

## FACTSHEET - Early Osage Farming & Hunting

### Farming

After the New Year ceremony [in April], families began **clearing and planting their fields** with corn, beans and squash along the creeks and rivers near their villages. Every family had its own field or fields, generally only a few acres in size. Men did most of the clearing, while planting the crops was done by women.



The planting of each field began with a **short ritual**. Beginning at sunrise, the woman prepared seven small mounds, called the **Mysterious Hills**. She used her digging stick to make a hole in the center of the first mound, in which she placed a single grain of corn that she tamped in with her foot. In the second mound she placed two grains of corn, continuing to increase the number of grains of corn until she placed seven grains in the seventh mound.

This ceremonial planting of the seven mounds constituted a **prayer for three things**: The maturity of the corn, the success of the hunters in finding game, and the success of the warriors in protecting the village. After planting these mounds, the woman continued her planting without any additional ritual.

The fields were **weeded** only until the sprouts were large enough not to be choked out by weeds.

As soon as the fields had been planted and the crops started to grow, preparations began for the **summer buffalo hunt** in the western plains. Winter food supplies would have begun to run short, and game was always scarce near the villages...

By the middle of August, the families returned from the hunt, back to their home villages and preparations began of the **harvest of the crops**.

Harvest commenced with the **Green Corn Ceremony**. This one-day ceremony was performed before any of the fresh corn was eaten and concluded with a feast of specially prepared green corn...

The **harvesting and preparation of the crops for storage** was time-consuming. Corn had to be picked, shelled, and dried. Beans were collected and dried. Squash and pumpkins were cut into long strips, braided and dried.

**Wild food plants** such as chinquapins (water-lily roots), prairie potatoes, and persimmons were dug or gathered in large quantities and cooked or dried and prepared for storage. The work of harvesting, preparing and storing food for winter lasted through the month of September.

### BUFFALO HUNTS

#### Summer Hunt

Families made elaborate **preparations for the hunt**. All mats, bark, and hides were removed from the lodges, leaving only the pole frameworks standings. The lodge coverings were piled at one end of



the village, covered, and tied down with poles. Other items were tied into bundles and placed in trees.

Some men left their guns and other valued personal belongings cached in hidden pits near the village. Buffalo were hunted only with **bows and arrows**.

Those not able to travel easily (elderly, women with small children) would **stay behind** on hunts, possibly moving to smaller hidden camps, as they were vulnerable with all able-bodied men away.

The village hunting party traveled **west toward the buffalo plains** along one of several **well-defined trails**. Moving in two parallel columns, the party was led by one of the two chiefs, while their soldiers scouted ahead, looking for signs of enemy raiders who might steal horses or attack straggling families.

Every ten or twelve miles along these trails, there were regularly used and named **campsites**, each of which had pole frames standing left from earlier trips. At night the hunting party would cover these frameworks with five or more buffalo hides, leaving them open at either end. These were simple long frameworks, about fifteen feet long, seven feet wide, and four and one-half feet high...

In the early 1800s, it took a hunting party about two weeks to reach the Arkansas River. Before entering the **grasslands west of the Arkansas**, every family cut poles to be carried on their horses and used later for their tent frames. Beyond this point there were no regular hunting trails or campsites. West of the Arkansas, there were just vast grasslands, scattered herds of buffalo, and the hunting camps of other tribes, many of whom were hostile to the Osages.

After the **scouts located the herds**, the party moved to a nearby sheltered valley and established a camp. Everyone stayed quiet and close to camp for fear of disturbing the herds before the hunt.

Osage **hunting strategies** were quite different from those of the Plains tribes. There was no attempt to surround or control the movement of the herds. Starting in the morning and led by the soldiers, the hunters moved as close as possible to the herd. Only when the soldiers gave the signal could the hunters charge into the herd...

The hunt itself and securing of meat and tallow took about two weeks of work. After that, the party remained in the hunting camp on the plains, with individuals and families free to pursue other interests. They might **visit other hunting camps of Osages or friendly tribes** such as the Kansa.

### **Fall Hunt**

Preparations for the **fall hunt** began around the end of September. These hunts were primarily for skins, not food. Families had already prepared most of their winter food for storage and cached it in pits. The fall hunting party would leave their villages in early October, followed the same trails westward, and returned to the village around the first of December.