

Recording Lakota History

For a long time, American Indians did not write. They told stories about their history, and sometimes they made drawings to keep records. American Indians called the Lakotas (la-KOH-tahs) lived on the Great Plains. What do their drawings tell about their history and how their surroundings affected their lives?

A group of Lakota families watched the night sky, certain that the world was coming to an end. Streaks of bright light darted above the Great Plains before falling into the blackness. Then new streaks flashed and fell across the sky—so many that one could not count them.

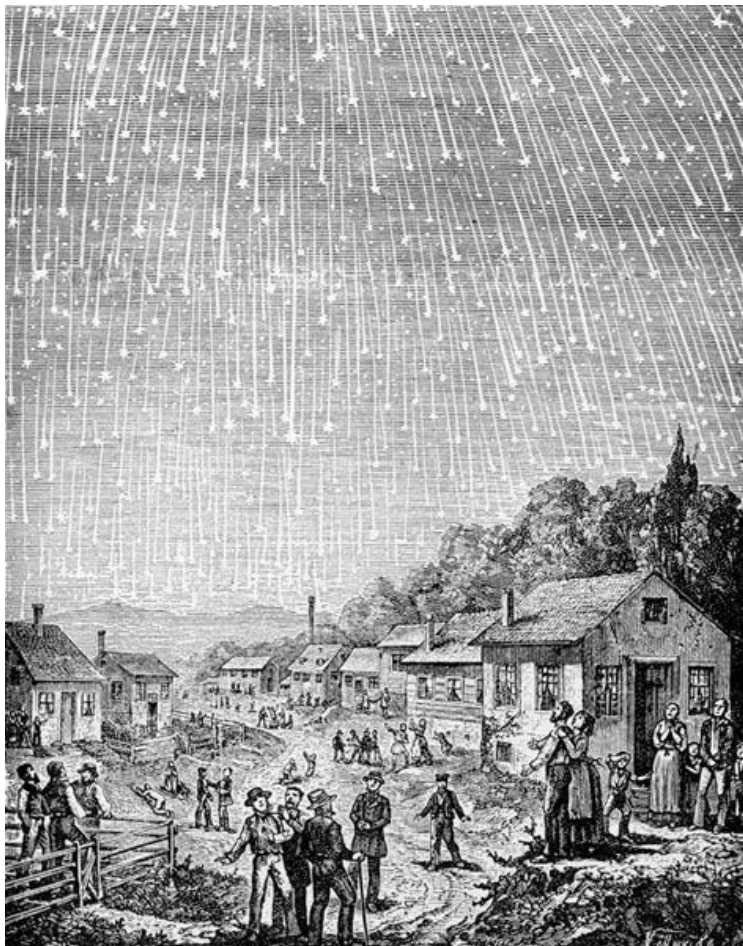


What was this grand display of fire in the heavens? Historians now know the Lakotas observed the Leonid meteor shower in November 1833. Scientists say that hundreds of thousands of shooting stars fell toward Earth on that cold, clear night.

The Lakotas who watched this amazing natural event would never forget it. They wanted to be sure that their children and grandchildren would know about it, so they made a record of the meteor shower for future generations.

To do this, the Lakotas would make a **pictograph**—such as a star—on an animal skin, or hide. The hide might already have other pictographs that represented memorable events from earlier years. One pictograph might show a buffalo hunt, or perhaps a war dance. Another image shows the meteor shower and stands for the year 1833. The Lakotas began calling this year the Year the Stars Fell.

Nature was important to the Lakotas. For example, they used the first snowfall of winter to mark the start of each year. These records are called “winter counts” and were made with pictographs. Each pictograph on a winter count showed a key event from a different year.



Many Lakota pictographs show how the climate, natural resources, and geography of the Great Plains affected their lives. For instance, some pictographs tell of heavy snowfalls or long periods without rain, while others show animal hunts in the Great Plains. Several images represent visits to nearby hills, forests, and waterholes to gather wood and water.

Winter counts are **primary sources** because the people who created them witnessed the events

depicted in the pictographs. Historians study primary sources to learn about past events. They also study **secondary sources**, or records of events created by people who were not there. A painting of the 1833 Leonid meteor shower by an artist who was not around during the event is an example of a secondary source. Those who create secondary

sources often analyze primary sources. For example, a historian might study Lakota pictographs and write a book about it. The book would be a secondary source.

A man named Lone Dog painted a winter count that spans over 70 years of Lakota history. Each pictograph on it represents what he felt was the most memorable event of that year. One pictograph shows two hands coming together. It represents making peace with the Cheyenne tribe. Another one shows a man with lines coming from his mouth, representing a case of whooping cough that caused many deaths within the tribe.

In each band of Lakota, one individual called the keeper had the honor of painting the pictographs on the winter count. Lone Dog was a keeper. For a long time, only a man could be the keeper. However, by the 1900s, women were occasionally allowed to take on this role.

The keeper paints a new symbol on hide from animals that they hunted on the plains. The Lakotas used many different parts of the animal for food, clothing, and shelter, and to meet other needs.

The hides wore out over time, forcing the keeper to repaint the winter counts onto other hides. He might use cloth or perhaps paper if it was available.

The Lakotas made winter counts for many generations. But once they began to write in the 1800s, many Lakotas stopped using pictographs to



keep records. Today, some Lakotas use new forms of communication—like video and the Internet—to record their history.

