

Family Life Among the Lakota

from *Cry of the Thunderbird: The American Indian's Own Story*
by Charles Hamilton as recalled by Chief Standing Bear

The home was the center of Lakota society — the place where good social members were formed and the place whence flowed the strength of the tribe. Here it was that offspring learned duty to parents, to lodge, to band, to tribe, and to self.

Woman's work, generally, was to cook for the family, keep the tipi in order, and sew the clothing of the household members. The good wife never allowed one of the family to run low in clothing. When the men came home from the hunt there were skins to be cleaned and tanned. New tipis were made and old ones, for the sake of frugality, made into clothing for children.

The good wife always kept plenty of food stored and cooked so that it could be served at any moment. The thought was not only to meet the food requirements of the family, but to be able to serve anyone who came by the tipi, strangers or relatives, children who came in from other tipis, or any old people whom the children might bring in.

Many of the courtesies of Indian social life included the preparation and serving of food. The serving of a family meal was a quiet and orderly affair. Mother placed the food in front of her while we children all sat quietly about, neither commenting on the food nor asking for any favors. Father, if at home, sat in his accustomed place at the side of the tipi. He, too, remained perfectly quiet and respectful, accepting the food that mother offered to him without comment. The food was portioned to each one of us as mother saw fit, her judgement being unquestioned, for we never asked for more.

Grandmother, next to mother, was the most important person in the home. Her place, in fact, could be filled by no one else. Parental devotion was very strong and the old were objects of care and devotion to the last. They were never given cause to feel useless and unwanted, for there were duties performed only by the old and because it was rigidly kept custom for the young to treat their elders with respect.

Women and children were the objects of care among the Lakotas. A man who unduly scolded his wife or who beat her or his children was not considered a good man. A man who would inflict punishment upon the women and children was considered a weakling and a coward.

All the tasks of women — cooking, caring for children, tanning, and sewing — were considered dignified and worthwhile. No work was looked upon as menial.