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The Spring Awakening

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Weather Watching
Lisa Grossman

THE SPRING AWAKENING

The Flint Hills were at one time a communal bison hunting ground for the Pawnee, Osage, Wichita and Kansa nations. The paragraphs below, excerpted verbatim from "The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture" by Gene Weltfish, describe a ceremony conducted after the winter bison hunt by priests in the Skidi federation, one of four bands in the Pawnee nation — a ceremony necessary to "awaken the whole earth from its winter sleep." Weather cues indicated when the ceremony's time had arrived. Gene Weltfish's main source for information in the book was Mark Evarts, a Pawnee of the Skidi Band.

The Pawnees had many tasks to accomplish in the early spring before the time of planting. Some of them were practical and some ceremonial, but to the Pawnees who believed that nothing on earth could move without the heavens, no practical task could be undertaken unless the appropriate ceremony had preceded it.

The first ceremonial act of the year was to awaken the whole earth from its winter sleep. After their long and arduous travels over the plains on their winter buffalo hunt, the Pawnees returned to their villages at the end of February or the beginning of March. The year began about the time of the spring equinox with the ritual recitation of the creation by the five priests, repeated for each of the twelve sacred bundles of the original villages that formed the Skidi federation. The position of the stars was an important guide to the time when this ceremony should be held. The earth lodge served as an astronomical observatory and as the priests sat inside at the west, they could observe the stars in certain positions through the smokehole and through the long east-oriented entranceway. They also kept

careful watch of the horizon right after sunset and just before dawn to note the order and position of the stars.

The round of spring renewal ceremonies was heralded by the appearance of two small twinkling stars known as the Swimming Ducks in the northeastern horizon near the Milky Way. They notified the animals that they must awaken from their winter sleep, break through the ice, and come out into the world again. At this time the Pleiades began to take a certain position. When these signs were seen, then they must listen for the thunder that is low, deep, and rumbling, starting in the west and rolling around the entire circuit of the heavens. Sheet lightning gave warning that this kind of thunder would soon appear. This thunder was the voice of Heaven, and when it came from the south they knew that it was the signal for the creation ritual to be performed.

The ritual was part of the sacred lore of the Evening Star bundle which at this time was kept in the earth lodge of Old Lady Lucky Leader. As soon as the thunder was heard, the five official priests gathered there and began their preparations for the ritual. The same ritual would be repeated for each of the twelve major sacred bundles, the Evening Star which they were about to perform, then Morning Star bundle, then Big

Black Meteoric Star and nine others. At intervals all during the month of March the priests went in succession to the different households where each of the bundles was kept, performing the ritual to renew their [the bundles'] powers. The order for the first three performances was as given above; the other nine, simply as each of the households happened to be ready to pause in its work and to provide the necessary food for the priests.

Now the five priests were sitting at the west in the lodge of Old Lady Lucky Leader, the Evening Star bundle lying open before them. The sacred objects were spread out on the skin of a tawny yellow calf representing the herds of buffalo. Two sacred ears of corn represented their staple food, two owlskins the watchfulness of the chiefs, hawkskins the ferocity of the warriors, flint for fire and sweet grass for incense; paints symbolized the powers of the different directions of the universe. Each of the priests held a gourd rattle in his right hand, and they sang together of the first creation. Their responsibility lay heavy upon them, for they and they alone must bring the world back to life again. Would they now be able to bring back the abundance of summer — the green grass, the trees, the animals reborn, the waters flowing free, the warmth of a summer day? Loud and insistently they recounted



Hair of God
Dave Leiker

each minute step of the creation and in the trancelike depths of their thinking, the events rolled by before them.

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