fight, but the traders seemed ignorant of how splintered Arikara society had become or how much danger this represented for them. The chiefs Grey Eyes, Little Soldier, and

38. Ashley to unknown, 7 June 1823; Ashley's man to unknown, 17 June 1823; Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 91-94.

39. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, pp. 51-52; Clokey, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 94-95; Ashley's man to unknown, 17 June 1823.

Bear all reacted differently to the whites' presence. The first was friendly and then became hostile. The second was aloof but later warned of danger, while the third remained friendly throughout the visit. The attitude of each town toward its guests was also different. The murder of one of Ashley's men took place in the lower village, and it was from there that Grey Eyes and his followers launched their dawn attack on the trappers. In the upper village, however, Bear and his followers vehemently denied responsibility for the fighting. Later that summer, Colonel Leavenworth reported that "the people of the upper village would not give up their horses to pay for the mischief which the Chief Grey Eyes of the lower village had done."⁴⁰

The Leavenworth Expedition later in the summer failed to defeat the Arikara, but it ushered in a period of difficulty for the Indians. Once the invading white army left, the bands separated. Some fled north up the Missouri. A few people remained near the now burned villages and gradually resettled there. Others moved south and west into Nebraska to live with the Pawnee for a time. One band even traveled to eastern Wyoming. In 1837, after more than a decade, the bands reunited on the Missouri, just in time to be further decimated by the smallpox epidemic that swept up the valley that summer.⁴¹ Thus, these people, who had survived continuing warfare with Indian neighbors and sporadic fighting with the whites, succumbed instead to disease.

Many accounts of their role in the early history of South Dakota and the fur trade stress the Arikaras' treacherous nature and the danger they posed to peacefully inclined traders. Certainly, they killed and robbed enough white trappers and traders along the Missouri and on the nearby plains during the first third of the nineteenth century to deserve the negative reputation they acquired among whites. Yet, except for the two famous attacks—the first against Ensign Pryor in 1807 and the second against Ashley's men in 1823—their record appears to be little more violent or unpredictable than that of the Pawnee, Sioux, or Blackfeet during the same decades. In the Arikaras' case, a bitter newspaper war of charges and countercharges between Henry Leavenworth and Joshua Pilcher, growing out of the 1823 cam-

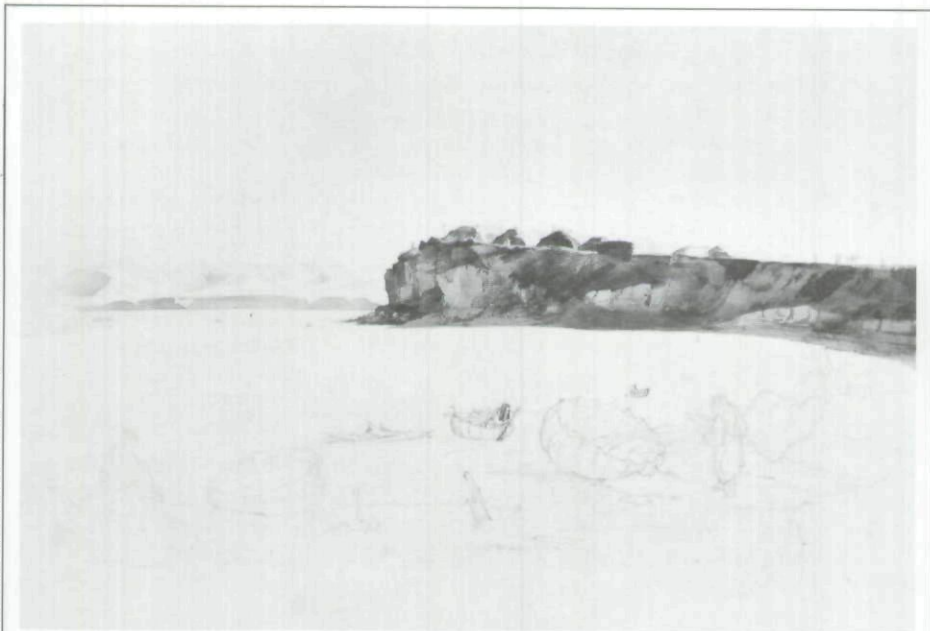
40. "Leavenworth's Final and Detailed Report," p. 229.

41. Meyer, *Village Indians*, pp. 87-90; Annie H. Abel, ed., *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839* (Pierre: South Dakota State Department of History, 1932), p. 109.

paign, helped spread the denunciations of the tribe. In the 1830s, travelers, artists, and traders continued to add to the list of negative images fastened on the Arikara.⁴²

When all is said and done, however, the Arikara appear to have had some clear motivations for their actions. They remained friendly and at peace as long as the whites traded fairly and until they finally perceived the fur companies to be a major threat to their own economic well-being. They responded violently when whites aided their enemies, either their sometimes competitors the Mandans or their bitter foes the Sioux. The villagers assumed

42. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (1844; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 1:204-5; Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, reprinted in vols. 22-24 of *Early Western Travels*, ed. Thwaites, 22:335-36, 23:223-26.



After their years of wandering, the Arikara joined the Mandan in their North Dakota villages. Bodmer's painting of a Mandan village, Mih-Tutta-Hang-Kusch, 1833, is unfinished.

that it hurt them when the whites traded with their enemies. It is not surprising, then, that white traders were often in danger of retaliation. The Arikara strove repeatedly to keep a resident trader at or near their villages. When whites promised to locate a trader or post in their vicinity and then failed to do so, the Indians interpreted this failure as an unfriendly act and sometimes responded violently. It is also possible, of course, that certain Arikara chiefs used the divisions and confusions within their society for selfish purposes, or even that evil men fomented trouble for narrow local reasons. Whether this happened or not, the Arikara War of 1823 was not unique. It resembled other Indian wars and incidents in many ways. It was unplanned, unnecessary, and a disaster for the tribal people. There were no heroes, stirring slogans, or major accomplishments. Instead, the survivors of a once powerful tribe struck out at their perceived enemies and suffered adverse consequences. Their actions, whether we of the modern world believe them to be rational or not, made at least some sense to them at the time. In the long run, the white man's diseases, not his guns, resolved the issue. The survivors of the smallpox epidemic of 1837 eventually settled among the Mandan and Hidatsa in North Dakota, where most of their descendants remain today.

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