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by Frank W. Porter III

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On June 25, 1805, at about one o'clock in the afternoon, the Crow Indians paraded into written history. On that date, 645 brightly painted Crow men and women wearing their finest buckskin clothing and mounted on decorated ponies filed solemnly through the Hidatsa villages on the banks of the Missouri River. A witness to the scene was a young French-Canadian adventurer named François Antoine Larocque. He had come to the northern Plains to trade with the Indians there for beaver and otter pelts, which could be sold for high prices in eastern North American and European markets. During his travels, Larocque kept a detailed journal, in which appeared his description of this procession, the first eyewitness account of the Crow ever recorded.

The Crow’s 1805 visit to their Hidatsa kin touched off days of feasting and trading. Amidst this activity, Larocque held a council with the tribe’s leaders and won permission to accompany the Crow back to their homeland. Larocque’s account of the summer he subsequently spent with the tribe was just one of several records made by non-Indian explorers who visited the Crow in the early 19th century. Although all of these journals contain errors and gaps, they offer unique snapshots of the confident Crow people on the eve of their first sustained contact with non-Indians. Information about the Crow’s traditional customs and beliefs has also been compiled in the 20th century by anthropologists who have visited the tribe and interviewed elderly Crow about their past. The records of both early-19th-century adventurers and 20th-century anthropologists have created a large body of information that provides the basis of our picture of the Crow way of life more than 150 years ago.
At the outset of Larocque’s account of his time among the Crow, he presented a description of the country where the tribe had migrated over the previous 500 years: “This nation inhabits the eastern part of the Rocky Mountains at the head of the River aux Roches Jaunes [literally, the river of yellow stones]... and close to the head of the Missouri.” By this time, the Mountain Crow had settled in the Bighorn and Absaroka mountains. For most of the year they hunted on the plains south of the Yellowstone River, but they spent the winter in protected areas south of the modern Montana-Wyoming border. The River Crow ranged along the upper reaches of the Missouri River. They continued to pay frequent visits to their old relatives in the Hidatsa villages and often came in contact with the Assiniboine and Blackfoot Indians living to the north.

According to Larocque, there were “three principal tribes” of Crow. The Crow were actually still a single tribe; Larocque was noting their division into the River Crow and two smaller groups that had formed within the Mountain Crow: the “Main Body” and the “Kicked in the Bellies.” The Main Body tended to travel west toward the Bighorn Mountains. The Kicked in the Bellies spent most of their time in the Little Bighorn and Powder River valleys in the eastern portion of Crow territory.

Although the tribe was divided into these separate units, the Crow frequently visited back and forth between camps. Larocque reported that he had “never seen them remain any time in their tents alone... They are social, are fond of company and are lonesome when alone.” But visiting relatives also served a practical purpose. The Crow needed to band together in order to guard their homeland from invasion by enemy tribes who wanted to hunt the plentiful game in Crow country. The Blackfoot to the north, the Shoshone to the south, and the Sioux and Cheyenne to the southeast were constant menaces. To protect their lands, the Crow sought friends in neighboring tribes as well. The Hidatsa were the Crow’s most dependable allies, but Larocque noted that the Crow also had a steady trading relationship with the Shoshone, from whom they obtained horses and Spanish glass beads. The Crow also traded with the Flathead, who brought horses and a sprinkling of handicrafts—blankets and food containers—with them when they left their plateau homeland and crossed the Rockies to hunt each summer. By visiting with these trusted trading partners and their kin, the Crow were able to maintain their strength and unity despite the threat of attack from rival tribes.

In Larocque’s description of Crow country, he reported that the tribe’s territory “abounds so much in buffalo and deer... [that] they find no difficulty in finding provision for a numerous family.” The fur trader noted correctly that the Crow had large households and that many men had more than one wife. But Larocque did not stay in Crow country long enough to learn how the tribe organized its families. Like many other non-Indian visitors who followed him, Larocque saw the tribe as simply a collection of friends and relatives who traveled wherever they pleased. Although to these strangers the Crow appeared to live in perfect freedom, they in fact ordered their society according to strict rules.

One of the first people to gain some understanding of how the tribe was organized was Thomas LeForge, an 18-year-old white American who set off in 1868 to travel through the Bighorn Mountains in search of game and adventure. Before long, LeForge fell in with a band of Crow Indians who were hunting there. They took him to their camp, where he lived in the tipi of Yellow Leggings, the leader of the band. LeForge and Yellow Leggings’s son, Three Irons, quickly became good friends. After several weeks, Yellow Leggings called his followers together and announced that he was going to adopt Thomas LeForge. “This young man is going to be my son,” the old man said. “Thus,” LeForge later recalled, “I became a Crow Indian.”

Whereas Americans and Europeans tend to define who they are by their race or occupation, Crow traditionally identify themselves by referring to their family. The Crow were bound together by kinship rather than by a uniform set of beliefs or written laws; the tribe was essentially a group of many interrelated families. Therefore, by adopting LeForge into his family, Yellow Leggings granted him the equivalent of citizenship in the tribe.

Young LeForge loved his life as a Crow. He hunted, trapped, and explored the Absaroka and Bighorn mountains with other young tribesmen. It took LeForge two years to master the Crow language, but he reported that when he had, he was “on good terms” with everyone in the band.

Soon after, LeForge—then a handsome 20-year-old sporting a mustache and dressed in moccasins and buckskin—took notice of an 18-year-old Crow woman, whom he called Cherry. Following Crow custom, he paid a visit to Cherry’s mother and brother and told them he wanted to marry her. (continued on page 38)
CROW KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

In 1868, Thomas LeForge, a white adventurer, was adopted into the Crow tribe. In his memoirs, LeForge later wrote that initially one of the most difficult things for him to understand about his new society was the way members of Crow families referred to one another. For instance, a Crow woman would call her mother’s sister by the Crow word for mother. Although confusing to outsiders, this terminology made perfect sense to the Crow. Like the members of every society, they had their own system of terms to denote kinship, and like every such system, it was an expression of the interactions among the people who used it.

These two kinship charts illustrate the differences between the kinship terminology traditionally used by the Crow and that used by non-Indian Americans and Europeans today. Both charts include three generations of the family of Cherry, the Crow woman who married Thomas LeForge. (According to LeForge, Cherry had a mother, a father, and three brothers—two adopted and one biological. For the sake of illustration, she is shown as having two sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.) The label beneath each symbol representing a family member gives the name Cherry would call that relative according to the system represented by the chart.

The importance of clan affiliation in Crow society accounts for many of the differences in the two charts. Crow clan membership was matrilineal, or traced through one’s mother’s side. Cherry referred to her male cousins on her mother’s side, who belonged to Cherry’s clan, by the same term she used for her three brothers. Similarly, she referred to her female relatives who belonged to her clan (her mother’s sisters or her mother’s sister’s daughters) as sisters. Unlike many Indian tribes, Crow individuals felt a special bond for close blood relatives who were not members of their own clan. For instance, Cherry called her paternal aunt mother and her paternal uncle father even though they belonged to her father’s clan and she belonged to her mother’s.

This representation of Crow kinship relations is greatly simplified. Crow Indians considered many other people—such as members of clans allied to their own—family members. They also had many more terms in their language than there are in English to denote relatives. (For example, girls used a different word for father than boys did.) These complexities, as LeForge and the non-Indian visitors who followed him discovered, are indicative of the tremendous importance of family relationships in Crow life.

**Two Views of Cherry’s Family**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbols:</th>
<th>female = marriage</th>
<th>descent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▲ male</td>
<td>▼ siblings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**American/European Version**

- grandfather = grandmother
- aunt = uncle
- father = mother
- cousin = cousin

**Simplified Crow Version**

- grandfather = grandmother
- mother = father
- brother = sister
- CHERRY

father  mother  brother  CHERRY  brother  brother  sister  brother
LeForge learned that Cherry's "people were of the burnt (or sore lips) clan." As he and later visitors came to understand, a clan was the Crow's basic unit of social organization. Each clan was composed of a group of related families and therefore included many more people than a nuclear family (parents and their children), the basic social unit in the United States today. The Crow word for clan, ashumnalexìia, was often translated as "driftwood lodges." Just as pieces of driftwood became lodged together as they were swept down the Yellowstone River each spring, members of a clan were joined together as a single unit.

Not all members of a clan lived or traveled together, however. Clans included too many people for that to be possible. The Crow also did not want to have only one clan represented in a band of travelers because clan members were considered so closely related that people within the same clan could not marry. Therefore, members of several clans traveled together so that no one would have to seek a mate from outside the camp. A person's clan affiliation, however, was still very important. Members of the same clan were more likely to assist one another at special religious ceremonies, to hunt together, and to share pride in each other's good fortune in battle.

The Crow observed a strict code of behavior based on their relation to one another. Youngsters, for instance, were expected to pay respect to male elders within their clan (known as clan uncles) and to their father's kin, whom they often called "mother" or "father." Adults would also honor these relatives by addressing them with special dignity and by giving them a portion of their kill from hunting expeditions.

Other relationships called for different behavior. The Crow believed that some relatives had to be avoided. Married men and women, for example, were not permitted to speak with their parents-in-law. Some relatives had to be teased. Children of men who belonged to the same clan were called "joking cousins"; they were expected to keep each other in line through constant ribbing and joke playing. Such roles were important in Crow society because cooperation among tribespeople was essential for their survival as they traveled from camp to camp. Discipline in the form of jokes and teasing was therefore much more effective than harsh punishments.

Thomas LeForge learned that to the Crow a family included many people—blood relatives, fellow clan members, and members of the clan of one's father. Sometimes this expanded definition of family was puzzling. As LeForge wrote, 'The number of genuine offspring children in any family was not easily discoverable. If one said, 'This is my son,' . . . the statement was never questioned. If any couple had several children when they apparently should have had but one . . . it was not polite to make references to the situation. The fact that a woman carried on her back a baby was not proof that it was her own.' But even though these customs were confusing to outsiders, they were of great practical value to the Crow. Even though the people of the tribe were divided into hunting bands that were dispersed throughout the Yellowstone and Missouri river valleys, all Crow felt special ties to the members of other bands. Whenever a group of Crow met another on the prairie or along a mountain stream, each person could be sure that among the strangers would be a relative. These ties bonded the tribespeople together and gave
them strength against their common enemies.

In the early 1800s, bands of Crow traveled in an annual cycle. Their schedule and route were determined by the availability of game and wild roots and berries. In the spring, when chokecherries bloomed, they would begin to gather different types of wild plants, including wild turnip, rhubarb, and strawberries. In the summer, they would collect ripened chokecherries and plums. At that time, bands would also come together to conduct religious ceremonies and group buffalo hunts. Throughout the year, individuals and small parties of Crow would hunt rabbits, deer, elk, and other game. As fall approached, the bands would separate into smaller groups that would seek refuge from the winter weather in the protected mountain valleys of the Rockies or along the bottomlands of the upper Missouri River.

Interaction with other tribes—both friends and enemies—also motivated the movement of bands of Crow across the length and breadth of their territory. Bands would sometimes travel to escape raids staged by the Blackfoot and the Sioux or to launch revenge attacks on these tribes. They also often set out for the Missouri River or the western slope of the Rockies to trade with their Indian allies there.

Temporary non-Indian visitors often reported that these bands simply wandered across the Plains in search of food and the excitement of battle. But those who spent time with the Crow knew better. Larocque, for example, wrote that a “band of young men” regulated camp life by dictating when people could hunt and when their group would move to a new site. These groups, known as warrior societies, also set the schedule of religious ceremonies. Larocque reported that those who disobeyed a warrior society’s orders were “punished by a beating or [their weapons] were broken or their tents cut to pieces.”

Membership in warrior societies was open to all young men who had distinguished themselves in battle. In the 1800s, the Foxes and the Lumpwood were the most prominent societies; others—the Big Dogs, the Muddy Hands, and the Ravens—were of less importance. Each society recruited promising young men, chose its own leaders, and established customs and emblems to represent it, much as different branches of the military services do today.

During the spring and summer, the warrior societies competed with each other for prestige and honors. They hunted and raided together, flaunting their successes in public parades and teasing their rivals when they fell short of success. Sometimes members of one society would even capture and marry the wives of those of another. Despite this rivalry, all disputes were forgotten when winter came. With the cold weather, warriors retreated to their earth lodges to tell stories of their exploits and prepare their weapons and finery for the coming year.

Warrior societies were led by chiefs who had attained this status by performing four types of military exploits: leading a war party, capturing an enemy’s horse, being the first to touch an enemy in a battle, and snatching an enemy warrior’s weapon. The men in each society who had accumulated the largest number of these war honors were regarded as the chiefs by general agreement of its members.

Each camp contained several other people who acted as leaders. Holy men and women who were believed to have special spiritual powers performed religious ceremonies. Others, whom non-Indians often called “medicine men,” were knowledgeable about the medicinal properties of herbs and other means of curing illnesses. Elders in a particular clan or household usually took responsibility for settling family
disputes or comforting people who had been wronged.

The affairs of entire bands were dictated by a combination of warrior society chiefs and elders. These leaders met together to plan their band's movements and to regulate the assignment of duties. Non-Indian explorers and soldiers usually referred to the people who made these decisions as chiefs.

"Chief," of course, is an English word; the best equivalent in the Crow language is bacheetche, which means "good man." The difference between these two terms is revealing. Unlike European kings or American presidents, Crow leaders of the early 19th century did not have their power spelled out in documents; instead it was granted to them by the tribe according to their ability to live up to the Crow ideals of bravery, generosity, and loyalty. When chiefs fell short of these ideals, they lost their power. Thus, in order to keep their position, Crow leaders had to stand out in their communities while continuing to participate in the daily life of their clan, band, or warrior society. They could never be too far removed from their followers.

The Crow's traditional form of government was well suited to a way of life based on hunting, family togetherness, and travel through a variety of environments. LeForge had a glimpse of this ancient political system during his years with the tribe. Later he reported that the Crow "had among themselves law and order more effectively prevalent than among any community of white people I have known. Their laws were few but they were well enforced."

The richness of the Crow's religious life was more difficult for visitors to appreciate. Larroque, for example, wrote, "I do not know what they believe...more than that they believe in good and bad spirits and in a Supreme master of life." The Crow were in fact a deeply religious people, but because they had no permanent churches it was hard for newcomers to understand their beliefs. For the Crow, religion was not reserved for Sunday; it was a part of everyday life. They believed that they had been blessed both by the creation of the earth and by their placement on the beautiful northern Plains; therefore, the Creator was never far from their mind.

The Crow regarded their homeland as proof of the Creator's presence. Because the Creator was nearby, they could be contacted through special ceremonies. The most common of these was the vision quest. In this ritual, a young man would leave his home for several days and retreat to an isolated area. There alone, he would fast and pray to the Creator to give him guidance in the form of a vivid dream. Sometimes, in order to help bring on these visions, the boy would cut himself and offer a gift of his own flesh to the Creator. When a vision quest was successful, a spirit would appear and instruct the boy how to behave or warn him against certain actions. Often this spirit would take the form of an animal, especially a bear or a buffalo. After the quest, this animal would become the boy's guardian.

To express gratitude for the Creator's blessings or to seek guidance for the future, groups of Crow gathered to perform tribal rituals. The most important of these were the Sun Dance and the tobacco planting. Sun Dances were held in the summer to help warriors avenge the killing of a relative or close friend in battle. Assisted and guided by a holy man, a warrior who was seeking revenge pledged to carry out the dance. An elder (called his Sun Dance father) organized the necessary dancers and costumes and oversaw the erection of a special earth lodge, in which the ritual was to be performed. Drummers, singers, fellow warriors, and relatives then spent several days preparing for the dance by making special moccasins, gathering buffalo tongues to feed the participants, and preparing the pledger for his ordeal. The last task required prayers to the Sun Dance father's doll: an object that the Crow believed carried great spiritual power. Sun Dance dolls were usually made according to instructions that were received from the Creator in visions. They were carefully protected and passed down from one generation to another.

When the ceremony finally began, the young warrior emerged from his tipi and moved solemnly between two lines of people that marked a path to the Sun Dance lodge. When the pledger arrived at the lodge, an elaborate dance began. Urged on by their families and friends, the Sun Dance father, fellow warriors, and the pledger moved to the rhythm of the onlookers' songs and the beat of drums. Most of the dancers stopped from time to time, but the
pledger, blowing an eagle-bone whistle in time with the drumbeats, danced continuously. The Sun Dance father’s doll was suspended before him throughout the dancing. The warrior continued to dance and stare at the doll until he fell into a trance. In this state, he received a vision that convinced him that he would be successful in punishing his enemies for the death of his friend or relative. The vision also inspired others to join him on the raid.

The tobacco planting was a commemoration of No Vital’s encounter with the Creator at the time of the River Crow’s separation from the Hidatsa.

A female leader of the Tobacco Society, photographed by Robert Lowie during an adoption ceremony in 1910.

According to the Crow’s oral tradition, the Creator gave the leader tobacco seeds as a special gift to the Crow and told No Vital that they should be planted each year. The planting was supervised by the Tobacco Society, an organization of men and women from all the bands of the tribe. Within the Tobacco Society were several different chapters, each of which adopted new members (usually couples) annually and met regularly in the fall and winter for dances. In the spring, the society planted a special ceremonial variety of tobacco gardens in special places. In the fall, its members harvested the tobacco seeds and stored them until they could be planted the following year. (Although the Crow smoked tobacco that they obtained through trade with other Indians, they never used the sacred variety.) The Tobacco Society’s activities reminded all Crow of their obligation to the Creator and of their ties to each other as members of the tribe that he honored with the gift of these plants.

Although the Sun Dance and the tobacco planting were the most important religious rituals to the tribe, their observance took only a fraction of the time the Crow devoted to religious activities. Crow people sought visions wherever they traveled. For instance, men and women often lay in tobacco fields in hopes of receiving a message from a spirit. Also, the Crow always carried “medicines”—objects that they believed contained power granted by the Creator—from camp to camp. These medicines ranged widely in size and power. Some were small articles, such as a part of an animal, that recalled a guardian who had appeared in a vision. Others were large bundles containing a variety of sacred objects. The most important of these items were sacred rocks, which were thought to have special power and to require special care.

The people who Larooque believed followed no organized religion also performed a variety of lesser rituals and ceremonies. These included the Bear Song Dance, the Sacred Pipe Dance, and feasts held to celebrate major events, such as victories in raiding or war. Each required that friends and family members cooperate and follow the orders of their leaders in order to make all the necessary preparations. All of these rituals reflected the tribe’s reverence for the Creator and its members’ belief that his power could appear in almost any form at almost any time.

Just as the Crow had a rich religious life without attending church, their children learned everything they needed to know to perform the roles they would play as adults without ever spending a day in a classroom. Each of the groups in Crow society—clans, warrior societies, religious organizations, and families—helped to teach children how to participate in social and religious activities. Youngsters were instructed in proper behavior by being encouraged to observe and imitate their clan elders. Warrior societies offered children advanced training in tracking animals and scouting enemies. Religious groups, such as the Tobacco Society, taught their young members the elements of Crow beliefs and the meaning of their rituals. Therefore, although the Crow had no schools, children had every adult in the tribe as a teacher.

Families gave young Crow an education in everyday matters. Children especially looked to their “fathers” and “mothers” (their mother’s siblings as well as their natural parents) and to their grandparents for instruction. Sometimes children would become attached to childless couples who might adopt them and take them into their lodge. When this happened, the children’s new parents (and clan relations)

A 1908 photograph of a Crow woman cleaning a buffalo hide by scraping it with a piece of bone.
A Crow woman's saddle and stirrups, made of rawhide and decorated with beadwork. Women who were skilled on horseback could ride with the tribe's warriors.

would take on the responsibility for their education and their biological mother and father would become less important in their life.

The Crow specified some tasks as women's work and some as men's work. The lessons children were taught, therefore, depended on their sex. Girls were instructed in the female tasks of butchering buffalo killed in hunts and processing their hides. They also learned to sew this leather into moccasins and tipi covers and to make all the tools and clothing their families needed. Because women were the central figures in family and clan relationships, the home was their province. They owned and used tools, erected the tipis, and were the guardians of their husbands' shields. These activities placed them in charge of most day-to-day activities within a Crow camp.

Crow boys were taught how to track and hunt game. At an early age they were encouraged to hunt birds and rabbits; they often brought rabbit skins to girls to tan and cure. (Little girls sometimes used them or pieces of scrap buf-

Boys were prepared to take over the male jobs of defending their camp, going on raids against their enemies, and, as members of the warrior societies, leading their band to new hunting or camping grounds.

Despite this division of labor, the Crow did not insist that only men do men's work and only women do women's work. The Crow accepted, even celebrated, people who were different from the group or who seemed specially suited to a particular activity. Thus, if a woman showed unusual skill on horseback, she might ride with the warriors. Similarly, if a man displayed an interest in household jobs, he was permitted to tan hides and make clothing. There was in fact a separate category of men, called bate, who preferred to dress and live as women. They were not only accepted but also revered by the Crow, who believed that the bate had a special tie to the Creator.

Despite its informal appearance, the traditional world of the Crow was regulated by family and clan ties; by political, religious, and war leaders; and by customs that all tribespeople respected and observed. The strangers who thought the tribe lived in complete freedom failed to appreciate the sense of group responsibility that all the Crow felt and that brought order to their seemingly unstructured way of life.