

Corn among the Indians of the Upper Missouri. By George F. Will and George E. Hyde. Reprint. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964. Pp. 323. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$1.60.)

Early white settlers in the Upper Missouri Valley made the usual mistake of ignoring what the Indians might have taught them and tried at first to grow the same crop plants that they had known farther south. Finally forced to turn to the hardy varieties of corn adapted to the climate by three centuries of primitive agriculture, they found a key to success. A pioneer in this use of local resources was Oscar H. Will, the father of one of the authors of this book and the founder of a well-known seed company serving the area. The book is a reprint of one which first appeared in 1917. The data are drawn from first-hand observations, from interviews with the last remnants of the Indian priesthood, and from accounts left by early travelers.

The Indians of the region were a mixture of various tribes, dominated by the Mandans. A strong group early in the eighteenth century, it was soon weakened by tribal wars and repeated scourges of smallpox. A transition from hunting toward agriculture was well under way when the first white explorers arrived. Towns had been built, and the cultivation of corn, beans, squashes, and sunflowers was well established. Hardy varieties of flint, flour, and sweet corn were grown in various colors. The mixed character of most varieties guaranteed that some of the plants were almost sure to survive under adverse conditions, and there was seldom a complete crop failure. It was usually even possible to maintain a small surplus of food from year to year.

Agricultural processes from planting to harvest were primitive. Metals were unknown, the tools were inefficient, and even the timing of activities was a problem in the absence of any sort of calendar. Most of the farming was done by the women, but it seems to have been regarded as a matter of interest and pride rather than a hardship. The white settlers brought better tools, new uses for corn, new markets, and the use of fertilizers, but they also brought new weeds, new animals as a crop hazard, new diseases, and many other problems. Interesting parallels are seen between the ways in which corn was grown and used in the Upper Missouri Valley and the corresponding processes in other parts of America with which the Mandans probably had little or no communication. The principal varieties grown in the area are described.

As usual among Indians, the corn plant was the central object of most religious thought. It was deeply involved in all the creation stories, and an elaborate religious pageantry revolved around it. Much of this mythology is discussed in detail. The documentation is excellent. Because of the lapse of half a century since its first publication, there are doubtless places where minor corrections might be made, but the book will stand as a landmark in the summarization of an important chapter in the history of the Indians. It is commendable that it is being made available to a new generation of readers.