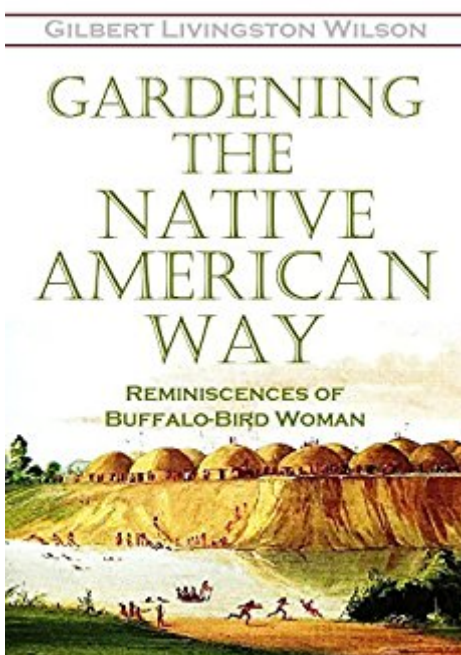


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Gardening The Native American Way: Reminiscences Of Buffalo-Bird Woman (1917)



Synopsis

In 1917 Gilbert Livingston Wilson (1869 – 1930) published an article on Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians which appeared in the journal *The University of Minnesota Studies in the Social Sciences*, Number 9. It is from this lengthy journal issue that Wilson's article has been excerpted and republished here for the convenience of the reader, who may not have time to purchase and read the entire journal issue. It is well known that maize, potatoes, pumpkins, squashes, beans, sweet potatoes, cotton, tobacco, and other familiar plants were cultivated by Indians centuries before Columbus. Early white settlers learned the value of the new food plants, but have left us meager accounts of the native methods of tillage; and the Indians, driven from the fields of their fathers, became roving hunters; or adopting iron tools, forgot their primitive implements and methods. The Hidatsas and Mandans, shut in their stockaded villages on the Missouri by the hostile Sioux, were not able to abandon their fields even if they would. Living quite out of the main lines of railroad traffic, they remained isolated and with culture almost unchanged until about 1885, when their village at Fort Berthold was broken up. It seemed probable that a carefully prepared account of Hidatsa agriculture might very nearly describe the agriculture practiced by our northern tribes in pre-Columbian days. With this in mind University of Minnesota student Gilbert Livingston Wilson set out in 1912 to Fort Berthold Reservation where the last remnants of the Hidatsas still survived to write a thesis on Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians. He spent summers of 1912, 1913, 1914, and 1915 obtaining materials for this study. He sought to find a representative agriculturist—presumably a woman of the Indian group to be studied, and let the informant interpret her agricultural experiences in her own way. He might thus expect to learn how much one Indian woman knew of agriculture; what she did as an agriculturist and what were her motives for doing; and what proportion of her thought and labor were given to her fields. Wilson chose for his study Buffalo-bird woman, a daughter of Small Ankle, a leader of the Hidatsas in the trying time of the tribe's removal to what is now Fort Berthold reservation. She was born on one of the villages at Knife River two years after the "smallpox year," or about 1839. To her patience and loyal interest is chiefly due whatever of value is in this thesis. In the sweltering heat of an August day she continued dictation for nine hours, lying down but never flagging in her account, when too weary to sit longer in a chair. Goodbird's testimony that his mother "knows more about old ways of raising corn and squashes than anyone else on this reservation," is not without probability.

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Book Information

File Size: 3995 KB

Print Length: 178 pages

Publication Date: June 4, 2017

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B071ZZK2X4

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #140,535 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1

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