

APRIL 22, 1976

Around any old ranch headquarters in the Shortgrass Country, artifacts of the Indian era remain. Historians say our public roads follow the routes of the redman and the Spanish explorers. We like to think of ourselves as being inventive and original, yet man's patterns are the same.

Out in the pastures, I wonder about the Indians. Scraps of flint mark their workshops. Mounds of burned rock 20 feet wide and three feet high outline their kitchens. Widely scattered tools prove that they had lots of kids. Scrapers and grinders are strewn in every direction.

How did they get along in such a harsh land? Indians broke camp faster than hoot owls change tree branches. No government jobs were available. Courthouses can't be skidded by a dog team or a stout wife.

Bureaucracy was limited to the tribal council. One scalp inspector served all the war parties. Bugs and frogs could be eaten without a permit from the health department. Fishing and hunting didn't require a license. Witch doctors and medicine men used a rattle handed down by their grandpas to prove certification.

Communication offered little employment. Blankets and smoke were the entire Postal department. Signs and calls replaced long distance. Deadletter boxes were unknown. Busy signals were settled by hatchets or clubs.

Campaign workers sure weren't in demand. Election results were determined by some big hefty fellow that made his constituents believe that the tomahawk was sharper than the tongue.

Once this one vote, one man rule was established, the chief didn't disappear to a faraway river never to be seen again. He had to keep his ax swinging or he'd be packing water to the old folk's division. But none of the political activity created any jobs except the sewing and surgical work that was turned to the medicine men in hot election years.

Farming was impossible in these parts. You know how planting and tilling works in the Shortgrass Country. Fallow sparrows that build their nests from the ruins of spider webs have a hard time making it here. You can imagine the chances of an early day farmer faced by a tribal council that thought subsidy had something to do with rewarding a hunter or a warrior and that crop failure was a disgrace justifying 40 lash marks across the tenderloin.

Some demand for a man of a planting bent was used in raising rattling gourd vines for the doctors, or herbs for the medicines. But without rain and without government aid, a sure fire culture to raise penicillin on the verge of a flu epidemic is a hazardous craft.

Actually, the chiefs didn't have a steady job. Let a war leader's horse stumble in the fit of charge, causing several warriors' horses to trip and make their bows discharge, and he was apt to be demoted to tightening the tom-tom strings on the junior council's drum.

Indians traded among themselves. Shell bracelets were swapped for wolf tooth armlets. Arrowhead makers exchanged wares with clay potters. Bracelet makers joined the armlet boys to hoodwink the ammunition fellows into cheating the kitchenware

outfits. Commerce was known, but it ended just like the commerce of cattle trading-nobody profited.

Best job offered was making peace with the whitemen. Peacemakers made low salaries, nevertheless they were compensated by the amount of entertainment provided.

Indians loved pranks and jokes. They were good sports, too. They'd ride out on pinto ponies, decorated up bigger than a painted drum. After a lot of solemn palaver with the White-eyes, the party would lighten up with the execution of the treaty.

Back at camp that night, they'd really throw a dance. Indians sure could take a losing streak in good grace. Folks in the darkest Africa can't dance after throwing off a million or so acres with a pen staff, and I want you to know those Africans are great hands to dance.

As you probably know, I live with an Indian. Child Who Sits in the Sun has taught me to respect her people. The kind of respect the heavy artillery taught the soldiers in World War I. The brand that you don't forget from your pickup down to the poolhall, or for that matter from your pickup clean up the road that leads to the Alcan Highway.

I have to think of the Indians. The day I stop will cost a head of hair.