

LIFE OF AN INDIAN BRAVE

From childhood on, an Indian boy dreamed of the day he would ride off to the hunt, or to war, with the men. Indian boys began to ride horses almost as soon as they learned to walk. By the time he was seven or eight he was an expert rider and cared for his family herds. Brothers and friends practiced marksmanship; and in their early teens they hunted buffalo calves together. As they grew older, the men would allow them to help break-in the wild ponies captured on the plains. In their late teens they were allowed to join war parties, and to do other chores for adult warriors. Friends would try to join the same military society so they could fight together, and if necessary, die together.

There were no elaborate rituals for initiating an Indian boy to manhood. He simply took his place when he showed he was ready. He would then begin courting a girl, although he probably would not marry until he owned some horses. Young men hoped to own many, as wealth was counted in terms of horses. The Sioux valued the horse greatly, speaking of them as 'sunka wakan' (mystery dogs) and considered them to be sacred. If he was wealthy, he might have more than one wife.

By the time he was forty, he no longer went on war parties, but joined the council of elders, whose advice was asked and respected by all.

Plains Indians did not often display their emotions. But, when a brave died, his women placed his body in the crotch of a tree, or on a scaffold. Relatives watched beside him, howling in grief. Often his horse was sacrificed, or its mane cropped short in mourning. This death of a brave warrior brought scenes of open grief, with close friends and relatives often gashing their bodies as a further sign of mourning.