
Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden Recounted by Maxi'diwiac (Buffalo Bird Woman) of the Hidatsa Indian Tribe (ca.1839-1932), edited by Gilbert Livingstone Wilson (1868-1930). Originally published as "Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians: An Indian Interpretation" by Gilbert Livingstone Wilson, Ph.D. (1868-1930) Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota (Studies in the Social Sciences, #9), 1917. Ph. D. Thesis.

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As Recounted by

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Maxi'diwiac, or Buffalobird-woman
Photographed in 1910

[Title Page]

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**AGRICULTURE OF THE HIDATSA
INDIANS**

AN INDIAN INTERPRETATION

BY

GILBERT LIVINGSTONE WILSON, Ph.D.



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CHAPTER XIII

TOBACCO

Observations by Maxi'diwiac

Tobacco was cultivated in my tribe only by old men. Our young men did not smoke much; a few did, but most of them used little tobacco, or almost none. They were taught that smoking would injure their lungs and make them short winded so that they would be poor runners. But when a man got to be about sixty years of age we thought it right for him to smoke as much as he liked. His war days and hunting days were over. Old men smoked quite a good deal.

Young men who used tobacco could run; but in a short time they became short of breath, and water, thick like syrup, came up into the mouth. A young man who smoked a great deal, if chased by enemies, could not run to escape from them, and so got killed. For this reason all the young men of my tribe were taught that they should not smoke.

Things have changed greatly since those good days; and now young and old, boys and men, all smoke. They seem to think that the new ways of the white man are right; but I do not. In olden days, we Hidatsas took good care of our bodies, as is not done now.

The Tobacco Garden

The old men of my tribe who smoked had each a tobacco garden planted not very far away from our corn fields, but never in the same plot with one. Two of these tobacco gardens were near the village, upon the top of some rising ground; they were owned by two old men, Bad Horn and Bear-looks-up. The earth lodges of these old men stood a little way out of the village, and their tobacco gardens were not far away. Bear-looks-up called my father "brother" and I often visited his lodge.

Tobacco gardens, as I remember them, were almost universal in my tribe when I was five or six years of age; they were still commonly planted when I was twelve years old; but white men had been bringing in their tobacco and selling it at the traders' stores for some years, and our tobacco gardens were becoming neglected.

As late as when I was sixteen, my father still kept his tobacco garden: but since that day individual gardens have not been kept in my tribe. Instead, just a little space in the vegetable garden is planted with seed if the owner wishes to raise tobacco.

The seed we use is the same that we planted in old times. A big insect that we call the "tobacco blower" used always to be found around our tobacco gardens; and this insect still appears about the little patches of tobacco that we plant.

The reason that tobacco gardens were planted apart from our vegetable fields in old times was, that the tobacco plants have a strong smell which affects the corn; if tobacco is planted near the corn, the growing corn stalks turn yellow and the corn is not so good. Tobacco plants were therefore kept out of our corn fields. We do not follow this custom now; and I do not think our new way is as good for the corn.

Planting

Tobacco seed was planted at the same time sunflower seed was planted.

The owner took a hoe and made soft every foot of the tobacco garden; and with a rake he made the loosened soil level and smooth.

He marked the ground with a stick into rows about eighteen inches apart. He opened a little package of seed, poured the seed into his left palm, and with his right sowed the seed very thickly in the row. He covered the newly sowed seed very lightly with soil which he raked with his hand.

When rain came, and warmth, the seeds sprouted. The seed having been planted thickly, the plants came up thickly, so that they had to be thinned out. The owner of the garden would weed out the weak plants, leaving only the stronger standing.

The earth about each plant was hilled up about it with a buffalo rib, into a little hill like a corn hill. It was a common thing to see an old man working in his tobacco garden with one of these ribs. Young men seldom worked in the tobacco gardens; not using tobacco very much, they cared little about it.

Arrow-head-earring's Tobacco Garden

An old man, I remember, named Arrow-head-earring, or Ma'ia-pokcahec, had a patch of tobacco along the edge of a field on the east side of the village. He was a very old man. He used a big buffalo rib, sharpened on the edge, to work the soil and cultivate his tobacco. He caught the rib in his hands by both ends with the edge downward; and stooping over, he scraped the soil toward

him, now and then raising the rib up and loosening the earth with the point at one end—poking up the soil, so to speak.

He wore no shirt as he worked; but he had a buffalo robe about his middle, on which he knelt as he worked.

Small Ankle's Cultivation

My father always attended to the planting of his tobacco garden. When the seed sprouted he thinned out the plants, weeded the ground and hilled up the tobacco plants later with his own hands.

Tobacco plants often came up wild from seed dropped by the cultivated plants. These wild plants seemed just as good as the cultivated ones. There seemed little preference between them.

Harvesting the Blossoms

Tobacco plants began to blossom about the middle of June; and picking then began. Tobacco was gathered in two harvests. The first harvest was of these blossoms, which we reckoned the best part of the plant for smoking. Old men were fond of smoking them.

Blossoms were picked regularly every fourth day after the season set in. If we neglected to pick them until the fifth day, the blossoms would begin to seed.

This picking of the blossoms my father often did, but as he was old, and the work was slow and took a long time, my sister and I used to help him.

I well remember how my sister and I used to go out in late summer, when the plants were in bloom, and gather the white blossoms. These I would pluck from the plants, pinching them off with my thumb nail. Picking blossoms was tedious work. The tobacco got into one's eyes and made them smart just as white men's onions do to-day.

We picked, as I have said, every fourth day. Only the green part of the blossom was kept. The white part I always threw away; it was of no value.

To receive the blossoms I took a small basket with me to the garden. There were two kinds used; one was the bark basket that we wove, and of which you have specimens; the other kind was made of a buffalo bull's scrotum, with hair side out.

Such a basket as the latter was a little larger than the crown of a white man's hat, the hat band being about the same diameter as the rim that we put on the basket. It had the usual band to go over forehead or shoulders. I bore the basket in the usual way on my back; or I could swing it around on my breast when actually picking, thus making it easy to drop the blossoms into it.

More often, however, I took the basket off and set it on the ground when plucking blossoms. I would make a little round place in the soft soil with my hands and set the basket in it, so that it

would stand upright. The basket did not collapse, for the skin covering was tough and rigid, not soft.

I often used the scrotum basket also for picking choke-cherries or June berries. It was more convenient when berrying to carry the basket swung around on my breast. Going home with the basket filled with berries, I bore it in the usual way on my back.

My father usually worked with us; and indeed it was to help him, because he was old, that we picked the blossoms at all. It was slow work. I did not expect to gather more than a fourth of a small basketful every four days; and as the blossoms shrunk a good deal in drying, a day's picking looked rather scant.

When we fetched the blossoms home to the lodge, my father would spread a dry hide on the floor in front of his sacred objects of the Big Birds' ceremony; they were two skulls and a sacred pipe, wrapped in a bundle and lying on a kind of stand. We regarded these objects as a kind of shrine. Nobody ever walked between the fire and the shrine as that would have been a kind of disrespect to the gods. My father spread the new-plucked blossoms on the hide to dry. Lying here before the shrine, it was certain no one would forget and step on the blossoms.

It took quite a time to dry the blossoms. If the weather was damp and murky for several days, my father, on appearance of the sun again, would move the hide over to a place where the sun shining through the smoke hole, would fall on the blossoms. The smoke hole, being rather large, would let through quite a strong sunbeam, and the drying blossoms were kept directly in the beam.

When the blossoms had quite dried, my father fetched them over near the fireplace, and put them on a small skin, or on a plank. We commonly had planks, or boards, split from cottonwood trunks, lying in the lodge; they had many uses.

My father then took a piece of buffalo fat, thrust it on the end of a stick and roasted it slowly over the coals. This piece of hot fat he touched lightly here and there to the piled-up blossoms, so as to oil them slightly, but not too much. He next moved the skin or board down over the edge of the fire pit, tipping it slightly so that the heat from the fire would strike the blossoms. Here he left them a little while, but watching them all the time. Now and then he would gently stir the pile of blossoms with a little stick, so that the whole mass might be oiled equally.

This done my father took up the blossoms and put them into his tobacco bag. The tobacco bag that we used then was exactly like that used to-day, ornamented with quills or bead work; only in those days old men never bothered to ornament their tobacco bags, just having them plain.

When my father wanted to smoke these dried blossoms, he drew them from his tobacco bag and chopped them fine with a knife, a pipeful at a time. Cured in this way, tobacco blossoms were called *aduatakidu'cki*. They were smoked by old men unmixed.

The blossoms were always dried within the lodge. If dried without, the sun and air took away their strength.

Harvesting the Plants

About harvest time, just before frost came, the rest of the plants were gathered—the stems and leaves, I mean, left after the harvesting of the blossoms. My father attended to this. He took no basket, but fetched the plants in his arms.

He dried the plants in the lodge near the place where the cache pit lay. For this he took sticks, about fifteen inches long, and thrust them over the beam between two of the exterior supporting posts, so that the sticks pointed a little upwards. On each of these sticks he hung two or three tobacco plants by thrusting the plants, root up, upon the stick, but without tying them.

When dry, these plants were taken down and put into a bag; or a package was made by folding over them a piece of old tent cover; and the package or bag was stored away in the cache pit.

When the tobacco plants were quite dry, the leaves readily fell off. Leaves that remained on the plants were smoked, of course; but it was the stems that furnished most of the smoking. They were treated like the blossoms, with buffalo fat, before putting, into the tobacco pouch; we did not treat tobacco with buffalo fat except as needed for use, and to be put into the tobacco pouch, ready for smoking.

I do not remember that my father ever saved any of the blossoms to store away in the cache pit, as he did the stem, or plant tobacco. Friends and visitors were always coming and going; and when they came into the lodge my father would smoke with them, using the blossoms first, because they were his best tobacco. In this way, the blossoms were used up about as fast as they were gathered.

Before putting the tobacco away in the cache pit, my father was careful to put aside seed for the next year's planting. He gathered the black seeds into a small bundle about as big as my fingers hunched together, or about the size of a baby's fist, wrapping them up in a piece of soft skin which he tied with a string. He made two or three of these bundles and tied them to the top of his bed, or to a post near by, where there was no danger of their being disturbed.

We had no way of selecting tobacco seed. We just gathered any seed that was borne on the plants. Of course there were always good and bad seeds in every package; but as the owner of a tobacco garden always planted his seed very thickly, he was able to weed out all the weak plants as they came up, as I have already explained.

A tobacco plant, pulled up and hung up in the lodge, we called o'puti: opi, tobacco, and uti, base, foundation, substantial part.

The Mandans and Arikaras raised tobacco exactly as we did, in little gardens.

Selling to the Sioux

We used to sell a good deal of tobacco to the Sioux. They called it Pana'nitachani, or Ree's tobacco.

A bunch six or seven inches in diameter, bound together, we sold for one tanned hide.

Size of Tobacco Garden

My father's tobacco garden, when I was a little girl, was somewhat larger than this room; and that, as you measure it, is twenty-one by eighteen feet. I have seen other tobacco gardens planted by old men that measured somewhat larger; but this was about the average size.

Customs

If any one went into a tobacco garden and took tobacco without notifying the owner, we said that his hair would fall out; and if any one in the village began to lose his hair, and it kept coming out when he brushed it, we would laugh and say, "Hey, hey, you man! You have been stealing tobacco!"

What? You say you got this tobacco out of Wolf Chief's garden without asking? (laughing heartily.) Then be sure your hair will fall out when you comb it. Just watch, and see if it doesn't!

I have said that my father softened the soil of his tobacco garden with a hoe. After the plants began to grow, the hoe was not used, either for cutting the weeds or for hilling up the plants. I have said that the weak plants were culled out by hand, and that the strong plants were hilled up with a buffalo rib.

ACCESSORIES TO THE TOBACCO GARDEN

Fence

When I was a little girl every tobacco garden had a willow fence around it.

I remember very well seeing such fences built. Post holes were made by driving a sharp stake into the ground with an ax; the stake was withdrawn, and into the hole left by it, a diamond willow was thrust for a post; on this willow were left all the upper branches with the leaves. A rail was run from the post to its next neighbor, at the height of a woman's shoulder, and stayed in place by bending over the leafy top of the willow post, and drawing it around the rail, then twisting it down and around the body of the post in a spiral manner. If the leafy top of the post was long enough, and slender enough, it might, after being wrapped spirally about the post, be even drawn out and woven into the fence.

Below the top rail at a convenient distance, there ran a second rail, bound to the post with bark. Besides these rails, branches and twigs, and as I have said, the tops of the posts themselves, were interwoven into the fence to make it as dense as possible.

The posts of the fence stood about two and a half feet apart, making, with the rails and the interwoven twigs, a barrier so dense that even a dog could not push through it.

There was an opening left to enter the garden, closed by a kind of stile-bars of small poles thrust right and left between the posts; against these bars were leaned one or two bull berry bushes, which were removed when the owner wanted to enter.

If a weak place was found in the fence, it was strengthened with a bull berry bush thrust into the ground and leaned against the fence or woven into it.

The Scrotum Basket

I have said that we used a basket made of the scrotum of a buffalo bull, for picking tobacco blossoms.

A fresh scrotum was taken, and a rim or hoop of choke-cherry wood was bound around its mouth; choke-cherry limbs are flexible and easily bent. The hoop was sewed in place with sinew passing through the skin and around the hoop spirally.

A thong was bound at either end to opposite sides of the hoop, and the whole was hung upon the drying stage, or at the entrance to the earth lodge in the sun. The skin was then filled with sand until dry, when it was emptied, the thong removed, and a band, or leather handle, was bound on one side of the hoop, at places a few inches apart, and the basket was ready for use.

The scrotum is the toughest part of the buffalo's hide. When dried it is as hard and rigid as wood.

Figure 39 is a sketch by Goodbird showing what the basket was like.



Figure 39
Reproduced from sketch by
Goodbird.