



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Mythology and Folklore: Their Possible Use in the Study of Plains Caddoan Origins

Full Citation: Martha Royce Blaine, "Mythology and folklore: Their Possible Use in the Study of Plains Caddoan Origins," *Nebraska History* 60 (1979): 240-248.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1979MythsFolklore.pdf>

Date: 1/4/2012

Article Summary: This is one of a series of articles based on presentations at a mini-symposium "Toward Plains Caddoan Origins: A Symposium" held at the Smithsonian Institution in November, 1976. Since myths contain references to real events, this study works to merge information gathered from myths and folklore with more modern accounts of the Plains Caddoan in order to validate this approach of study.

MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE: THEIR POSSIBLE USE IN THE STUDY OF PLAINS CADDOAN ORIGINS

Martha Royce Blaine
Oklahoma Historical Society

An ethnography of a society usually contains accounts given by its members of the origin point or earliest remembered home of the group's ancestors.

Most of us are familiar with the origin and early location stories of the Caddoan groups under discussion here as given by Dunbar, Grinnell, Dorsey, Fletcher, and others. Repetition of these accounts would add no information to this session. The Wedels, Lessers, and others have completely considered, analyzed, and reported them in their studies. In addition, they and others have discussed the eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts given by various explorers, travelers, military figures, and others who encountered and dealt with each of these tribes, and who often vaguely or more exactly described their earliest or then concurrent locations.

In preparation for the ethnographic portion of this symposium, another tack has been taken to see if there might be some other body of ethnographic information that would assist us in our search for Plains Caddoan origins and that had not, perhaps, been closely scrutinized for this purpose. Swanton (1910) in his article, "Some Practical Aspects of the Study of Myths," remarked that "myths, particularly those relating to the origin of tribes or families, contain references to real historical events, and hints from which others may be inferred . . . but which appear only as occasional flashes or objective reality through a subjective haze." With this in mind, I decided to study cautiously the 148 myths, legends, or folk tales recorded by George Dorsey (1906) in his *Pawnee Mythology* with the hope that some "occasional flashes of objective reality" would result and perhaps add a small nugget of previously unobserved data relevant to our discussion here.

As Swanton suggested, mythology or traditional tales are not generally considered a reliable historical source, and yet I believe they would contain the oldest record of a tribe's views of its own history.

Legendary and supernatural characters fill the pages of mythology, and non-scientific explanations give reason to the universe and the events observed in nature. But in all myths there are material objects used by that culture in describing and carrying out the fanciful and actual events that are told. There are also identifiable places mentioned which it is assumed were known by the legend keepers directly or indirectly at one time. These objects and place names are often the reality in the haze—a sturdy web on which the fanciful events are spun or take place.

For this study the legends were separated according to band affiliations of the tellers, of whom thirteen were Pitahawirata, seventeen Chaui, forty-five Skidi, and seventy-three Kitkahahki. Cultural items that might be pertinent to the study were listed in chart fashion for each band, and checked off and described as they appeared in each legend. The items listed were village area or region, river or stream nearby; other geographical features described during any events that transpired, such as rivers, hills, mountains, springs, holy places, timbered areas, and others. Descriptions of journeys were listed and the distance in days, directions traveled and purpose of journey noted, such as vision quest, hunting, warfare, horse stealing, and settlement. Artifacts listed were wooden utensils, bows, arrows, flint implements, kettles, knives, arms and ammunition, and sacred bundles. All types of dwellings were listed. If warfare occurred, then the direction traveled, and enemy if names were noted. Subsistence patterns such as gathering, hunting, and horticulture ended the list.

Only two items from the above list have been selected for consideration here: a type of dwelling and a list of those areas known by name today, which the story-teller declared to be an original home or early home area, or the scene of an event. The decision to concentrate on these two items was reached after reading the following two stories from which I give brief excerpts. The first is a Chaui legend told by Red Sun, a Pawnee Scout and Chaui doctor, who died in 1903. It says:

Grandfather told me that our people were put upon the earth a long time ago, when there were no seeds to plant or buffalo to hunt. They wandered from place to place and fed upon roots, berries, and pond lilies. . . after they had wandered for many years they reached the north country and there they found small game, which they killed and ate. . . There was a certain place where they were to go, and there they must make their village and stay. This place was somewhere near what is now called Nemaha, Nebraska. They came to a place where there were many ponds and the entire country was swampy. . . the people did not have to go far to find lilies, stems of reeds and other things to eat. Here they stopped and began to make grass lodges. Near these grass lodges was a high hill. At the foot of the hill a spring gushed forth and the water from the spring made the lands swampy.

In legend (No.) 80, Good Food in the Kettle, a Kitkahahki, related that

Tirawa created a man and woman and put them upon the earth. When they grew up, each of the two sons took a wife. The old man, who was called by his children Pitahawirata, Old Man from the East, said, I have one lodge. We cannot all live in this lodge. Let us make another lodge to the right, where my older son will live with his family. Then let us make another lodge to the left of us, and there my younger son will live with his family. The tipi to my right with all the other tipis which shall be placed about it in the future, shall be known as Leading Village (Chaui), and the tipi to the left with all other tipis shall be known as Small Village (Kitkahahki).

The old man taught his sons the bundle ceremonies and gave them bundles that were something like the original bundles which he kept. These bundles were known as Kawarakis.

The story goes that the older son built his village somewhere near Nemaha, Nebraska, and the other family went farther south and made their village near Little Nemaha, Nebraska. Grass houses are mentioned also. A Pitahawirata legend says that at one time they moved from the Nemaha to the Republican River in Kansas, where they built a village.

On the basis of these two stories, and with the listing of all the items from all legends completed, efforts were concentrated on named locations of events and villages, and on the grass houses mentioned. The latter will be discussed first. In the context of this symposium, grass houses are of interest since they are one of three principal house types used by Plains Caddoans but not necessarily by all groups or at all periods. Typically, they have been identified with the Wichita-speaking groups, whereas the Pawnee and Arikara are considered earthlodge-builders, and all three used the tipi part of the time. The legends seem to hint at a different and perhaps more complicated situation.

In the total number of legends, eighteen contained references to the grass house or lodge, as it is called, or the grass house village. All four bands mentioned such structures: Pitahawirata once, Chaui three times, Kitkahahki six times, and Skidi eight times. Information about them fell into several categories, such

as location, description, social class or type of inhabitants, number of inhabitants, and activities associated with them, among others. The Chaui, Kitkahahki, and Skidi claim that the grass house was the earliest type structure they knew and used. In some stories the grass house is the only type of dwelling mentioned, in others the grass house and tipi occur, and in still others there is mention of grass house, tipi, and earth lodge. In a few instances, the entire village was composed of grass houses, as in Legend No. 3 of the Chaui, No. 56 of the Kitkahahki, and No. 7 of the Skidi.

The only present-day geographical location specified where grass houses were found was the aforementioned Nemaha area near the Missouri River. Other less helpful and less definite places mentioned where they were built were on "a big water to the East" (Kitkahahki), and "south near a big stream" (Skidi). They were also built or located near unnamed swamps, ponds, hills with nearby springs, creeks, and many—nine in all—in arboreal settings, such as heavy timber. Here they stood alone, apparently, with sometimes a small clearing around them which contained a cornfield or garden.

One more area that might be remindful of some particular location was a Kitkahahki legend which noted the presence of red stone in the vicinity. Thus, "the people believed that the turning of the boy and his dog into red stone was the origin of the red sandstone in the nearby country."

Unfortunately, little is written in any of the legends as to overall appearance of the grass houses. They could be constructed by a few people—one, two, or three are mentioned. One had an entrance flap at the doorway. Sometimes the cooking was done outside, in front of the structure. Durability and serviceability were limited. Some were occupied for two or three years and then rebuilt. Seats were given to guests around the fire, and food was served in wooden bowls. One house burned down after catching fire from the firepit that in this case was inside the structure. The adjective "little" or "small" often prefaces the name except in one Kitkahahki story where it was customary for the young girls of the villages to build a large grass house for the old priests to sit in so they could sing songs to call the buffalo before the hunt.

Subsistence activities in which the grass house inhabitants are involved are mentioned frequently. Gathering was a means of

obtaining food, as was growing a garden. Village hunting is mentioned in two legends, but the predominant form of hunting is solitary, with the man going by himself into the forest or timber nearby. Six of the eighteen stories about grass houses described this form of hunting. One often gets the impression that one is reading about a nuclear, neolocal, scattered residence pattern.

Only a few individuals lived in a grass house, four or five at the most, and all seemingly members of a nuclear family. In some stories, perhaps reflecting a later period, the grass house appears concurrently with the earth lodge. In one story the comment was made that the rich live in fine earth lodges, while the poor live in grass lodges.

The evidence from legends is of particular interest in light of Linton's (1924) suggestion that the predecessor of the earth lodge may have originated from a southern type of thatched house, which was carried northward by tribal movement rather than solely by diffusion, the Arikara and possibly the Mandan being the principal agents. The occurrence of grass thatched dwellings in the Central Plains historically, notably among the Wichita, and the problems they pose for the archeologist at all time levels, will be touched on later in this symposium.

As stated in a previous paper, the Oñate expedition of 1601 reported grass houses in the great bend region of the Arkansas River, and the 1541 account in the "Relacion del Suceso" reported that "the Taraques have straw houses, the Araes some of straw and the rest of hide" (Winship 1896:577). The Araes have often been identified with the Pawnee.

Curious about whether Arikara traditions carried any references to the grass house, I examined eighty-two stories in *Traditions of the Arikara* by George A. Dorsey (1904), but found no mention of such structures.

Before I comment further on the grass house, your attention is directed to the second data group drawn from *Pawnee Mythology* (Dorsey 1906). This concerns the locality names of given places and their distribution among the four Pawnee bands. The names listed were Kansas, Swimming Mound in Kansas, the Nemaha area in southeast Nebraska, the Republican, Loup, and Platte rivers, in Nebraska, and Missouri River. These localities are mentioned in connection with travels, village locations, and events. From south to north, they occur in the indicated frequencies in the legends of the various bands:

AREAS MENTIONED BY NAME BY PAWNEE BANDS AND ARIKARA

Place	Pitahawirata (1)	Chaui (3)	Kitkahahki (6)	Skidi (6)	Arikara
Kansas, including					
Swimming Mound	2	1			
Republican River	1	1	8		1
Nemaha Area	1	1	3		
Platte River		1	1	3	
Loup River				6	
Nebraska Area	1			1	1
Missouri River					Many

What seems most obvious from this limited sample of locations is that events in the South Band legends (Pitahawirata, Chaui, Kitkahahki) are associated with Kansas and the southern part of Nebraska, that is, in the Nemaha and Republican River localities. These areas are mentioned 18 times, with only two allusions to the Platte River, once by the Chaui and once by the Kitkahahki. The Skidi legends never speak of the more southerly country but refer to the Platte three times, the Loup four times, and Nebraska once. The Arikara mention the Missouri River frequently in connection with old village sites, northern Nebraska once, and the Republican River once. Here, where they said there was only one mountain, they had built a village.

It should be remembered that while rivers and other areas are frequently mentioned, they are not identified except in general terms. If they had been named specifically, the distribution in the above table might well have changed for band-name locations. The information that we do have, as presented in the table, raises the following questions, among others:

1. Can it indicate that the two groups, that is, the South Bands and the Skidi, were separated for a sufficiently long period so that the Skidi retained no legends centering around the southern area?

2. Does it indicate that all or some of the South Bands stayed in the Nemaha-Republican River, Kansas, areas longer than did the Skidi and did not move into the Platte region until later by reason of their minimal mention of this latter area?

3. Could it be suggested that the Skidi and Arikara never were a great length of time in the Kansas-Nebraska border region, but may have reached their historic village site locations by another route?

4. Is it possible that some South Band groups continued from some undetermined early period to live in the Kansas-southern Nebraska region until the late 1700s and were living in other than earth lodge house types? When Pike encountered the Kitkahahkis on the Republican River, he mentioned earth lodges only, but perhaps other house types were present and other band groups were not utilizing the earth lodge exclusively. Garland Blaine believes that the Pitahawirata may have been in the Smoky Hill region in the mid-1700s and later, based on accounts related by his family. If so, where are these village sites and those mentioned by Dunbar as being along this river in the 1790s?

From study of these two items—grass houses and named locations—I suggest the possibility that grass houses were used by all bands of the Pawnee in some distant past and, perhaps in modified forms, up through the nineteenth century, when they are described in the traditions. Earlier, they may have been constructed by South Band groups in Kansas and southern Nebraska in the Nemaha and Republican River localities. They also may have been used farther north because Skidi legends mention them. We do know that the Skidi accounts do not mention the Kansas-Nebraska border area in any of the stories in this particular collection of mythology. Searches in additional folklore collections might modify this finding.

The stories locate only two slightly overlapping localities for the North and South Bands. Is it possible that this body of intertwined folk tale and possible historical events may have occurred and become **entrenched** in tribal lore during the time that subdivisions of one, or more, or all of the South Bands inhabited the aforementioned area and before certain unknown band segments moved north to the Platte and Loup River area? This may be suggested by the fact that the Platte River is mentioned only once by the Chaui and Kitkahahki in the 148 stories. This distribution might have been different, however, if an equal number of tales had been recorded from each band.

In conclusion, the study of these two elements taken from the *Pawnee Mythology* volume, with a limited search of the Arikara traditions, suggests that a closer examination of the legends, traditions and mythology of all Caddoan groups, may offer additional information about early locations of the tribes. Trait lists from them, including the locations mentioned, could be

studied to see if additional information previously overlooked, might be added to our knowledge. Such data might assist in more closely tracing changes in locations, describing material traits and perhaps behavior patterns.

Criticism of this study can be made because no attempt was made to determine the degree of reliability of the data drawn from the Pawnee and limited Arikara sources. First, there was no check to determine whether the translation of the original data from Pawnee and Arikara to English was accurate. At this late date it may no longer be possible to do so with any success. Second, my assumption that the existence and use of objects and locations mentioned should have a fair degree of reliability, was not proven. Part of the difficulty in the use of cultural trait lists from folklore is that objects named or places mentioned are not necessarily objects used or places known.

Comparison of folklore trait list items, such as grass houses, with trait lists from archeological site data and ethnohistorical, ethnological, and linguistic sources would assist in establishing degrees of greater reliability for folklore elements if found identified in one or more of the above sources.

This is more probable in the case of nonperishable items such as the flint implement, and to a lesser degree earth lodges. Here the archeological data have primary and the folklore secondary validity. However, in the case of items in folklore that are perishable and leave few or no traces, such as grass houses, then there may be no confirmation in archeology or other independent sources. This does not rule out the existence and use of the perishable items by the culture originating the myth, or the accuracy of the events and their locations, but it does reduce the degree of validity. We are faced then with the fact that in such cases, folklore becomes the primary data and its own confirming source since it is the *only* source we have for a given recorded trait or event.

Further study of a larger body of mythology and folklore drawn from all the Plains Caddoan groups, combined with confirmatory evidence taken from archeology, linguistics, ethnohistory, ethnology, and other sources, may indicate the reasonableness of this approach, not hitherto pursued, in seeking answers to some of the questions bearing on Plains Caddoan origins.

REFERENCES CITED

- Bolton, Herbert E.
1916 *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706*. New York.
- Dorsey, George A.
1904 *Traditions of the Arikara*. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publ., No. 17.
1906 *The Pawnee Mythology* (Part 1) Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publication No. 59.
- Dunbar, John B.
1880 The Pawnee Indians: Their History and Ethnology. *Magazine of American History*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 241-281.
- Fletcher, Alice C. See Hodge, F.W.
- Grinnell, George Bird
1889 *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-tales*. New York.
- Hodge, F.W., Editor
1907-10 *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, 2 parts. Washington, D.C.
- Linton, Ralph
1924 *Origin of the Plains Earth Lodge*. *American Anthropologist*, n.s., Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 247-257.
- Swanton, John R.
1910 Some Practical Aspects of the Study of Myths. *Journal of American Folk Lore*, Vol. 23, No. 87, pp. 3-7.
- Winship, George P.
1896 *The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542*. Fourteenth Annual Report, Bureau of [American] Ethnology, Part 1, pp. 329-613. Washington.