

History of the Assiniboine People from the Oral Tradition

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[**Editor's note:** This article originally appeared in *Nakodabi--The Assiniboine People* 1.2 (October 1992): 4-5. The article is published here, with corrections, by permission of the author. *Nakodabi* was edited by Bob Saindon and published by the Friends of the Assiniboines Foundation. Beautifully edited and produced (**illustration**), the magazine was unfortunately short-lived. Wamakashka Doba Inazhi (Robert P. Four Star) teaches Assiniboine language and culture at Ft. Peck Community College and is Bridge Coordinator for the Community Services Department. Among his many talents he is a gifted native singer, leader of the Red Bottom Singers drum, which may be heard at the Red Bottom Celebration near Frazer the third weekend in June. He is a graduate of MSU-Northern.]

My people, Hude'shabina (the Red Bottom people), were one of forty bands of Assiniboines who roamed the northern Great Plains from York Factory on Hudson's Bay, Lake Nipigon, and Lake Superior in the East to the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and Montana in the West. Before the coming of the white man, members of our tribe were characterized by their method of cooking: fist-size stones were heated until they were red hot and then immersed into hides of water making the water boil for soups and stews.

The name *Assiniboine* was derived from the Chippewa words *u'sinⁱ* and *u'pwawn'*, which literally means "stone boilers." Others of our tribe are called Stoney, a name derived from the same source.

Our name for ourselves is *Nakona*, or *Nakonabi*, meaning "The Friendly People."/1/

Our traditional history tells of our life east of the Great Lakes and our slow migration west as the non-Indian peoples settled the eastern seaboard. While we lived in the region east of the Great Lakes, our oral history tells us, some of our people met with white men who had red hair all over their faces and rode in boats that had cloth and furs hanging above them. These white men took some of our more adventurous people back to their country over a great body of water. After a few years some of our people were brought back. They said they were treated extremely well by these white men and taught many of their ways of life. Other stories tell of some of our people living where it was always snow. It is also told that some of our far-ranging people found a place where it is always summer and how the summer was finally brought to where our people lived.

As the original Assiniboine tribe grew (before the arrival of the white man), groups would follow a leader and settle in various regions. Consequently they would be named according to what happened to them, or the region

they settled in, or a custom they practiced.

The story is told that in their travels the Red Bottom, or Red Root, people once camped in a place late in the evening. The next morning it was noticed that they had camped in an old dried swamp bed. The red plants had colored the bottom of their lodges. So the name "Red Bottom" was tacked to this group. But according to another story, the name came from the Red Bottom people's reputation among other Assiniboine bands as keepers of medicines, "Hude'shabina" 'red roots' in our language.

From where the Milk River empties into the Missouri all the way to North Dakota was the wintering grounds for the southern Assiniboines. Neighboring tribes called the people who came from this region River Paddlers because our people at one time used the canoe. But this is a misconception. We do not all belong to the River Paddler Band, although we are related. There is, however, a band known as "River Paddler" (i.e., Canoe Paddler--*Wadopana*), of which many descendants settled in the Wolf Point-Poplar area, as we call it today.

Our history tells that as a friendly people we befriended anyone who needed our help. As a warrior society our people never backed down from anyone--neighboring tribes attest to this. As a result of our friendliness, unscrupulous individuals took advantage and distributed among our people blankets and other gifts that were laden with the small pox germ.

Small pox epidemics came to our people three times. The first time approximately half of our people perished. Entire bands died. Still, the bravery and fearlessness of our people was evident as warriors dared other warriors to take the belongings of small pox victims and wear them as a way of showing they feared nothing. As a result, more and more of our people perished from these dreadful epidemics.

Many graves are visible today showing where the victims were buried. As a result of these ravages our people finally scattered to the far reaches of our country. Many settled in eastern British Columbia, northern Alberta, northern Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

The Assiniboines in Montana were placed on reservations. At Fort Belknap we were placed among the Atsina or Gros Ventres, whom we once befriended, but they turned against our people. We were also placed on the Fort Peck Reservation where the Sioux people settled after they had been driven out of the Dakotas.

The Assiniboines were the first tribe to befriend the white man, yet we received the least help from him and the worst treatment.

After the small pox epidemic decimated our young men and weakened our people, neighboring tribes took advantage of the situation, heaping further depredations upon our old people and women and children. Neighboring tribes took large portions of our country and claimed that it was theirs

from time immemorial. All the protesting of our people fell upon deaf ears. Consequently, written history makes it sound as though the Assiniboine people never existed.

Historians and ethnologists classify the Assiniboine people as Sioux because our language is classified as a Siouxian tongue. Our oral history tells otherwise. The popular story of the Assiniboines splitting from the Sioux in the early seventeenth century is untrue.

The traditional history of the *Nakodabi* does not begin when the white man began writing about us; our history goes back further.

A long time ago our people saw that the white man would come to our lands and run over it like ants on an ant pile. They saw that it would be futile to resist them. Consequently, many of our people educated their young in the white man's ways, and they assimilated into the white society and left, never to return.

Our history tells us that one day a Sioux medicine man met with White Dog, a River Paddler war chief. This Sioux medicine man was named Sitting Bull. Sitting Bull asked White Dog to help him in his fight to kill all white men. White Dog said: "No. If I kill a hundred white men nothing will happen, the white man will just send more, but if just one of my people gets killed while we're fighting these white men, my people will mourn this and I will be the cause. Long ago I made peace with the white man and that is the way it will stand."

Our history has never been properly documented, but it still lives in bits and pieces. There is a task for some ambitious person of Nakoda descent to piece together and document our history for future generations to view and judge.

This is the sad story of our people.

Notes

1. *Nakona*--sing.; *Nakonabi*--pl.; the author explains that these are the traditional forms of the names, whereas *Nakoda* and *Nakodabi* are modern forms exhibiting Sioux influence (ed.).[\[Back\]](#)

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