Informant - Pierre La Cree

Pierre's father was a Soto, his mother was a Cree. Pierre’s father was born near where Winnipeg now is. His father was from Turtle Mt. and deserted his mother soon after he married her.

In marriage the man gives a horse or even several horses to the woman's folks. Long ago children were very obedient to their parents. If a girl was told by her parents to marry a certain man, she did even if she disliked him.

If the father of a girl was well fixed for horses, he would give the young man one, but this was not totally necessary. It was customary for the young couple to live with the girl's people first. Then they could go back to the father's place and live there.

That's why they were not backward in giving any number of
horses to the girl’s father for when the young man went to live there he could use them anyway.

Before reaching the age of marriage, young people would be given a "lecture" by their elders; boys by their fathers, girls by their mothers. The "lecturer" would whip out his knife and plant it in front of the boy saying, "If you don't like what I am saying you can stab me." That is why the old people were so much attached to each other in the old days. Bad feeling came in only with white man's liquor.

If a young man took a liking to a girl he would tell his father about it. If they could, they would give a present to the girl's folks and arrange the marriage.

Puberty fasting goes on even now. About the age of 12, a boy's father tells him to do it. A boy seldom fasts on his own accord. The boy goes out at the break of day and goes to the top of the highest hill. He gets there just as the sun is coming up. He stands all day facing the sun and turns with it until it sets. (Pierre did not know if the boy must look into the sun.) No shelter is built nor do they sit down. At night they go back to camp. Some repeat this the next day or even for three or four days.

Before going out the boy smokes a pipe and asks to be blessed. Some try it in the winter (Pierre was not sure of this among the Cree). In nearly all cases the spirit comes in a dream at night when they are back in camp. In rare cases, it comes to them as they are standing. If one does not get the vision, he can only try again. Men try it also.

On the first try there is no special way to dress. But if you already have had a vision you know how to dress by the first revelation. The vision in itself makes you want to try and try again because you want to get on further.

An odd woman would also try it. Even in the old days not everyone tried it; since treaty it has died down a lot. It depends on the ambition of the man. Pierre has never tried it. The vision did not come to all who tried and the grief of it is that some would pretend that they had seen it.

The tipi covers are representations of dream revelations. But not everybody who has had a vision has the right to paint his tipi -- he may not be far enough advanced. He must go to one who is further along and get the insignia from him.

These painted tipis even right now are held sacred. A menstruating woman may not stay in one. Nor can a man enter one smoking or bring fire out. Alec added that he heard an old man object when someone entered his tipi through the sides which had been drawn up for ventilation.

That is why you often see a tipi with a little tent by the side of it for menstruating women. Also if a man has a medicine bag
in a house a menstruating woman may not enter. The fire taboo does not hold for medicine bags. These bags are often hung outside the house for this very reason.

Then Pierre swung into a series of stories concerning the power of vision experience.

This one I saw myself. One day a priest, Father Hugonard, and myself were preparing a meal at Lebret. Some strange Indians rode up and Father went out to meet them. It was Sitting Bull and about ten of his men fleeing from the States. Sitting Bull said, "Father, I want to tell you something. I call you Father because the God you serve has proven himself more powerful than the God I worship." He took up a yellow pebble, of the color of fat. He showed it to Father Hugenot who recognized it as one of the hardest stones there is. Then Sitting Bull rubbed the stone between his palms and reduced it to powder. "My spirit promised me that I would crush the white man just as I crush this stone. But he has betrayed me."

Once my grandfather lost a child. He mourned for a long time and it seemed as though his horse was going to die also. He was alone in the bush one day when someone came up to him and said, "Do not mourn for your child any more. As for your horse, let it eat this plant and it will not die." My grandfather looked up and saw a horse going away. My grandfather fed the plant to the horse and it got well. This plant was taken to me by an old aunt of mine who came especially from Turtle Mt. to give it to me. I have it now.

Recently a halfbreed, Alex, came running up to me and said that his horse was very sick. It had eaten too much oats and was all bloated. I went over and gave it one feed of this medicine. It got well right away and Alex gave me $5. Easy money for me.

My uiste-a was a man gifted in vision experience. He was a nutimiwiyina from around Edmonton. When he was young he was a Catholic. As he grew up he discarded Catholicism and as soon as he did, the visions appeared to him. He dreamt about everything -- all that flies in the air and all that crawls on the earth. He dreamt that they all took pity on him.

All at once he was in a party that was fighting ayahtciyiuiuwuk. In the centre of their camp circle was the ukimau's tent which had a special pole to which a bit of fur was attached.

The Cree were getting the best of the fight when someone shouted, "If anyone can take the akuta-ghau (the fur piece) he will be ukimau." When the old men at the party heard this they all said, "Don't do it." In fact, some held on to their sons. But man after man went out to get it and was shot down. Finally my uiste-a thought that there were too many men getting killed. He went out, taking his time and walked up to the
enemy chief's tipi. Shots came all around him. He got so close that the enemy could touch him with their rifles. Now even the old women turned out with their axes and beat him in the head. He did not mind it and walked right back. There was no mark on him at all.

This akuta-ghau was found mostly among the ayahtciyiuiuwuk but a Cree who had captured one could display it. It was a longer pole than the ordinary tipi pole and was attached to the outside or stuck upright in the ground beside the tipi. Sometimes a Cree would get the right to display this by a vision. He need not be ukimau.

A second deed by this uiste-a whose name was nextawhikoue-p, "Beautiful Feathers," occurred at a fort near Edmonton. In the fall of the year the Plains people from the south and east and the Forest people from the north and west would assemble to trade and would live in two huge encampments.

In the Plains encampment there was an old Soto who had caused a lot of trouble through bad magic. When the Cree saw him they said, "Here's where we get trouble." Sure enough, before long a man came around announcing that the Soto was challenging the Cree medicine man to a contest in his tipi. They all had to go lest the old Soto work even more harm on them if they stayed away.

Beautiful Feathers waited until the last when the Soto's large tipi was full of men and he took a seat by the door. Beside the Soto there was a barrel of whiskey, a case of twist tobacco, ammunition, and a brand new gun. These were to go to the winner of the contest.

The Soto began by lighting the pipe and passing it on. But when the next man took it a snake head darted out of the stem. The man passed it on and so it passed without being smoked until it reached Lovely [sic -- Beautiful] Feathers. He calmly took the snake between his teeth, drew it out, threw it away, and smoked the pipe. Then the pipe was smoked around.

"Aha," said the old Soto. "Things are beginning to become interesting. Young man, you and I have got to play a little. You begin, young man." But Beautiful Feathers said, "No, old man, you are the challenger, you begin."

Then the Soto put his thumb in the rifle barrel, ripped it open, and handed it to Beautiful Feathers. Beautiful Feathers simply grasped the barrel and pulled it together again.

"Aha," said the Soto, "things are interesting." He took an eagle feather, smoothed it, and said, "Young man, watch out." He hurled the feather at Beautiful Feathers who caught it. Beautiful Feathers also smoothed the feather and said, "Old man, watch out." He hurled the feather and it pierced the old Soto until only the tip was showing.

The old Soto fell over. But he had provided four drummers and
singers for just such an emergency. One singer began and the Soto stopped bleeding. The second joined in and the Soto began to breathe. The third and fourth fixed him up. The Soto then rolled the whiskey, the tobacco, the shot, and the gun, outside of his tipi and said, "Young man, you win." When the Soto got back to his own place, he died.

I could tell you other feats of my uiste-a for two days and two nights.

There are two kinds of doctoring men. Maskixkiwhiyinu, "Medicine Man", cures by the use of herbs, roots, etc. Mamaxtawiyinu, "Magic Man", "Wonderful Man", uses any means.

(No entry in handwritten fieldnotebook related to this material).

After I had finished with Pierre, I asked for some woman informant with whom I could check up the kinship system. There was no woman in all of Red Dog's village that day for all were out digging seneca root which they sell in town.

When first I talked with Jack, Red Dog, and pimatat, the latter soon asked me how much I was going to pay them. I replied that it was my custom to give gifts to informants, not money. When I was in Day Walker's tipi some days later, pimatat got up, said that he was going to town and wanted money. I gave the same talk about gifts. He countered with a long story of how Cadjoe had cheated him out of seven museum pieces, saying that he was only borrowing them. "Now," said pimatat, "we want our things back." At any rate, I bought some shirts, socks, and gloves to give to all my informants at File Hills.

As I went to deliver them to Red Dog and Jack Fisher, they both were eating in a tent, not in their tipis, which may or may not be an additional resultant of the tipi painting.

When I went over to Feather's place, there were twelve to twenty people there, assembled for a sing of some kind. I wanted to stay but was deterred by pimatat's ugly mug being present. Pimatat didn't seem to like my gift of a shirt very much.

Mr. Dodds told of a ceremony he had witnessed. The furniture was all moved out of a house, and the walls were lined with people kneeling. They would sing in a rising tone, lifting their arms at the same time. Their arms and voices would reach a high point at the same time. Then one would pray for the old man in whose house the sing was taking place and for whose cure they were praying.

The File Hills Agency all in all may well be worth returning to, not so much for the old lore, as for the present day conditions. Remember it was Graham's pet plan. He engineered the colony there. It is where I have seen most tipis. The old rites are still going on as evidenced by the Round Dance on the
night I came and the sing at Feather's place. Remember too, the bluff old farmer Mr. Dodds.

Mr. Melvin, who was farm instructor at File Hills for 5 years says, "Pierre La Cree is the best horseman on the North American continent. His control over horses and his
horsemanship is uncanny. When his horses were branded, he did not tie them nor check them in any way. He just stood beside them and they did not flinch or move."

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