Adaptation Type: Village Farmers/Plains Villagers
Cultural Complex: Washita River phase
Time Range: A.D. 1250 - AD. 1450

Geographical Distribution: “Village Farmers” is a term used to describe a particular stage of development across most of North America in late prehistoric times. “Plains Villagers” refers to the adaptation of this village farming way of life to a Plains environment. Plains Village cultures occurred in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, north-central Texas and the Texas panhandle, eastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado.

A number of Plains Village societies were located in western and central Oklahoma. Sites of the Washita River phase cultural complex are found along the Washita River and its principal tributaries from roughly Wynnewood in Garvin County to western Custer County. The Washita River phase is thought to represent one of the groups ancestral to the historic Wichita living in Oklahoma, Kansas and northern Texas in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Descendants of these historic Wichita bands are known today as the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes with tribal headquarters in western Oklahoma.

Environment: Environmental conditions during the time of the Washita River phase were essentially those of today. However, based on some paleoenvironmental studies, it appears that from perhaps AD 1200 to AD 1500, areas of western and south-central Oklahoma experienced periods of climatic instability. This included long periods of drought as well as short periods when torrential downpours occurred. It is possible that this instability eventually led to abandonment of the region by village farming societies.

Demography: It was during Plains Village times that prehistoric populations were at their highest levels. Villages of 80 to 100 people were spread along the river and major streams approximately every 1-1/2 to 2 miles. It is roughly estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 people lived in this area during the Washita River phase.

Washita River phase people usually lived into their late 30’s or early 40’s with some individuals living into their 50’s and 60’s. Males normally lived longer than females. This is because many women died in their late teens and early 20’s as a result of complications from childbirth. Other than accidents, the most frequent cause of death was probably disease.

Technology: People of the Washita River phase had an expansive and diverse technology. Using stone, bone, wood, clay and other naturally occurring materials, they made a variety of tools and ornaments. Hunting and processing of game animals was centered on the use of a chipped stone technology. Bison, deer, and other animals were hunted with the bow and arrow. The people used a number of different arrowpoint styles. Most were triangular in shape, usually an inch to an inch and a half in length. Different styles were created by notching the sides (Washita points), the corners (Scallorns), the side and base (Harrells), or by leaving the form unnotched (Fresnos). In addition to
Ground stone items included manos, metates, sandstone abraders, hammerstones, small hematite celts, and occasionally elbow pipes and stone balls. There were also a wide array of tools and ornaments made from bone and shell. These include bison scapula (shoulder bones), innominate (pelvic bones) and horn core hoes, bison tibia (leg bone) digging tips, bison metacarpal (knuckle) fleshers, and bison rib rasps and counters. Deer mandibles were used as sickles for cutting grasses while other deer bones were used as needles, pins and awls. Deer bones were also frequently used for round or square gaming pieces. Box turtle shells were used as rattles and other bones were used for a variety of items ranging from awls and needles to beads and gorgets (decorative breastplate). Mussel shell was used for spoons, scrapers, and ornaments such as beads, gorgets and pendants.

Clay obtained from stream deposits was used principally for making pottery vessels. Washita River phase pottery was probably made by women in the village. Pottery consisted of large to medium-sized jars and occasionally a bowl-like form. Apparently, replicas of water bottles and bowls made by Caddoan peoples to the east were also manufactured at some villages. In general though, the pottery was utilitarian, being used to store and prepare foods. In addition to pottery vessels, some other pieces were made of clay including small, unfired figurines. These figurines were crudely made and their precise function is unknown although suggestions for their use have ranged from children's toys to fertility models. Spindle whorl-like items are also found at many villages and are believed to have been used like modern spindles in weaving. Raw clay was also used to prepare fireplaces inside Washita River phase houses.

Settlement: As noted previously, people of the Washita River phase lived in villages of approximately 80 to 100 people. Most villages contained between 10 and 20 houses and occupied an area averaging about five acres. These villages were situated on fertile terraces of the Washita River and its major tributary streams. Their placement on these terraces was to take advantage of the fertile soils for farming and to avoid all but the most severe floods. With villages spread about every mile to mile and a half along the river, there was probably a community-like organization between villages much like what we see in rural areas today.

Washita River phase houses were made of posts set upright in the round and then plastered with mud. Either two or four center posts were used to hold up a roof of thatch or straw. Houses were rectangular and roughly 21 feet long by 15 feet wide. There was usually a central fireplace with benches or pallets around the wall. The residence normally
contained one or more storage pits where food and other surplus goods might be stored. When the houses were abandoned, they usually were filled with trash. The typical house accommodated 8-10 people. This is approximately the size of any nuclear families in traditional societies.

Sites of the Washita River phase represent some of our most frequently encountered remains in western and south-central Oklahoma. More than 200 sites of this culture have been found over a ten-county area of Oklahoma.

Subsistence: The diet of Washita River phase people was varied but provided a stable mix of nutrition. Farming produced three basic staples: corn, beans, and squash or gourd. The annual village needs for corn could be supplied within a 12-13 acre plot. Beans and gourd were probably grown within the same garden area, basically as supplements to the corn crop. Early corn was possibly eaten green or fresh (roasted); however, the bulk of it probably was allowed to dry. It was then picked, shelled, and either stored or ground into meal and stored. There is no evidence to indicate that other cultigens were stored. In addition to these domesticates, a variety of wild edible plants were collected. These included sunflower, pigweed, goosefoot, marsh elder, wild barley, sand plum, and numerous other plants. Besides plants harvested for food, others were collected for medicinal and ceremonial purposes. Here, spurge, morning glory and creeping cucumber can be identified. Women, children, and elderly males probably did most of the gardening activities although men helped in initially clearing the fields. Women and children also did most of the wild plant collecting. However, in the case of medicinal and ceremonial plants, it probably was the village shaman who harvested these items.

Although Washita River phase people depended on corn as a staple in their diet, they also relied heavily on animals to provide protein. Bison was hunted extensively as were deer, elk, and antelope. In addition, smaller game such as cottontail, jackrabbit, fox squirrel, beaver, and raccoon were taken. There is also abundant evidence that smaller animals such as prairie dog, gopher, rats and mice were killed, although it is not known whether these were pests or were used as food. Because of their settlement’s location near water, the people also made use of the river’s resources. Most sites contain substantial quantities of fish remains (freshwater drum, catfish, perch, etc.), turtle, and mussels. Birds were also exploited. The most frequently hunted bird was wild turkey while smaller numbers of goose and duck were killed. We also see extensive use of box turtle. This parallels historic hunting of box turtles by the Caddo after they moved to western Oklahoma. Most hunting activities were the domain of males. The major means by which boys received their adult names and status was through their hunting prowess.

In general, the diet of the Washita River phase was well-balanced and there is no evidence that people did not obtain enough food for proper health.

Social System: Although Plains Villagers are viewed as having a simple society, it was more complex and contained more subtleties than had been previously realized. There were two organizational levels within Washita River phase society— that of the household and that of the village and community. Everyday domestic activities were usually focused
at the household level. As noted earlier, the typical household consisted of an extended
nuclear family: the mother, the father, the children, and potentially aunts and uncles and grandparents. Although not positively documented, it appears likely that kinship was
defined through the female side (matrilineal kinship). This family unit based around the
matrilineal kin group was the basis for most activities. The men did the hunting and some
of the house construction while women and children tended the crops, collected wild
plants, worked the hides, and did cooking and other basic domestic chores. While each
household conducted a similar set of activities, there are indications that some
specialization in activities also occurred. For example, it appears that each household may
have been producing certain items (e.g., specialized tools or ornaments for the other
villagers). This is much like a low energy cottage industry where each household would
make a product for the other villagers who would then share their special goods. The
village also had a special house or structure for ceremonies that may also have been the
dwelling of the shaman or medicine man.

A group of elders and/or a leader or set of individuals who had gained positions of status
by being good hunters or decision makers probably made decisions regarding the village.
It is also possible though that village leadership was inherited by being passed down
through one or two select families in the village. Important village decisions might be:
when to move the village to a new location and where to relocate, when to schedule the
annual or semi-annual bison hunt, who is to help in new house construction and who
speaks for the village in outside affairs, especially trade.

There was undoubtedly also some loose consolidation among villagers in close proximity
to one another—what sociologists have termed community organization. With villages so
densely packed along the river, cooperation would be required in selecting new village
locations, to avoid competition over lands desired for agriculture, in establishing a
common front to other groups, etc. Here, it is possible that one village may have had more
importance than the others or that a certain family had more power in decision-making.

Little is known about the religious lives of Washita River phase people. They probably had
shaman or medicine men or women who served as doctors, priests and sorcerers. When
people died, they were buried in a formal cemetery, which was separate from the village.
Because there is little difference in the goods placed with the dead, it does not appear that
status differences (if present) were well evidenced in their funeral customs.