

**Gilbert L. Wilson. *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden: Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987) 129 pp., \$7.95 paper.**

*Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden* was originally published in 1917 as *Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians: An Indian Interpretation*. First written as Wilson's doctoral dissertation, the book is particularly informative about the gardening techniques of Hidatsa women. The narrative voice is that of Maxidiwiac (Buffalo Bird Woman). Thus, the book fits within the genre of as-told-to autobiography; however, the narrative is more focused and detailed than Wilson's general autobiography of the same woman, *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story*, published in 1921.

Wilson was an anthropologist, a student of Clark Wissler, who had been influenced by Franz Boas' holistic approach to ethnography. While Wilson chose to study Hidatsa agriculture through extensively interviewing one gardener, the resulting account reveals information, not only about gardening tools, planting practices and the layout of gardens, but about the cultural life of the people as a whole and their relations with neighboring tribes, such as the Mandan and Sioux.

The narrative, written in plain diction, is at the same time very detailed and scholarly. *Buffalo Bird Woman* thoroughly explains every step in the process—from the preparation of the garden plot, through the harvesting and storing of food and the selection of seeds. Sunflowers, squash, corn and beans were the major crops; and each is dealt with separately.

The book contains many diagrams—maps of the gardens in relation to the bend in the Missouri River in North Dakota where they were located, planting layouts of individual garden plots, construction of the booth used for threshing, the cache pit, and many others. The photographs also help the reader to visualize the processes described in the text.

Wilson's is the kind of account that can help to dispel the stereotype of the plains Indian as hunter. Hidatsa corn and tobacco were valuable trade items; the narrative contains some information about trade with the Sioux.

While Wilson's book is rather tedious in its style and in one instance too quaint in the use of a Latin phrase, "Sed si femina in domo menstrua erat," revealing the writer's squeamishness at openly including *Buffalo Bird Women's* reference to menstruation, perhaps that is part of the value of the book as a historical document.

At once the book is reliable, informative and impressive. It shows the modern reader the life of a people who were careful to avoid exploiting the land or each other. Gardens were left fallow for two years after several years of cultivation so that they would again produce high yields. Though gardening was the work of women, rather than men, after men grew too old for hunting and going on war parties, they did help women

in gardening; and tobacco was almost exclusively the produce of old men of the tribe.

Wilson's book is valuable in providing information about Hidatsa agricultural practices in the late 19th century. It would be a particularly good text or research tool for related courses in history, anthropology, agriculture, literature or ecology.

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