



Religious Beliefs of the Nebraska Indian

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Hungate provides summaries of folktales of the Pawnee and other plains tribes. This information on the beliefs, ceremonies, and mythology of the Indians had been transmitted orally for many generations.

Cataloging Information:

Plains Indians' Folktales Included: Chaui Pawnee, Skidi Pawnee, Hribara Pawnee, Wichita, Caddo

Photographs / Images: council of the Pawnee with Major Long and staff in 1819, High Eagle and other famous scouts of the Skidi Pawnee, Roam Chief and Yellow Hair, Samuel Allis

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE NEBRASKA INDIAN

By Mary Hungate

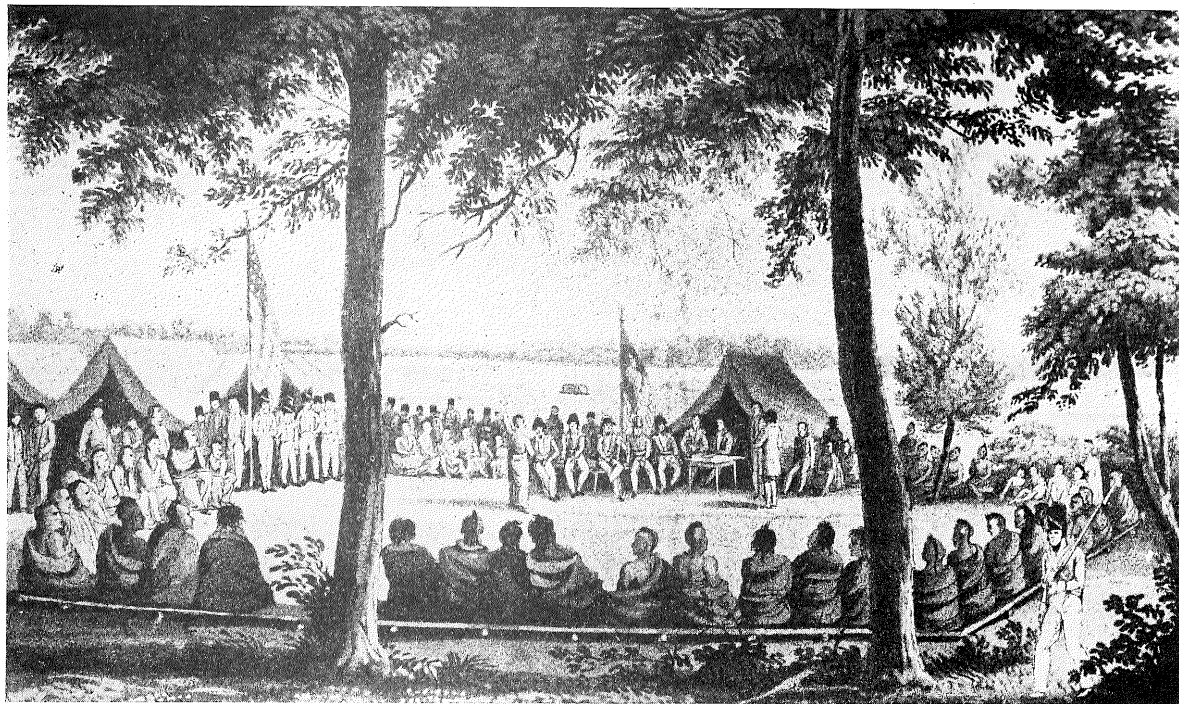
(The Pawnee Indians are remarkable among all the Plains Indians for their religious beliefs, ceremonies, and mythology. Their folk tales and mythology translated into English make over one thousand printed pages. This literature has been handed down from generation to generation by oral transmission. In many respects this Pawnee literature resembles the ancient Hebrew literature, transmitted by oral tradition and partly written down in the books of the Old Testament. The Wichita and Caddo Indians are near relatives of the Pawnee.

Miss Mary Hungate, a student of Nebraska University, graduated in 1915, married and was last heard from under the name of Mrs. Floyd Bennett, with her home in the Philippine Islands. Her thesis which follows is a remarkable condensation of parts of the folk lore of the Pawnee and other plains tribes. A. E. S.)

Tales of the Creation

One of the characteristics of mankind that has been manifest all through the ages is curiosity. Man has ever been asking the questions "Why" and "How" and endeavoring to find the answers by drawing upon his experience, his environment, and his imagination. Like all primitive people the Nebraska Indian answered the questions as they arose, and in consequence left us a wealth of folk-lore which portrays the religious beliefs, ceremonies, and explanations of natural phenomena in a most artistic manner.

We have been so busy studying the mythology of the Greek, the Roman, the Egyptian and the Hebrew that we have neglected the tales produced by the first inhabitants of our own state. I shall present some of the myths developed by the Nebraska Indian in connection with his religious beliefs which rival the mythology of any ancient people in scope of imagination and artistic design.



Council of the Pawnee with Major Long and Staff (From Painting by Samuel Seymour)
October 9, 1819

The story of the Creation has furnished such a vast field for the dreamer that many tales have arisen concerning the beginning of the earth. Each tribe developed its own explanation. These differ greatly in detail, yet in part bear a remarkable resemblance to the theories advanced by the forerunners of our modern civilization.

Tale of the Chaui Pawnee

Roaming Chief, the hereditary chief of the Chaui, tells the following tale which has been handed down for generations by this tribe, the Pawnee.

"After Tirawa created the sun, the moon and stars, the heavens, the earth and all things upon the earth, he spoke. At the sound of his voice a woman appeared upon the earth. Tirawa spoke to the gods in heaven and asked them what he should do to make the woman happy.

The Moon spoke and said, "All things that you have made, you have made in pairs, as the Heaven and the Earth, the Sun and the Moon. Give a mate to the woman, so that the pair may live together and help one another."

Then Tirawa made a man and sent him to the woman, and he said:

"Now I will speak to both of you. I give you the earth. You shall call the earth 'Mother.' You shall also call the Moon 'Mother.' The heavens you shall call 'Father'. In time you, woman, shall be known as 'Mother' and man shall be known as 'Father'. I give you the sun to give you light. The moon also shall give you light. The earth also will give you light.

"The earth also will I give you, and you are to call her 'Mother', for she gives birth to all things. The timber that shall grow upon the earth you shall make use of in many ways. Some of the trees will have fruit upon them. Shrubs will grow from the ground which will have berries upon them. All these things will I give you and you shall eat of them. Never forget to call the earth 'Mother', for you are to live upon her. You must love her, for you will walk upon her.

“I will show you how to build a lodge so that you will not be cold or get wet from the rain. Go get timber. Cut ten forked sticks and set them in a circle. Cut some poles to lay upon the forks. The posts that are set in the ground to uphold the lodge represent the four gods who uphold the heavens in the northeast, the northwest, the southeast, and southwest. There are minor gods between these with powers that connect the power of one god to another. There is also an outer circle of many gods, and you shall cut poles to represent them; their power extends from one god to another.

“When the lodge is complete, dig in the center a fireplace and I will give you fire-sticks so that you can make a fire. These fire-sticks belong to the sun. Fire will do many things for you.

“After you have completed the fire-place, make the ground even inside the lodge, leaving only one small mound in the west for an altar. Kill a buffalo and place the skull on the altar. Though the skull has no life in it, I, Tirawa, the spirit of the buffalo, will be present there when the rays of the sun shine upon it. For this reason always keep the skull on the altar facing the east, so that the first rays of the sun as it enters the lodge will shine upon it. Remember the skull, for I have placed it in the lodge to live with you and talk to you. Listen to the thunder, for it is your Father’s voice. You must sacrifice things to him and to the other gods in the heavens.

“I now give you, Man, a bow and arrows which are to be known as ‘the wonderful bow and arrows’. To you too, Woman, I give bow and arrows and also a hoe made from the shoulder-blade of a buffalo, and seeds of four different colors, and you shall have corn of these colors. Make a pot from the clay of the earth and cook the corn on the fire and eat it. I will tell you what herbs to eat and what to give to the sick. Eat these things and the flesh of animals.”

When they had completed the lodge Tirawa spoke again and said:

"I make you to live in the lodge and you shall increase, but you are not to live forever. You are to die and will be placed in the ground again. You and your children must always remember that I gave you life, but you are to return to your Mother the earth again."

High Eagle, a Kitkehahki medicine man, told the following story.

After Tirawa created the world he created man and put him on the earth facing north. Tirawa told this man to put his thumbs together facing north. The man obeyed and upon his thumb-nails appeared the imprint of the faces of the two gods of the north. After the man's thumb-nails were grown out and the faces had disappeared he was told by Tirawa to again extend his thumbs toward the north, and the faces of the other two gods of the north appeared on his thumb-nails.

The four gods of the north are the gods who send the buffalo to the people and rain that the crops may grow. They gave to the man power to create a mate for himself by sending a Kingfisher to the earth. The Kingfisher divided the earth so that part of it became water and part became land. After the Kingfisher had done this the bird dropped down beside the man, who reached out his hand and touched it. Thereupon the bird became a woman.

Tale of the Skidi Pawnee

That the Skidi Pawnee had very little contact with the other tribes is shown by their mythology, as their tales differ greatly from those of the other Pawnee tribes. This difference is quite marked in their story of the creation which follows:

In the beginning was Tviawahut (the Universe and Everything Inside) and chief in Tviawahut was Tirawa the All-Powerful, and his spouse was Atira (Vault of the Sky). Tirawa stationed the gods in the sky as Stars, Sun, and Moon. Toward the western paradise, as ministers of the Evening Star, he placed Cloud, Wind,



High Eagle (third from left, standing)
and Other Famous Scouts of the Skidi Pawnee

Lightning, and Thunder. Tirawa looked and was pleased.

Then Tirawa told the Bright Star that he was ready to make the earth and that he should tell the gods to sing, for he was going to drop a little pebble. Then the gods began to rattle their gourds and sing and the Clouds came up black and dense, and as the wind blew the clouds they became blacker and heavier and the Thunder and Lightning entered the Clouds. The Clouds were placed over space and into these Tirawa dropped a pebble which rolled around among them. When the storm had subsided the space was found to be filled with water.

The four-quarter gods were then given war-clubs, and as soon as they touched the waters they struck them with their clubs so that the earth was created and the water was separated from the land.

After the earth was made Tirawa commanded Bright Star to tell these gods to sing, and the song was to be about the formation of the earth. So the four gods sang and the Clouds came up, the Winds howled, the Lightnings flashed, and the Thunders roared. While the four gods sang about the formation of the earth, the storm passed over the earth, and as the Wind blew it rained, the Lightnings striking in the ground, thus giving life to the earth. The Thunders shook the earth, so that in the parts where the earth was not level the dirt slid down into the valleys.

Then Tirawa commanded Bright Star again to instruct these four gods to sing, but this time their song was to be about the timber and the underbrush that makes the land gray. The earth was covered with plants but the plants contained no life. When the Winds blew through them and the Rains fell upon them, when the Lightnings struck them and the Thunders sounded above them, then the timber possessed life.

After this was done Tirawa again commanded Bright Star to tell the gods to sing. Then the Winds, the

Clouds, the Lightnings and the Thunders passed along the creeks, the ponds, the rivers and the lakes. As the Wind passed over the streams of water it cleansed the bottoms of the streams and purified them. Then it rained and filled the streams with water. The Lightnings struck the streams and the Thunder sounded into them so that, replying, was heard the sound of the streams flowing from the lands and Tirawa now knew that the streams were sweet.

Again Tirawa commanded Bright Star to instruct the gods to sing and to send the Winds, the Clouds, the Lightnings and the Thunders to the earth. The Winds and the Clouds passed over the earth, and wherever there was scattering of seeds by the gods, here the Lightnings and Thunders worked, so that life was put in the seeds and they at once sprouted and came up from the ground. After this was all done Tirawa was glad, and he hid himself for a time.

In the meantime the Great Star, as he followed the stars to the west, came to the home of Bright Star. He united with her and to them was born a daughter. Sometime after this the Sun overtook the Moon, and to them a son was born. Then Tirawa spoke to Bright Star and commanded her to place the girl upon the Clouds that she might be taken down to earth. So Bright Star spoke to the gods, telling them to sing about making the storm. As the Clouds arose she took her little girl and placed her upon the Clouds. Then, as the old men rattled their gourds and sang about the storm traveling downward to the earth, the Clouds moved toward the earth. The storm passed over the earth and all at once a funnel-shaped Cloud touched the earth. Then the Clouds arose, and there was the little girl standing upon the earth. Thus came the Pawnee name "Tcuraki" or Rainstanding—the name for the girl. And she wandered about the land, not knowing where she was.

Now when the girl was placed upon the earth Tirawa again commanded Bright Star to speak to the four gods,

telling them to send the storm, and bidding the Moon place her child upon the Clouds, so that the Clouds should go to the earth and place the child upon the earth. So the four gods rattled their gourds and sang once more. As they sang, the Winds arose, the Clouds came up and the Lightnings and Thunders entered the Clouds. The Clouds arose to where the Moon was standing and she placed the child upon the Clouds. In funnel shape the Clouds moved downward until they touched the ground, and the child Piruski stood upon the earth.

Piruski wandered about until he found the girl, but neither of them was capable of caring for anything until Tirawa commanded Bright Star to tell the gods to sing again and so to put life into them and give them understanding. As it rained upon the two children the Lightnings struck about them and the Thunders roared, which awakened the children and gave them life.

After a child was born to them they seemed to understand all—that they must labor to feed and clothe the child, and that they must erect a grass lodge in which to protect him from the rain. So the gods sang and gave to the woman earth, timber, and water. After they gave her seeds they sent dew, fog, rain, mist, wind and night.

After these things were made the storm swirled around the grass lodge that the woman had built and the woman knew that her lodge had been visited by the gods. She had her lodge, the altar in her lodge and the holy place west of the lodge. Then she remembered the pathway from the west to the center of the earth where she had been put. This she was to remember always, that above that centre dwelt Tirawa, who had spoken all these things to her. Then the Lightning taught her the use of firesticks, and she remembered that whenever she left the lodge she must speak as speech was given to her by the gods.

After all this singing by the different gods in heaven they remembered the man and that they had not given him anything. So the gods in the West sang and he was

given moccasins to wear on his feet, and a robe to cover his body. They told the man that Atira, the mother corn, should always be with him and that he should always wear the Swift Hawk to tell him of the office of a warrior. They gave him the war-club to remind him that the war-clubs divided the earth from the waters, and the Swallow who is the messenger from the gods. The gods gave to him colors and paints, taught him the names of the animals and gave him the bow and arrow with which to kill the animals.

These things were not given to them all at once, but the gods sang and mentioned the things they were to have. The people multiplied and discovered the existence of other peoples. Then all of the peoples were brought together for a great ceremony, their camps being arranged according to the relative positions of the particular stars upon which they severally depended. After they were gathered together the Evening Star revealed to them the use of the bundles and various other ceremonies.

After Piruski died his skull was taken up and placed in a bundle so that his spirit should always be present and impart power to the Skidi people. Many years after his death another Chief had taken charge. The people liked him, for he was kind. Now in one of their journeys, while a woman was putting up a tipi the pole slipped and fell upon the skull, breaking it. The chief who was keeper of the bundle said that he knew it was going to break, for he had been commanded by the gods to change the skull. So the ceremony was held and they opened the grave of the second chief and placed his skull in the bundle.

Tale of the Hribara Pawnee

The Hribara, who are closely allied to the Skidi, have preserved this tale explaining the Creation.

There was a big lake. On this lake were two ducks swimming around. They saw the Wolf coming from the southwest. Then they saw in the north Lucky-Man

coming. The Wolf and Lucky-Man met on the shore of the lake.

The Wolf challenged Lucky-Man to see who could endure the rain the longest. The Wolf hung up his own skin, while Lucky-Man hung up all kinds of feathers on a long stick. It commenced to rain.

The Wolf finally gave in. He said: "I am beaten, but now I want you to create with me. I want to make land. I want you to make land, and whatever things should live upon it."



Roam Chief (Pawnee) and Yellow Hair (Sioux)
agree to "bury the hatchet."

Then the Wolf said, "I will take the north side of the Missouri River and I will make land." The Wolf called a Duck and said, "Now, Duck, can you dive away down under the lake and fetch me some dirt from the bottom?"

The Duck said, "Yes." And the Duck dived and brought up mud and placed it before the Wolf.

The Wolf then threw the mud to the north, saying:

"Form into land, and let it be prairie, and let buffalo roam over the prairie." And it was done.

Then the Wolf told Lucky-Man that it was his turn. Lucky-Man then turned and called the Duck and told it to bring the mud from the lake. This time he brought up more than he had brought the Wolf. Lucky-Man threw his on the south side of where the Wolf had made his land. Hills and mountains were formed. The buffalo were seen on the land.

Lucky-Man said: "When the people come they shall choose to live on the south side of the Missouri River, for there are hills and valleys, so that their ponies, dogs and buffalo can find shelter in the hills and mountains. You made your country level; in the winter time the buffalo will be driven away from there by the storm."

The Wolf made the land on the north side and Lucky-Man made the land on the south side; so there was a channel between the two countries where the Missouri river bed is. The first thing they knew, the stream of the Missouri began to flow along the dividing line of the two countries they had created.

Tale of the Wichita

In the time of the beginning there were no sun, no stars, nor anything else as it is now.

Man-Never-Known-on-Earth, Kinnekasus, was the only man that existed and he it was that created all things. When the earth was created it was composed of land and water but they were not yet separated. The land was floating on the water and the darkness was everywhere. After the earth was formed, Man-Never-Known-

on-Earth made a man whose name was Having-Power-to-Carry-Light (Kiarsidia). He also made a woman for the man whose name was Bright-Shining-Woman.

After the man and the woman were made they dreamed that things were made for them, and when they woke they had the things of which they dreamed. Thus they received everything that they needed. The woman was given an ear of corn, whose use she did not know, but it was revealed to her in her heart that this was to be her food, and that it was to be the food of the people who should exist in the future, so the Mother-Corn should be nursed and preserved in order to provide that food. Still they were in darkness, not knowing what was better than darkness.

Once upon a time it came into the mind of Having-Power-to-Carry-Light that he should go toward the east. He went farther and farther, not knowing where nor why but propelled by some power within himself. Finally he came to a grass lodge where he found some one else existing on the earth besides himself. This man of the grass lodge told him that he had brought him there to reveal certain things to him that were to transpire. He told him that the one who created them both was about to improve their condition, to cause villages to spring up and to give them power to teach the people things that had always been unknown.

While they were talking they heard a voice from the east telling them to hurry and prepare their arrows in order to shoot the deer that were on their shore. After they had prepared their bows and arrows the voice spoke to them again, saying that there would be three deer, but that they must shoot neither the black deer nor the white deer but the one that was half black and half white.

The two men went out and saw the deer coming out of the water toward them. When they got to the bank the white-and-black deer jumped out and as it was jumping the man of the grass lodge shot it. After shooting it he followed all three deer. Then he heard a voice

saying, "You have done the right thing." By shooting the deer that was half black and half white it was signified that there should be days and nights.

The white deer went ahead, then the black deer, then the one that was wounded. The man of the grass lodge followed them. This meant that everything would move—that the sun would rise, the stars would move, and that darkness and light should move on. So the man of the grass lodge became Star-that-is-Always-Moving (Kinnihguidikidahis).

Having-Power-to-Carry-Light stayed there on the shore after the other man had left to follow the deer. As he looked toward the east he saw a man standing in the water who said that thereafter he should be called Reflecting-Man—the sun. So the man on shore thought that, as he was to be known as the sun, he should give light and be seen by the people and aid them to have great powers. Then Having-Power-to-Carry-Light returned home, and as he had light to travel in he could see a long way. He found that light was better than darkness, for he could travel much faster.

When he got home the sun went down and he saw three stars come up in the sky, followed by a single star. Having-Power-to-Carry-Light made up his mind that the three stars were three deer and that the other star coming up behind was the man who wounded the deer.

This was a new start for the man and the woman. Time went on, and Having-Power-to-Carry-Light saw that the promises which were made by Man-Never-Known-on-Earth to Star-that-is-Always-Moving were being fulfilled. He saw villages springing up. There were more people existing, and this was as had been promised.

After these things had happened the man and the woman went from one village to the other showing the people how to use the things they had. Having-Power-to-Carry-Light traveled like a spirit. He taught the men how to travel from one place to another, how to hunt the

animals that existed for their use, and how to make the things they needed.

When Bright-Shining-Woman began her work among the women she first gave them Mother-Corn which they planted, cultivated, harvested and used for food. She taught them the various uses that the corn could be put to, so that they progressed very rapidly.

After Bright-Shining-Woman had given all these instructions to the other women, telling them how to make their offerings to her and to the other heavenly beings, she told them that she had all of their powers and they were to know their condition through her. Then she disappeared.

Now Having-Power-to-Carry-Light told the men that in bringing their game to the hunt they must offer to the moon, to the stars, and other heavenly bodies. After he told them all the things they were to have, to use, and to do he told them that there was a place for him to go, and he too disappeared.

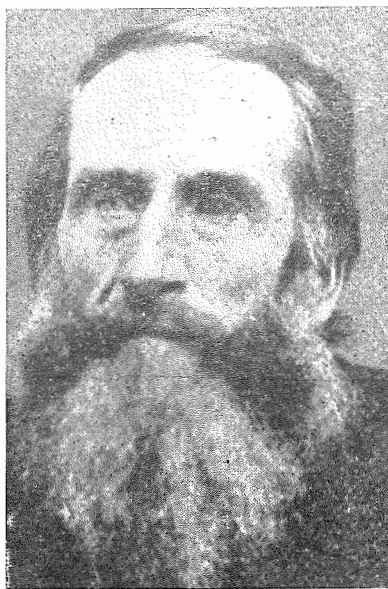
Late that evening after the sun went down the people saw the woman in the sky and she had become the moon. Early the next morning after the darkness passed away the people saw a star in the heavens and it was the man, who then became known as the First-Star-Seen-After-Darkness-Passes-By.

Tale of the Caddo

In the beginning the sun, stars, moon, and earth did not exist as they are now. Darkness ruled. With the lapse of time came a man, the only living being. Soon after his arrival a village sprang into existence with many thousands of people. For a time he disappeared and then he seemed to be everywhere. He called all of the people together and gave them all kinds of seeds which they were to eat. He told them that the Great-Father-Above would give them a man by the name of Sun who would overcome Darkness.

He also announced to the people that the Great-Father-Above had given him marvelous power, because it was necessary for some one on earth to carry out his will. He told them to return to their homes, hold a council among themselves, and select a chief whom they should look upon as a great father.

When they had returned and assembled there was a man in the council by the name of Coyote who told them



Rev. Samuel Allis
Congregational Missionary to
Pawnee 1834-1846

that the unknown powerful man should be called Moon because he was the first man created on the earth.

After Moon came to be chief he selected another whom he called Errand Man to be his helper and to call the people together. He was sent to tell the people to prepare to leave their Old-Home-in-the-Darkness, for the Moon was going to lead them through into a better land.

All of the people gathered together in groups and each selected a leader. Moon told all of the leaders that they must sing and beat their drums as they were moving on and that none of them should ever look back the way they came, lest the people should be stopped and remain in darkness.

So the people began moving westward, and they came out of the ground into another world. While they were yet traveling Coyote told the chief that the world was too small for the people; then he turned and looked back in the direction whence they had come. The people had not all come out, so those went back while the others kept going westward.

Finally the chief picked up some dirt and threw it in front of him. It formed very high mountains. When the people came to the mountains they stopped and began to make their first homes and villages. Moon went to the top of a mountain looked about, finding that the people had gone in different directions. When they all lived together the only language spoken was Caddo, but after they scattered they all spoke different languages. When Moon came to his people—the few he had left—he told them the name of the place in the ground from which they had come. He told them the direction to their right hands should be called North or cold side and the direction to their left hand side should be called South or warm side.

In the beginning all of the people lived in darkness, but they became dissatisfied and wanted light. They called a council to discuss how they should get light. The Coyote was first to voice the complaints of the people and he carried them to the Moon, who was a prophet. The Moon thought over the question and then reported:

“There are yellow, black, spotted, half-spotted and white deer upon the earth. These deer are here for a purpose. If you kill the white deer everything shall be white, if you kill the spotted deer everything shall be spotted and bad, if you kill the black all shall remain in

darkness, but if you kill both the black deer and the white deer we shall have day and night. During the day everything shall be white and we can go about and hunt and visit, but during the night we can return to our homes and rest."

The people accepted the prophet's words and started out and hunted until they killed the black and white deer, and from that time on we had day and night.

When the Sun first came out of the east and went down in the west it went too fast to do them any good at all. Coyote announced that he was going to stop the Sun from going so fast. He started eastward early in the morning and waited for the Sun to come up. When the Sun came up he found Coyote waiting for him. Coyote told the Sun he wanted to talk to him, for he was in trouble. The Sun said that he could not stop and talk, but Coyote told him that he would go along with him. So the Coyote kept talking about the things that had lately happened and walking very slowly. When the Sun was nearing the west Coyote asked him to wait a moment and scampered over. After a while the Sun grew tired of waiting and went on very slowly, lingering for the Coyote to come, but Coyote did not appear. The Sun went down very slowly, still waiting for Coyote, but Coyote did not appear. And this is the reason why the Sun still lingers and goes down very slowly.

In the beginning of the world people and animals all lived together and were the same. After a time they became too numerous and there was not food for all. A council was held and they decided that some should become animals and live apart and be hunted for food.

Some of the people who lived where the big fire had burned the grass were rolled about in the black ashes until they became black and took the form of bears. Long pieces of white stone were put in their mouths for teeth and in their feet for claws. Each was given ten lives. When killed the first time he was not so very fierce. The

second life arose from the blood that was spilled when the first was killed. Each time after he was killed he became fiercer and fiercer, so when he came to his tenth life he was so fierce that he fought and ate human beings.

Other people who lived where the long grass grew were rolled upon the earth. When they arose they had the form of buffalo, and grass clung to them and hung like a beard under their necks. They too were given ten lives and put on the prairie to live where man might hunt them. The deer were made in same way, and after them all of the other animals.

Moon showed the people how to make bows and arrows, how to hunt and how to fight, but at last he became wicked and sinned and was banished to the sky, where he still lives.

HOW WHITE MEN MADE THE WILD WEST WILD

When we think of cruel Indians, we usually think of the Sioux and the Apaches. And yet the Sioux were not really a savage race.

Chief Standing Bear, the last great leader of the Sioux, has written his autobiography, and one passage follows:

"We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, the winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness,' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful, and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery.

"Not until the hairy man from the east came, and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved, was it 'wild' to us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that, for us, the 'wild west' began."

---From Shannon County News, March 4, 1938.