

The First Americans

by Jane Werner Watson

Long years ago in all our wide land there were no cities. There were no railways or roads. There were no horses or wheels. But there were people living there.

The people lived in small groups scattered over the land. Some wandered across the wide grassy plains hunting for food. They carried their homes—called *tepees*—with them. The women and girls of these groups could set up the *tepees* quickly.

The men hunted wild buffalo. The people ate the meat of the buffalo. They wore its hide for clothing. They covered their *tepees* with buffalo hide. The men made tools from buffalo bones. No wonder these nations came to be known as the people of the buffalo!

Winters were hard on the plains. The people set up camps close to rivers. Some heaped earth around the bottom of their *tepees*. Others built lodges of earth to keep out the winter winds. Often there was not much food.

Boys were sent out alone at night to fetch water. Or they spent days and nights alone without food or water to test their bravery. Boys of the plains nations wanted to grow up to be good hunters and warriors.

They learned to make war whistles, war clubs, and bows and arrows. They also learned to shape bowls for pipes from stone and to make stems from wood. A boy started work as a moccasin-bearer or as a servant to a warrior. Then he became a water-carrier.

After that he scouted for herds of buffalo and kept an eye out for enemies. If he was a good scout he became a warrior. The best warrior became the chief.

For play, the boys wrestled or rolled small hoops with spears. They

spun tops and played stick ball. Their balls were made of deer or buffalo hair wrapped in strips of hide.

Girls played house with toy tepees or carried puppies on their backs instead of baby dolls. And they helped their mothers.

East of the Mississippi River most of the land was covered with great forests. Many animals lived in the forests—bear and woodland buffalo and deer. The men of the woodland nations hunted these animals for food for their families.

They also hunted smaller animals—rabbit, beaver, opossum, squirrel, and wild turkey. Boys of these nations learned to move silently through the forest so they could be good hunters. The men and boys also cleared trees and burned bushes.

In these clearings, the women and girls raised corn and beans and squash. They also gathered fruits and nuts and grass seeds and bulbs that were good to eat. In the fall, children gathered walnuts, hickory nuts, and acorns in the woods.

The woodland people liked to live together in villages. In summer many of them moved to summer homes near a lake or stream. They caught fish, turtles, and shellfish. When water birds flew south in the fall, the men caught some of them for food. Usually there was plenty to eat in the woods.

Homes were made of poles covered with bark or mud or grass mats to keep out the harsh weather. Some of them were round. They were called *wigwams* or *wickiups*. Other nations built long houses in which many families lived together.

Each family had its own cooking-fire and a space for a sleeping-shelf. In the cold winters people had more time to work indoors. They made fur robes and leggings and moccasins trimmed with porcupine quills. They made smoking pipes and tools, and decorations of shell beads.

The women wove baskets out of grass and made boxes and pots of birchbark. Canoes were often made of birchbark, too.

While the families worked, the old people told stories—about the Great Spirit who watched over them from the sky, about the Sun which gave them life, about the Thunderbird who roared from the clouds during storms and the animals which gave them food—and about the heroes of their people.

Some nations made mounds of earth in the shape of snakes, eagles, wildcats, and other animals for which they had special respect. Grass grew over these mounds and some can still be seen today.

Paths led through the woodlands. Sometimes people of other nations came along those paths to trade furs, grain, or hard stone for arrow points. Many of the nation used strings of shell beads called wampum to pay for things they bought.

Nations spoke different languages. But they could speak together in sign language. Some Native Americans in the woodlands had fur and wild rice to trade. They did not raise crops. They were hunters and fishermen.

In the snowy winters they walked over the thick, soft snow on snowshoes. They pulled their wares on toboggans. Suits of furry hides kept them warm.

North of the woods, on the icy treeless plains, or tundra, other hunters and fishermen lived. They went to sea in skin boats to hunt whale, seal, and fish. On land they traveled in sleds pulled by husky dogs.

There were no trees to give them poles or bark for their homes. So they made houses of snow or chunks of earth rounded at the top over rafters of curved whale bone.

In the long dark winters they sat on their sleeping-shelves inside their warm sod or snow houses. They burned whale blubber for light. Often they did not have much food.

The women and girls worked at softening hide for clothing by chewing it. The men and boys carved tools and decorations from stone, ivory, or bone. And the old people told stories.

South of the icy tundra, near the Pacific Ocean, deep forests grew. Nations in these forests fished and gathered shellfish from the sea. In the spring they went out in big canoes to hunt giant gray whales.

In the summer the woods gave them berries and fruit. This rich land could feed many families, so people lived in large villages. In the rainy, stormy winters they lived in the shelter of the forests. In spring and summer they paddled their canoes down the coast to summer homes.

They built sturdy wooden houses with posts carved from soft, tall cedar trees. Their canoes were made from cedar logs. And they carved tall poles into the shapes of the animals their families felt related to—deer, bear, turtle, beaver, or eagle.

Many village chiefs and others of these northwest coast nations became rich and powerful. They took pride in having gift-giving parties called *potlaches*. Many other nations also had ceremonies at which they gave gifts of blankets, shawls, baskets, and bead work. The gifts honored those who got them. They also showed how rich the giver was. Sometimes in one great party a rich man of the northwest coast gave away all he owned! Of course he would soon be invited to someone else's *potlach* and be given fine gifts in return.

Parties, festivals, music, and dancing were very important to these people of long ago. At the center of almost any village was an open space for dancing. All year there were sun dances, rain dances, corn dances, deer dances, harvest dances, and winter dances.

Every nation had its own special dances. There were special dances to honor young people, both boys and girls, as they grew up.

Often dancers wore costumes. They wore masks to honor a spirit or

god. And as a man danced, he seemed to become that spirit. To make music, people beat on painted drums, shook rattles made of dry gourds, and blew into whistles or pipes. Some of the best dances were those of the southwest nations who lived in bare, dry country where it was often very hot.

Some of the people of the southwest made simple shelters of thin posts or logs covered with brush or clay. But many nations built towns of high-piled houses made of stone or sun-dried brick.

Usually the town was built on top of a cliff or into the side of one, for protection. It was often a long climb to the town's small fields. There was little rain. Water for the corn, beans, and squash had to be brought from streams and pools by digging ditches.

Small boys and girls had long walks, too, taking the family flocks to pasture. These children of long ago had to learn to live with heat and cold, rain, snow, and hunger.

If sickness came, a medicine man was called. He brought herbs to cure the sickness or he called on good spirits to help. A sand painting could bring the spirits.

People of long ago lived close to the spirits of the earth and air and sea and sky. They believed that the land and waters belonged to everyone—to use and to enjoy—and to pass on to their children.

It was over five hundred years ago when sailing ships from Europe started to cross the ocean to this wide land. People of Europe saw the deep forests, the swift rivers, the grassy clearings. They liked what they saw and wanted it for themselves.

More and more of them came, bringing horses, wheel, guns, and many new ways of living. Since then life has never been the same for the nations of the first Americans.