

The Story of Corn Silk: An Ancient Mandan Legend

Collected by Orin G. Libby



The stories that make up our oral traditions convey important cultural beliefs that govern the proper behavior of our people, explain the origins of those beliefs, and tell our history. Often, a story was also a mnemonic device outlining the proper performance of a ceremony and was associated with a ceremonial bundle, a collection of objects that were significant to the story and used in the performance of the ceremony. These ceremonies—and the deeper meaning of the stories—belonged to the keeper of a bundle. By carrying out the ceremonies, we honored the spirit of the bundle and gained the favor of the presiding spirit, maintaining a close bond with the supernatural forces that ruled our lives. In this way, our people were able to perform what would be called miracles; breaking a drought by making it rain, calling the buffalo near the village or healing the wounded or sick.¹

-Calvin Grinnell, Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation

The story of Corn Silk, only the very first portion of which is told here, fulfilled many of the roles described above. The full tale, published by the State Historical Society in 1910, goes on to tell the story of Corn Silk's son, Down Looking Around Eagle, and how he learned the ceremonies associated with this story and bundle. The ceremonial significance of this story remains the property of the bundle holder, but other information about Mandan life can be learned—for instance, when Corn Silk meets the black mice, we can learn the proper way to enter another's earthlodge home.

There was once a chief of a village who had seven sons and one daughter called Corn Silk. **Corn Silk** was very beautiful and had many suitors among the young men of her father's village, but she refused them all. Six of her brothers scolded her for this but she paid no attention to them. Her seventh brother never took part in this faultfinding, but always sat by the fire looking down. So it went on, suitor after suitor left their choicest gifts in front of her father's lodge but she never paid any attention to them, until at last no one in the village cared to sue for her hand, but sought other maidens of the village who would listen to their wooing.

At last there came to the village the son of a famous chief living far southward and he brought as his gift

a beautiful spotted pony, a pinto, such a horse as had never before been seen in that part of the country. He tied the beautiful pony in front of the tipi of Corn Silk's father and left it there. All of Corn Silk's brothers expected her to accept this priceless gift and thereby become the wife of the young man who had come so far to win her. But when Corn Silk paid no more attention to the gift of this new suitor than she had to the others, the brothers became very angry.

Even the seventh brother, who had kept silence up to this time, now broke into bitter words of complaint for he desired the beautiful pony for himself, and if Corn Silk married its owner, it would come into the possession of the family. "Why do you not marry," he said to his sister, "are you any better than the other young women of our village? What is it you are waiting for; do you want to marry Spotted Eagle? Now this was the name of a very terrible magician who lived in the land where the sun rose. He was called **Spotted Eagle** or Eagle-Spotted-With-Bare-Places-As-Though-in-Molting-Time. No one who visited him ever came back, so that this question asked of Corn Silk by her brother meant: Do you wish to wed Death?

She was very angry at her brothers but she made no answer to anything they said, for she was deter-

mined to show them that she was not afraid of their threats. Very early the next morning she made ready for her departure from her father's village before anyone was stirring. She fastened her sewing bag to her belt, with its bone awl, sinews for thread and the beads used for ornament. She also took a small bag of corn pemmican, made from pounded parched corn mixed with buffalo fat. She then started for the village of Spotted Eagle, toward the land of the rising sun, just as the first light of early morning was showing in the east.

She knew that her journey was very long and she made use of her magic arts to shorten it. After she had traveled to a considerable distance beyond her village, she climbed a low hill and looked eastward. As far as her eyes could see stood another hill and she said to it, "Come up close," and immediately it came up so near to her that she could step over to it. Standing on this new hill she said again to the farthest hill in sight, "Come up close," and it did so. In this way she continually shortened her



Figure 1. Corn Silk started for the village of Spotted Eagle just as the first light of early morning was showing. Detail from pictograph of the Mandan Indian village of Mih-tutta-hang-kush, meaning first village or east village, located near the Fort Clark trading post on the Missouri River. Mandans built the village in 1822 and lived there until 1837, when about 90 percent of the village's population died in a smallpox epidemic. This picture of the village, based on Mandan oral history, was made by I-ki-ha-wa-he, or Sitting Rabbit, a Mandan Indian, in about 1900. (SHSND 800)

journey, so that at the end of the day she had come a very long distance on her way.

As it grew dark she began to think of where she could sleep, and then she saw a small tepee a short distance away. She stood listening and then began to hear voices inside and knew she had come to the home of the black mice. She heard them complaining to each other of the hard work they had to get food enough for the winter. "My toe-nails are sore from digging the wild potatoes of the woods," she heard one say. "My teeth are sore from biting and gnawing the shells and husks off from the seeds I am gathering for my winter store," said another. Presently she heard one of them tell a young mouse to go out for more wood for the fire. When the mouse saw Corn Silk, it ran quickly back inside crying, "There is an Indian outside."

At this all the mice in the tepee quickly scrambled into the darkest corners of the tepee, and Corn Silk heard them squeaking and scurrying about to find a safe place to hide. After a time, while Corn Silk still waited quietly outside, some of the older mice came back to the fire and one of them invited her inside. However, as soon as they saw her enter, they again took fright and ran into the darkest corner they could find. Corn Silk seated herself by the fire, for she was both tired and cold, and presently took out her bag of corn pemmican and began to eat a little for her supper.

As the odor of the good food filled the small tepee, the mice smelled it and began to creep softly toward the fire where Corn Silk sat eating her supper. At last they sat all about her, the youngest on the outside, still trembling with fear of their strange visitor. When she had finished her supper, some of the mice asked her what it was she ate which smelled so good to them. When she said it was her food, they all asked for a little taste, and she gave them all a tiny bit. They were very much pleased with the new food and praised it highly. Then they asked her for a little of her bead necklace, and she gave them a piece of it. They then told her that they knew where she was going and were very sorry for her, because she had been good to them and had granted them all they had asked.

They told her that on the following day she would come to the second of the underground people and then to the third. On the fourth evening she would reach the home of the rulers of all the underground people, and they would tell her what to do to escape death in the village of Spotted Eagle. They promised to send word on ahead to the next ones of their tribe, and to obey all orders from their rulers, the people of the fourth tepee and the greatest of all, the badger people.

So the next day Corn Silk set out again on her journey toward the land of the rising sun. She traveled the same way she had the day before, standing on the first hill she reached and telling the most distant hill to come up close, and then repeating this all day long. At night she was very weary as she had come a long way and everything looked strange, for she had never been so far from home.

She looked everywhere for the tepee of the field mice who lived in the deep woods, for they were the next ones she was to meet. When she found their tepee, she waited outside until she was seen and invited inside. These mice were not so much frightened at her appearance, for the black mice had sent them word that she would reach their tepee that night.

She sat by their fire as before and ate some of her food. Soon these mice, also, begged for a little, and she gave each of them some. They asked for a bit of her bead necklace, and she gave them a piece as she had done at the first tepee. The mice were very grateful to Corn Silk for what seemed to them very precious gifts, and promised her to be ready to help whenever they were called upon to do so.

The third day Corn Silk traveled as she had the days before, and saw many strange sights in the new land she passed through so rapidly. She spent the night with the pocket gopher people, sharing her corn pemmican with them and giving them also a piece of her bead necklace. They told her that the next night she would reach the tepee of the badgers, and the oldest one of this tribe would tell them all how to help her when she needed it in the village of Spotted Eagle.



Figure 2. Corn Silk fastened her sewing bag to her belt, with its bone awl. Corn Silk would have taken a sewing bag and awl case like these Hidatsa pieces on her journey. (SHSND 12788 and 1401)

The fourth night she found the tepee of the badger people, and their queen explained to Corn Silk what she must do to escape death in the village of Spotted Eagle. Corn Silk shared the last of her corn pemmican with the badger people and gave them the last bit of her bead necklace. The next morning she left the tepee of the badger people, much cheered by their promises of help and by the advice which the old queen had given her.

The village of Spotted Eagle was not far away and soon she was walking among the tepees, looking for the one belonging to the chief. The people of the village knew she was a stranger among them and that she was coming to marry Spotted Eagle. “What a pity it is,” Corn Silk heard them say to each other, “that so beautiful a maiden must be killed like all the others who have come here from far away.”

But Corn Silk gave no sign that she knew what they said, but walked on till she came to the tent of the chief, who met her at the door, exclaiming, “Mother, see, here is my beautiful wife.” So Corn Silk entered his tepee and became his wife, but his mother loved her very dearly and saved her from her son not once but many times when he wished to kill her, as he had all the others who had come to his village, both men and women.

As soon as Corn Silk had come to live with Spotted Eagle, she set about following the directions given her by the queen of the badger people. She took her sewing bag and made a pair of moccasins for herself, with long, heavy strings that trailed behind her when she tried them on. Her husband laughed at the clumsy work and taunted her with not being a skillful woman, but she only replied that this style of moccasins was the kind used in her tribe. She made, also, wristlets of deer skin with long strings. The queen of the badgers had told her that her husband would try to kill her on the day they went to the lake to bathe.

The next morning Spotted Eagle said to her, "Wife, let us go to the lake to bathe." Then she did as she had been warned to do: she put on her moccasins, but let the strings trail behind her, she put on her wristlets of deerskin, with their long dangling strings, and her hair hung free on her shoulders. When her husband asked why she made ready in so strange a fashion, she replied, "It is the custom of my people."

The lake where they were to bathe was some distance from the village, and in some places the bank was high above the water. As they came near

such a bank Spotted Eagle told his wife to stand by the edge of the steep bank on a large buffalo skull there, while he went higher up to a pile of stones. "I will come to you four times," he said, "and then we will go to the lake to bathe." He turned to go up the bank while Corn Silk, remembering the words of the old badger queen, did not stand upon the buffalo skull, but instead she kicked it over the bank into the lake, saying, "I will not use this for it is as though I were dead."

As the skull fell down toward the water, she saw a huge fish spring out of the lake and crush the skull in his terrible jaws as though it were an eggshell, while many others like him snapped at the skull and tried to seize it themselves. Then Corn Silk saw, where the skull had laid, a hole in the ground and the badger queen called to her to lie down. She was frightened and lay down quickly, hoping that the underground people would not forget to help her in the danger that was close upon her.

Suddenly the earth upon which she lay sank gently down, leaving her half buried, while on every side she saw the underground people swarming out to help her. Under the direction of the badger queen they had dug a long tunnel to the place where Corn Silk had lain down, and had dug the earth away from underneath her until she was sunk down on a level with the prairie. Then each of them seized some part of her hair or clothing or one of the strings in their sharp teeth and pinned her fast to the ground, while keeping out of sight under the ground themselves. Spotted Eagle, meanwhile, had changed himself into a black eagle and came swooping down with a strong wind bearing him along, intending to sweep Corn Silk into the lake.

But the underground people held her fast and the great eagle soared away out over the lake, and the huge fishes leaped up with their great jaws wide open, but Spotted Eagle called out to them, "I am your son, don't you know me?" So they sank back into the water and did not leap up again to seize him.

Spotted Eagle flew back slowly over Corn Silk, and stopped again at the pile of stones further up



Figure 3. Spotted Eagle was a very terrible magician who lived in the land where the sun rose. This eagle was drawn by Red Fish, a Dakota Indian, in the early 1900s. (SAHRL 20602)

the bank. Then presently he came rushing down at her, beating up the dust with his great wings, while in the middle of the whirling cloud she saw the curving beak and clutching talons of Spotted Eagle. He swept over her and as before she did not stir out of her place. This time, when he flew back, he came more slowly, turning his head from side to side, trying to see why he had failed to hurl her into the lake. The third time he swooped down, Corn Silk felt his great wings brush her face. As he flew back over her once more, she saw at his throat something white gleaming there, and she remembered then that the old badger queen had told her to look for the white shell Spotted Eagle always wore, and that if she could once snatch it from his neck and hold it fast, she would no longer need to fear his charms or his power to hurt her. But it was too late this time for the great bird was far beyond her reach.

The fourth time Spotted Eagle came down the hill, he darted upon her with all the fury of a tornado, and the air was black as night and the horrible roar filled her with terror. Yet, though she felt the claws of the monstrous bird clutching at her dress and hair, Corn Silk was saved from death by the efforts of her faithful friends, the underground people, who clung so tightly to her that neither the fierce storm nor the clutching talons of Spotted Eagle could tear her loose from their hold. So for the fifth time Spotted Eagle flew back again over her, closer than before. He was very anxious to know how his wife had been saved from death. But this time Corn Silk was ready and as he came gliding over her she suddenly snatched at the white shell that gleamed at his black throat, the cord broke and she held the magic shell in her hand.

In an instant the eagle became again a man, and as Corn Silk rose from the ground and the underground people hurried down out of sight, Spotted Eagle begged her to give him back the magic shell, for he told her it was his heart. But she remembered the warnings of the old badger queen, and hid it away in the folds of her dress, never letting it out of her reach for a single moment. When they went back to the village together, all the people



Figure 4. Corn Silk and Spotted Eagle lived many years very happily. An unknown Dakota artist drew this image of a courting, possibly eloping, couple in the 1880s or 1890s. The young warrior is holding the young woman's moccasins so she cannot run away; Europeans also long used similar mock-abduction rituals. (SAHRL 104831)

were surprised to see Corn Silk and said to each other, "She must have had very strong medicine indeed to have beaten our chief."

So they lived many years very happily and after a time a son was born to them. When the boy was about seven years old, his father said to his mother, "Come, let us go back to your father's village and visit your family; I will go as an eagle for it is a very long way, but how will you go and our little boy?" But Corn Silk said it would not be hard for her either and while Spotted Eagle was changing his shape, she called her boy and they went together to the lake. Soon, instead of two people one would have seen two swans, one large and one small, swimming about in the lake. Then they both flew up in the air to where the eagle was waiting for them, and together, at nightfall, they began their flight westward. So rapidly did they fly that in a single night they had reached the village of Corn Silk.

They found matters in a very bad way at her father's village, for the corn had failed for lack of rain and

the buffaloes had not come as usual, so that the village was very near to starvation. But Spotted Eagle made medicine for the rain and soon everything was changed: rain fell, the corn began to grow, and the grass began to get green, and plenty of buffaloes soon came near the village. Presently everyone was feasting and had entirely forgotten the famine they had just passed through.

They lived at this village several years, but one day Spotted Eagle and Corn Silk were in the lake bathing while their son played along the edge of the water. After a time the boy came to where his mother's clothes were lying and began to pull them about. He saw something white there among her clothes, and took it in his hand to look at it. Then he held it up and called out, "What is this, mother?" Corn Silk knew it at once as the shell she had snatched from the neck of her husband, and by keeping it hidden she had been able to prevent her husband from harming her. At the same instant Spotted Eagle saw and recognized the shell, too.

Eagerly he leaped forward and began to hasten at his utmost speed for the shore, where his son stood holding the magic shell. Neither of them could go very fast because of the deep water in which they were standing, but they ploughed through the water, Spotted Eagle ahead, and Corn Silk only one step behind him. At last he reached the shore, snatched the shell from his son's hand and turned himself instantly into a great eagle that soared away up into the sky. Corn Silk came up too late to save the shell, and she scolded her son severely for having been the means of losing his father forever.

But Spotted Eagle called down to her from where he was circling overhead, "My son shall be called Ma-ta-we-ke-ta-da (The-Down-Looking-Around-Eagle) and he shall be like me." Then he flew away and they never saw him again.

O.G. Libby was listed as the author of this article in 1910. Libby also published a shorter version of the story of Corn Silk in 1908. In that version Joseph Packineau, a mixed-blood resident of Elbowoods who often acted as Libby's interpreter, is listed as the source. An examination of Libby's fieldnotes reveals that the story of Corn Silk was told to him by a number of residents of the Fort Berthold reservation. It appears that Libby combined these different versions into the story published by the Society in 1910.

Most of the images used to illustrate this article were created by Mandan, Hidatsa, and Dakota people in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Although not originally created to illustrate this story, they have been adapted to that purpose.

About the Editor

Orin G. Libby (1864-1952), the "Father of North Dakota History," received the Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin in 1895. In 1902 he joined the faculty of the University of North Dakota, where he taught until his retirement in 1945. He also served as secretary of the State Historical Society of North Dakota and initiated and was editor of the *Collections* and *North Dakota Quarterly*, predecessors to *North Dakota History*. Libby worked tirelessly to preserve the early history of North Dakota, particularly of the American Indian people who had long called the region home. One of his best-known works, originally published in the *Collections* in 1920, was republished in 1998 as *The Arikara Narrative of Custer's Campaign and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*. Like much of Libby's work, it remains essential to the study of the history of the northern plains.

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1. Calvin Grinnell, Resource Specialist, Cultural Preservation Office
Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation, New Town, North Dakota