

American Woodland & Plains Indians



James H. Hillestad looks back at distinctive Native American environments and illustrates them with two evocative dioramas

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

“Indian” was the name European explorer Christopher Columbus mistakenly applied to the New World indigenous people he encountered on arrival in what he believed was the “Indies,” the medieval name for Asia. This article touches on the lives of those peoples during the period from 1622 (Jamestown, Va., conflicts) to the Plains Indian Wars of the 19th century.

WOODLAND INDIANS

The Woodland Indians settled in the area east of the Mississippi River between the Gulf of Mexico and James Bay in what is now Canada.

Most prominent was the Iroquois Confederacy, which became known as the Six Nations. It was made up of the Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca, Onondaga and Tuscarora tribes. They call themselves the “Haudenosaunee.” It literally translates to “They Are Building a Long House,” meaning nations belonging to the league should live together like families in the same longhouse.

The Iroquois controlled many other tribes, expanding to become the most powerful confederacy in North America and the nucleus of Woodland culture. They revered war and fought bravely to defend their lands from neighboring tribes and white settlers. They played important political and military roles during the French and Indian War (1754-63) and the American Revolutionary War (1775-83).

This dedication to warfare, combined with the introduction of European diseases such as smallpox, was a major cause of the decline in native populations during the 17th century. The Iroquois compensated by

adopting captives. War parties were often organized specifically for this purpose.

The Iroquois tended fields of corn, beans and squash (crops collectively known as the “Three Sisters”) flanking their semi-permanent villages. The entire process of planting, cultivating, harvesting and preparing food was the women’s responsibility.

The Iroquois observed a matriarchal

The Iroquois built longhouses and domed wigwams of elm bark, surrounding them with wooden stockades for protection. Some longhouses were 100 feet long and could shelter up to 20 families.

Decoration of dress often involved porcupine quills and bird feathers. A woman’s typical dress was a calf-length, wrap-around slit skirt of deerskin, later made of woven cloth.

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mother clan system. They believed that no person was entitled to actually “own” real estate, but the Creator made women stewards of the land. Since the women also raised children, they were held in higher regard. Clan mothers appointed leaders and, if they proved to be unsuitable, discharged them.

PLAINS INDIANS

The sweeping Central Plains and rolling hills of North America were the homeland of the Plains Indians. The most prominent tribes included the Blackfoot, Crow,

BELOW: A clan mother dishes up hot venison stew for a youngster.



In the 1960s, Native American became the preferred way to refer to U.S. Indians in much the same way that the term Asian replaced Oriental. Aboriginal Canadians comprise the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. —James H. Hillestad

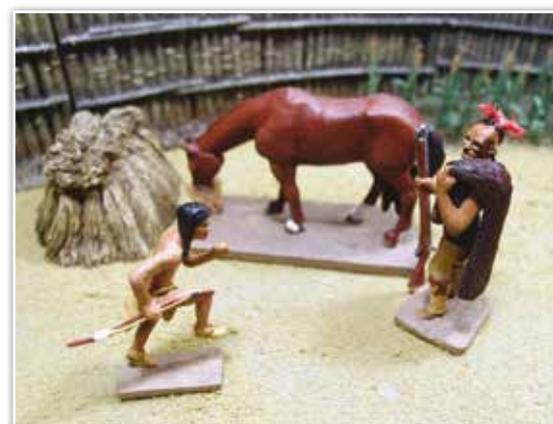


ABOVE: The 2-by-4-foot Woodland Indian diorama features a stockade surrounding a longhouse and a wigwam.

BELOW: A woman watches an arrow maker at work in the Woodland Indian village.

RIGHT: A tree stump has been adapted for grinding corn in one of the vignettes crafted by Jack Updyke.

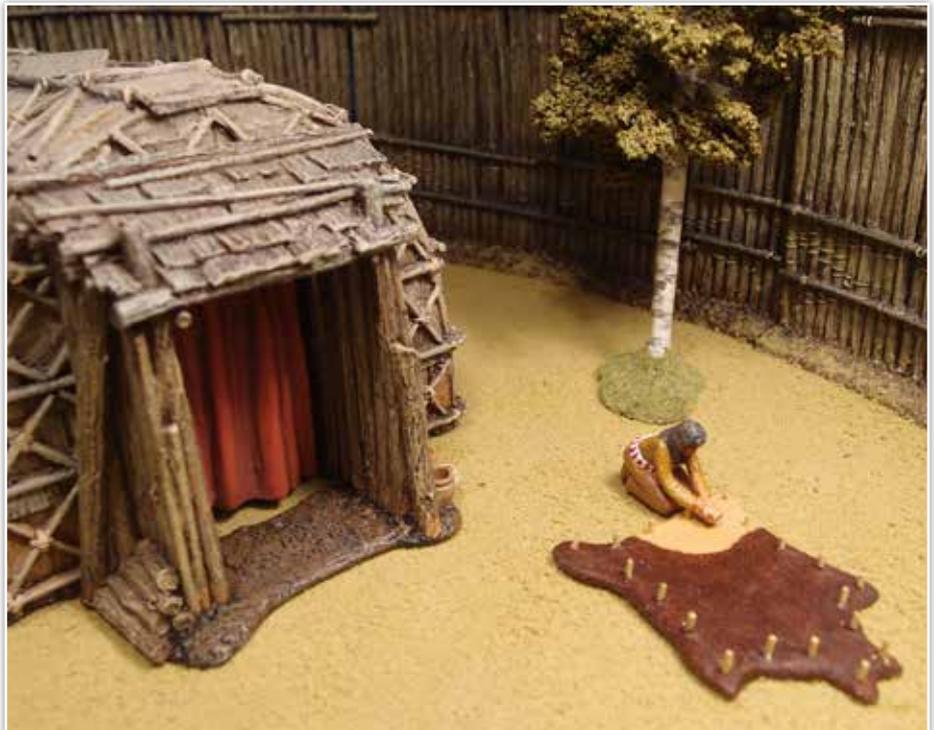
BELOW RIGHT: A young brave practices a war dance under the watchful eye of an experienced Woodland warrior.





ABOVE: Members of a Plains Indians tribe beat a ceremonial drum.

RIGHT: A woman working outside her wigwam cures an animal hide for making garments and other applications.



Cheyenne, Comanche, Shoshone, Arapaho and the seven sub-tribes of the Teton or Lakota Sioux. The Apaches and Nez Percé were Plateau tribes.

Plains tribes were originally hunter-gatherers or farmers mainly concentrated along river valleys. Dogs were used as their beasts of burden.

Beginning in the late 17th century, however, inroads made by Spanish explorers and colonists led to the eventual adoption of transformative horse culture by the Plains Indians. A horse lent both prestige and practical usefulness to its owner. Compared to the material lifestyle of their poorer ancestors on foot, nomadic Indians with horses could much easily transport more goods while traveling faster and farther.

The zenith of the various tribal cultures on horseback lasted about 200 years. They ranged from Canada in the north to the Rio Grande in the south and from the Rocky Mountains to the west and the Mississippi River to the east. The mounted nomads followed the buffalo herds that provided them with sustenance, traded items and made war against one another.

Providing shelter for the tribes of the Great Plains was the tepee. To this day, it is one of the best designed tents in the world. Basically a tilted cone, it comprised three or four main poles, strapped together at the top, and covered with buffalo skins.

It offered the essential asset of portability. A tepee could be dismantled

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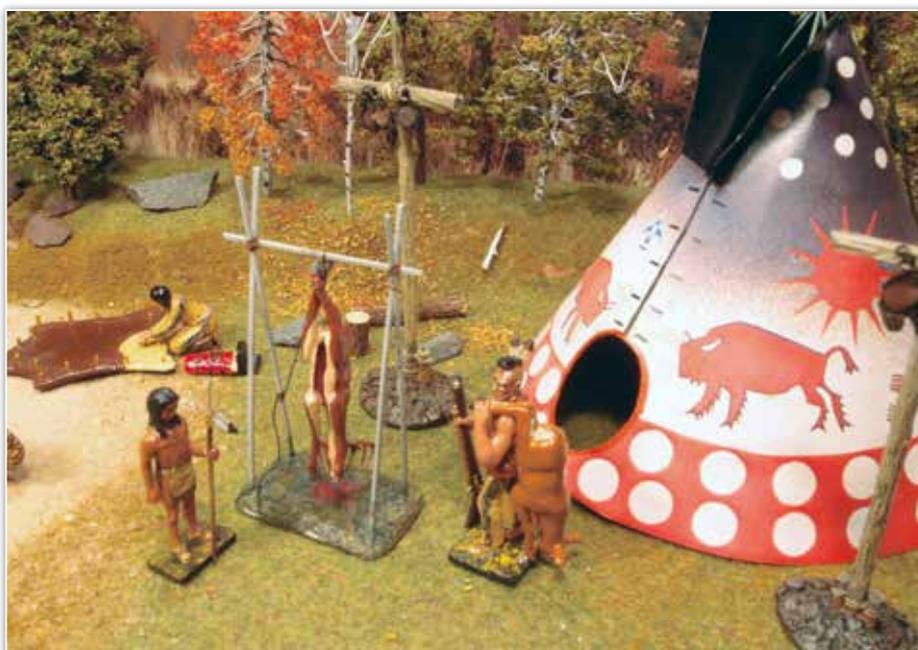
or erected quickly by two experienced women. It was sturdy enough to endure the harshest winters, waterproof and streamlined against the wind.

At a tepee's top were two smoke-flaps allowing smoke to exit freely from the central fire, thus ensuring warmth in winter. In the heat of summer, the side of the tepee could be rolled up to allow ventilation. The smoke-flaps could be closed to allow rain to run down the outer walls.

The tepee was more than a shelter -- it embodied the sacred circular form and was seen as symbolic of the Indians' world. Painting pictograms of visionary experiences and scenes of war exploits on tepee exteriors was commonplace.

Plains Indians managed to live very comfortably in what most modern readers would likely regard as cramped conditions. Etiquette within the tepee required that no one walk between the central fire and another person.

Antelope and deer provided meat and skins. But it was the buffalo which was the staff of life. A successful buffalo hunt was celebrated at a Sun Dance. The importance of the buffalo was underscored by many rituals of song, dance and ceremony surrounding the hunt.



LEFT: A man shouldering a deer returns home from a hunt.



ABOVE: Woodland Indian deer hunters in action.

ABOVE RIGHT: An impressive buck becomes prey for forest hunters.

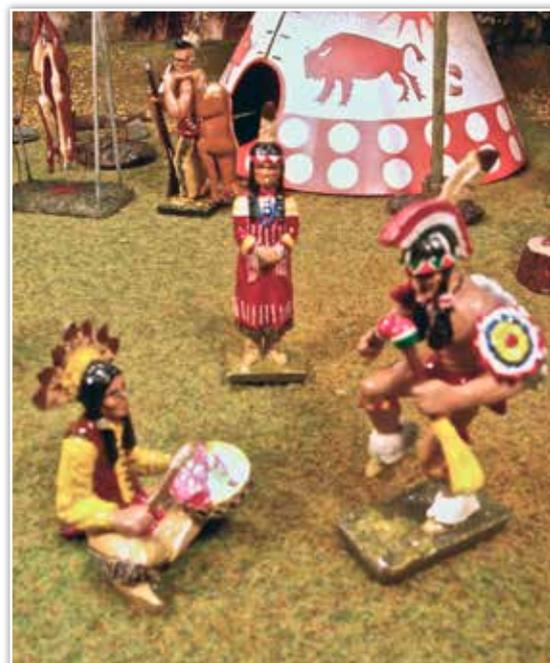
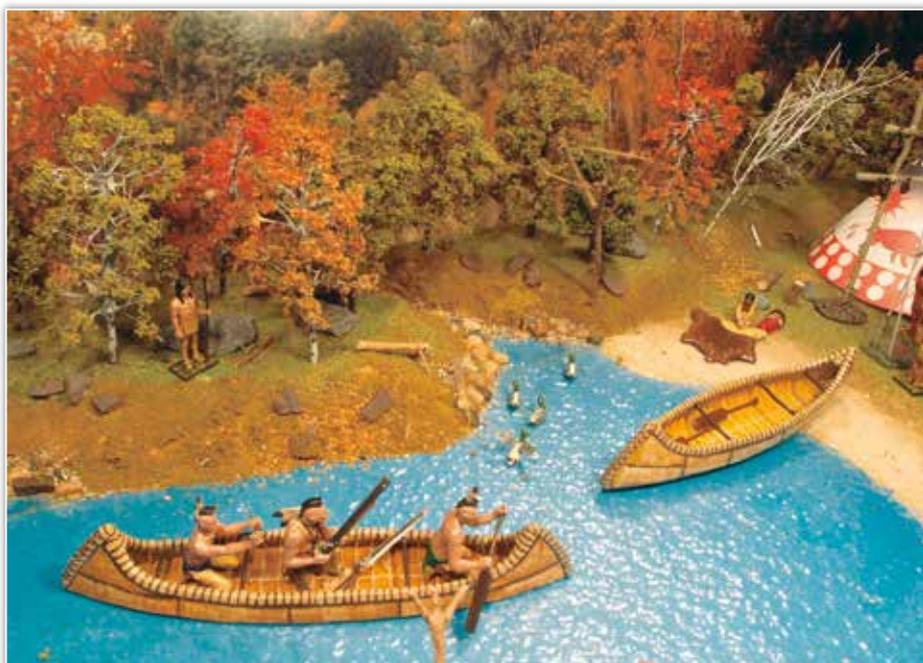
LEFT: Successful hunters return to their Woodland village.

BELOW: Tepees form a waterside village in the 2-by-4-foot Plains Indians diorama.

As for attire, full dress was worn for ceremonial occasions as well as into battle.

The feather bonnet did not necessarily denote a chief, as is often supposed. Instead, it meant that a man had earned and claimed the right and honor of





wearing it as a leading warrior. While any brave could wear feathers, the right to wear a war bonnet of eagle feathers was only earned by a few. A bonnet-wearer claimed to be one of his tribe's ablest defenders.

Warriors who chose to fight virtually naked feared neither death nor the need for physical protection. They were

LEFT: A chieftain standing in the shade of ceremonial scalping poles gives thanks to the Great Spirit.

BELOW: Chiefs gathered around a campfire smoke a peace pipe.

ABOVE: Plains Indians participate in a sacred Sun Dance ceremony.

ABOVE LEFT: Indians paddle a canoe back to their waterside village.

convinced that their charms, paint and prayers would fortify them against their enemies' weapons.

Like a stolen horse or a captured rifle, scalping provided an individual with a trophy of war. The hair was considered synonymous with an enemy's identity and an extension of his soul. Scalps were sometimes displayed on ceremonial poles.

THE DIORAMAS

The 54-mm figures in both of my dioramas and the teepees are the fine work of John B. Updyke, who trades under the name Minimen: History in Metal. I have known Jack for 25 years and have the greatest respect for his creative talents.

The stockade, longhouse, wigwam and ceremonial scalping poles are the work of the prolific John Jenkins, the artistic mind behind John Jenkins Designs. ■

sources

"American Woodland Indians," Michael Johnson, Osprey Publishing, 1990; and "The American Plains Indians," Jason Hook, Osprey Publishing, 1985."

about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.

