The Indian boy who lived during the Golden Age of the Plains people was trained from infancy to be a warrior. In a sense, his very life was oriented around the field of conquest.

There were two types of trips made by the Indian warriors into enemy territory. Some journeys were for the express purpose of making war, but the most common purpose was the horse raid, and the horse alone was the target.

**Raiding Parties**

Some raiding trips were relatively short and were completed in two weeks, while other covered great distances, and the party might be gone from its home camp for several months. Blackfoot accounts tell of ancient war parties which left in the spring of one year and did not return till the summer or fall of the next. Sometimes the Blackfeet traveled all the way into Mexico, and returned with Spanish weapons and horse bits to prove it. Other Plains tribes say their war parties went as far west as the Pacific coast.

The leader of the raid or war party became known as the pipe-holder. A veteran of many previous raids, he would be well acquainted with all the landmarks and water holes in whatever country they might cost. From beginning to end of the expedition, his authority was absolute.

Horse-raiding groups consisted of four to twenty persons. War parties ranged from fifteen upward to several hundred men, although even a party of one hundred was rare enough to be considered a mean force. Each group of raiders would include a few young men for training purposes, and on occasion a few women to do the cooking. Any raiding party could also include a few men who were not invited – especially young men anxious to become warriors; they would follow the party and join it some distance after it left the village. These were not always the most desirable traveling mates, but they were acceptable if they were willing to submit to the authority of the party leader.

The preferred time for departure was before sunup, so that when the rest of the village arose the adventures would already be well on their way. Under average traveling conditions, a party on foot would make twenty-five miles per day; a party on horseback would average fifty miles a day. Mounted war party members rode an average horse and led their prized war horses behind them, so as to keep these in prime condition for the demanding events ahead.

On foot or horseback the war party traveled in single file, with the war leader always in front. The experienced warriors came next, and the youngest men last. When the leader stopped, everyone else did the same. His commands were passed by words or hand signals back from one to another. If ambushed, they went in all directions, with every man for himself. In enemy territory they remained as close together as wisdom and training dictated.

An impressive amount of gear would be taken on a raid, and even more on a war party. There would be rawhide carrying cases and such clothing as fitted the journey, extra bowstrings, glue sticks, quirts, a small supply of sinew and awls, war paint bags and shell cups for mixing the paint, extra moccasins, fire making equipment, ***pemmican***, small field pipes with wooden tampers and tobacco, personal medicine items, robes or blankets rolled and strapped across the back infantry-style, bows and about twenty arrows per man, knives, shields, clubs and/or tomahawks, lances, ropes to make war bridles for stolen horses, and snowshoes for rough going into winter.

Shortly after leaving his village, the pipe-holder would select at least two experienced young men to serve as scouts. Many of the warriors carried wolf skins to be used as disguises for this service, and the Crows said they sometimes daubed themselves with mud to look like wolves. Often, two advance scouts were sent ahead and to either side, a third one acted as rear guard.

Few fires were made in enemy country, and the men were careful about their foot tracks. If possible, camps were made in brushy or wooded areas. A typical one night shelter was made of willow or cottonwood branches bent over after the nature of the sweat lodge. The branches were covered with brush, leaves and blankets. The Blackfeet, and some of the northern tribes, made a unique war lodge shelter of trees stacked in a tipi shape and covered with bark and leaves. Both field shelter types were designed to hide the campers and to ***diffuse*** the smoke from their fires. Some accounts speak of rock shelters being prepared for the night.

When a small horse-raiding party had moved some distance into enemy country and came upon fresh tracks that clearly indicated the foe was nearby, the scouts began to look for a village to raid. Once one was discovered, a next to last camp was made ten or so miles away from the village, and the next day was spent in preparing for the raid.

Attention was given to weapons and other gear, to painting for battle, and to final prayers and ***supplications.*** Finally, the Indians’ personal medicines were securely fixed in place. All food and surplus equipment, plus horses if they were riding, were left at camp in the care of the first timers, and that night the experienced warriors stripped for action and moved, under the cover of darkness, to within sight of the village. This was the real moment of tenseness and excitement.

Ordinarily the pipe holder would scout the area, sometimes even sneaking into the village if a dance was going on. He might also do this if the village was very quiet, and in either case would return to advise the group as how to proceed.

Some of them always went for the horses picketed at the tipis, since those were the greatest prizes, but while they did this the others cut away a part of the main herd in the pasture area. Depending on the situation they would get a few animals or a great many; perhaps sixty or more. If no suspicions were aroused they might even lead the first horses off a short distance, hobble them, and return for additional ones. The greater the risk, the better they liked it.

Once they were a safe distance away from the village, they mounted the best horses and herded the others to their base camp. Here they would hastily pick up their gear, the young men, and be off for a ride that lasted at least two nights and a day before they slept. Pursuit by morning at the latest was inevitable, and they wanted to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the enemy. With so many horses, hiding the trail was almost impossible, and an advantageous head start was their only hope. More than one party was overtaken and badly mauled, and knowing this, they had little rest until the border of their own country was crossed.

**War Parties**

The situation with a large wart party was somewhat different than with that of a raiding group. A small war party would proceed with the same stealth as the horse-raiding group, but secrecy was out of the question for a large body of warriors. They knew they would be discovered shortly after – or perhaps even before – the enemy territory was invaded, yet they took special courage in their medicines and strength. They moved, in any case, against enemy bands, which meant that they would face a force of equal or lesser number than their own. And nine times out of ten that force was on its way to meet them some distance from its village. Ambush was always preferred to an open encounter, and each body, as it approached, would be seeking just such a place and opportunity. Often defensive positions were taken in grass, bush, trees, or a washout. On occasion rock ***breastworks*** were built in preparation for a pitched battle.

Hopefully, the invading force would have time to change into its full war ***regalia*** before the forces were enjoined. The Cheyenne say that most of their warriors preferred to dress – to impress the enemy, to take full advantage of their medicines, and to be ready to meet the “One-Above” in proper attire. Some, though, stripped for action. Those who did painted their bodies extensively and were certain that their medicine preparations would save them from harm.

Upon meeting the enemy in the open, where all hope of surprise or advantage was gone, the leaders of both sides usually rode out to taunt their opponents, while the main bodies formed long lines behind them. Sometimes the leader’s main task was to hold his young men back in line. The taunting might go on for hours before mass action began. Once it did, there would first be firing from a distance, and then a mighty clash, with most battle plans forgotten and every man for himself. Each rode in singing his sacred war song, living his medicine to the fullest, and yelling at the top of his lungs to build up courage.

The Cheyenne say that in a battle the din was incredible. Horses ran in every direction as everyone sought coup, and the dust was too thick one could hardly see. Many said they lost track of all time and feeling; that when on foot “their feet hardly touched the ground.” Most admitted they were exceedingly afraid, but they went in anyway.

Generally speaking, losses in even a prolonged engagement involving hundreds of men would be fairly light, with a few being killed and a few more wounded. Everyone knew there would be another day to fight again, and they preserved themselves for it. The Comanche, who were a very large tribe in comparison to others in their area, were experts at this device. They overwhelmed small groups and literally cut them to bits. Yet if a single Comanche fell, they often ran – even when the numerical odds were in their favor. The northern tribes were not quick to do this, but they took any losses as a bad sign, and were glad to find an excuse to call it a day.

Mutilation of fallen enemies was fairly common, all tribes practicing it to some extent. The Blackfeet and Comanche were the worst. Sometimes a body would be taken home for the women and children to “count coup” on, sometimes the limbs or fingers were removed, and it was fairly common to collect finger bones, which were made into necklaces to be worn at great festivals. A man who had one on when he fell in battle knew full well, however, what his own fate would be when the enemy found the bones.

**Returning to Camp**

When the members of an Assiniboine war party arrived within sight of their home camp, they attracted the attention of the village by certain standard signs. If the party had been successful, a member trotted in a zigzag fashion. Then the people ran to greet them and took the scalps, horses, or other objects they had captured. A short dance followed, during which the objects were displayed. Everyone was happy. After that the owners often gave away everything they had taken to whomever they had in mind.

The Crow party approached their village and spent the night close to it. Early the next morning, they fired off their guns, gave characteristic yells, and thundered toward the camp, setting a grand victory celebration into motion that might last several days.

This was the way of life for the Indian warriors of all the Plains tribes. To them, the swift raids and the miniature wars were part of a very good life in which the days were enjoyed, not measured. As they put it, it was “the time when our hearts sang for joy.”

*“The Mystic Warriors of the Plains” (New York: Mallard Press, 1972).*