

ARIKARA FISH-TRAP

The Arikara fish-trap, which forms the subject of this article, was made, and the information respecting it was furnished, by White-Bear, who was ritualistically authorized to make and use it according to ancient custom. None but those who had purchased the right and had learned the ritual might have presumed to construct and set a fish-trap, but it is true that at the present time some young men of modern thought build and operate fish-traps for practical purposes. In constructing such fish-traps they use materials most conveniently at hand – for example, binding twine instead of rawhide thongs for making the panels of pickets.

The fish-trap (see the illustrations) is a circular pen made in four panels of sandbar willow attached to four posts, and a detached gate made from twelve sandbar willows the same as the panels. Each of the four panels consists of one hundred sandbar willows. These willow sticks, both of the panels and of the door, are sharpened at the lower end in order that they may be thrust into the sand of the riverbed and made firm in a circular form like the ground plan of the Arikara dwelling and of the medicine-lodge.¹

The four posts supporting the four panels of the trap are referred to the four main posts of the dwelling and of the medicine-lodge. In the center of the circular pen was placed a cottonwood sapling with the twigs and leaves left at the top. This central sapling is referred to the fireplace of the Arikara dwelling, and more particularly of the medicine-lodge. The four main supporting posts of the circular pen may be of any suitable hard, firm wood, such as ash. No species is prescribed; but the poles or stakes used in making the panels and the door must be of sandbar willow. The cord used to weave the panels and the door must be of buffalo rawhide thong, but of course, thongs of domestic cowhide had to be substituted when buffalo-hide could no longer be had. The bar used to fasten the door when closed must be of Juneberry wood (*Amelanchier alnifolia*). Arikara informants offered the opinion that the Juneberry was prescribed by the ritual because its fruit was so important a part of the Arikara commissary. The sapling in the center

¹The term “medicine-lodge” is the ordinary white man’s designation of the structure and institution, which is in effect the tribal temple.

of the pen, correlated with the fireplace of the house or temple, must be a young cottonwood tree, the cottonwood being one of the species of trees having sacred and mystical significance.

Outside the circle of the fish-pen are four other strong stakes, which serve to give support and firmness to the panels. No particular species of tree was prescribed for this purpose.

Of the four panels of the fence, it will be noted that one has a number of the palings cut shorter than the others. When set up, these shorter palings make a gap over which the operator can step into and out of the pen.

When a fish-trap is to be set up, a place is chosen in a backwater or eddy beside the main current of the stream. First, the four main posts are set where the trap circle is to be. These, as said before, refer to the four main posts of the medicine-lodge, and, having been set, the four panels are next placed, extended each in a segment of a circle from one of the four posts to the next, the panel with the before-mentioned gap made by shorter palings being set next to the shore. The four outside supporting posts are next set. These are forked. The young cottonwood sapling is cut and brought for the center-pole of the pen; this sapling is twelve to fifteen feet high, and has its branches trimmed off except at the top, as mentioned. The twigs and leaves at the top are left for the purpose soon to be explained. Now, the pen being erected, a bunch of *Artemisia gnaphaloides* is attached to each of the four main posts and one on each side of the door.

Five pieces of bait are placed, one tied to the sapling in the center and one to each of the four supporting posts. The bait preferred is maggoty meat. A screen of sandbar willow twigs with the leaves left on is placed along the downstream side of the pen to catch the floating maggots and to cause them to float away through the open door of the trap downstream, and lure the fish through the door. As the fish swim about the trap on the lower side, they find the open door and enter. The pieces of bait for the four main posts are tied on thongs, which have each a noose in the end to drop over the fork of the outside supporting post so that it can be quickly lifted, and that on the cottonwood sapling at the center is tied with a knot easily slipped, in order that all the pieces of bait may be readily and quickly removed when the operator enters to take out the fish which have been caught.

If a man wishes to have a fish-trap set up, and does not himself know the ritual or possess the

ritualistic authority to do so, he goes to a man who has this knowledge and authority, and engages to pay him the proper fees to have the work done. Having the necessary knowledge and ritualistic authority to make the trap, a man goes about it seriously and thoughtfully. He must give his mind to the task; he must think of the goodness and greatness of Providence, especially of the ways of the living beings in the river, the fishes there; he must refrain for the time from any connection with a woman; he must have his mind quiet and clear of doubt and anxiety; his heart must be free of malice and of any grudge against anyone; hold no ill-will and no anger. As he works on the gathering of the materials and the construction of the parts of the trap, he puts the power of his good thoughts into his work and impregnates with them the trap, which he is building. He does not think of the trap as a device by which he is to deceive and outwit the fish, but as a divinely appointed means by which, if he faithfully does his part, Providence will give to him the fish which he needs for his food and for the food of his kinsfolk and friends.

The fish most commonly impounded in the trap is the catfish, though sometimes other species are caught, they say. They also say that if fish of one species go into the trap, other species will stay out.

The time of first setting a trap for catching fish is the time of new corn, roasting-ear time. The use of the fish-trap may continue until the water becomes uncomfortably cold for the work, probably about the middle of August or soon after, for on the upper Missouri, in the Arikara country, the nights begin to have a cold edge as early as August.

When a fishing project is undertaken, the trap is constructed as before described: a site is selected in which to set it in an eddy at the edge of the strong main current, and a sheltered place in the bushes back a hundred yards or so from the river-bank is chosen for the camp of the operator and his assistant. A pit is dug in the sandy bank a dozen feet or so from the shore in which to hold the fish when caught. This is made large enough to contain all the fish they may catch, and deep enough to prevent them from jumping out and escaping into the water.

An offering is made ready to propitiate the fish spirit in the river. In old times, this would be painted robes, or robes decorated with porcupine quillwork, or moccasins, necklaces, or any other valuable objects of native manufacture, and a small pouch of tobacco of the species *Nicotiana quadrivalvis*,

cultivated from time immemorial by the Arikara. In modern time, this one requisite remains unchanged, but the other gifts may be and commonly are commuted to pieces of cloth or calico, which can be bought from the white trader. Beef heads or other suitable pieces of spoiled meat are sought, and brought to the vicinity of the trap and laid on the bank till wanted.

The bunches of *Artemisia gnaphaloides* are gathered and made ready, one for each panel of the pen, one for each door post, and one for use by the operator in cleansing himself as he leaves the pen. There is also provided a quantity of the boiled and dried root of *Actae arguta* Nutt, which is the proper medicine to apply as a remedy for the poison if the operator or his assistant should be stung by a catfish.² In case of such poisoning, some of the root is chewed and put upon the wound, together with the chewed bark of young sandbar willow sprouts. At the same time a finger is inserted into the mouth of a catfish and some of the slime there from is wiped out and also applied to the wound. But if, in their preparation, the men have adhered to the prescribed rules of abstention, it is said the fish will never harm them. On the other hand, it is said that if a man has disregarded the rules, the fish will be very angry and he will be unmercifully stung. It is told of a certain Arikara, at the present time living on the reservation, who, being skeptical, disregarded the warning given him in regard to the necessary proper preparation, and insisted on going into the pen to dip out the fish. The fish were stirred up and he was painfully stung. He hurriedly got out of the pen, retired to the camp, and lay down by the fire; but the pain and the swelling from the wounds increased, and he called for the operator who had a right to administer this medicine, confessed his fault, and asked to be relieved, giving his pledge for the proper fees. The medicine was applied and he was relieved of his pain.

All being ready, the pen is set up; the four panels are strung out in a circle attached to the four main posts, the outside support posts are placed, and the central cottonwood sapling is set. The operator goes entirely round inside the circle of the pen, testing the firmness of the setting, feeling the bottom of the palings with his toes. In all his operations, the operator of the trap wears only a breechcloth. Having firmly set all the panels, he attaches to each a bunch of *Artemisia gnaphaloides*, and a bunch to each of the

²The Arikara name of the "fish medicine," which, is now identified as *Actae arguta* Nutt, is škánikáitit.

two doorposts. Now he makes another circuit of the pen, throwing water with his hands over all the pen to cleanse it of his own presence. Then he steps out over the gap of the fence on the shoreward side. He picks up the sandbar willow pole to which he has attached his offering for the fish spirit in the river. This offering he now carries up-stream to a jutting point above the fish-trap. Here he stands, facing the current of the stream, and makes an invocation to the spirit to have pity on him, to receive the offering which he makes, to be kind to him, and to grant him a generous catch of fish to supply his need.

He now goes back to the camp he has made in the bushes for a little rest and refreshment, for by this time it is evening. His assistant has prepared a meal, which they now eat. It is now dusk. After they have filled and lighted and offered the pipe, and have smoked, the operator goes carefully and quietly to the high bank above his fish-trap. There he settles himself, wrapped in his blanket (in his buffalo robe in old time); he waits and watches with patience under the torment of the mosquitoes and the gathering chill of the night. He is alert to all the signs of nightlife about him. He can see little, for it is dark, but he hears the sounds made by the fish leaping in the river before him, and by the owls in the timber back of him, the mice and other small mammals in the vegetation about him, and every little while the thundering sound of caving banks and bars, undercut by the river current. Finally, he hears the rustle made by the shaking of the twigs and leaves on the central cottonwood sapling in his fish-trap. He knows that now the fish are entering, and are tearing at the bait and shaking the sapling. After a sufficient time, when by the sound he judges that a sufficiently large number of fish are in the pen, he rises and drops his robe (or blanket), and very quietly makes his way down to the shore and picks up the gate of the pen. He carefully steps into the water, putting one foot before the other without rippling the water. Slowly and carefully, he moves forward to the doorway of the pen. Arrived there, he sets the gate firmly, and fastens it with the Juneberry crossbar, which he carried in his hand for that purpose. Now he calls his assistant to help him. He takes up the baits and hands them over. The assistant lays them up on the bank and hands the dipping basket to the operator, who takes it, bends over, pushing it before him through the water all around the pen, especially next to the palings, where the fish will be trying to escape. When he has all he can lift, he hands the basket over to his assistant, who empties them into the pit on the bank. The process is repeated until the operator has

removed all the fish from the pen. Now he replaces the bait, removes the gate, cleanses the trap by splashing as before, steps out, and, as before, standing in the water on the shoreward side of the trap, and facing up-stream, he again cleanses himself by aspersion of water with the bunch of *Artemisia gnaphaloides*. During this latter operation he stands facing up-stream because every progressive symbolic action of the Arikara is made facing up the current of the Missouri River, for all their tradition of their tribal life is in reference to that stream, whose designation in their own language signifies Mysterious river, or Sacred river. Their migration route for centuries has been along the course of the Missouri, and always up-stream. Their destiny, it seems, has been toward the source of the Mysterious river, and to do other than face up-stream in the manifest direction of their tribal destiny while performing a symbolic ritualistic act, would be to invite disaster.

The fisherman and his assistant now inspect their first catch. The very largest fish is picked out and cleaned for immediate cooking, which was done by boiling in a pot. The viscera, but not the head, is removed, and the fish is cut into three pieces to facilitate cooking.³ This largest fish of the first catch was required to be cooked and eaten entirely and at once by the owner of the trap as a thanksgiving feast to the spirit of fish for the bounty given. The operator resumes his vigil, and through the night, one or more further catches may be made. In the early morning, the owner of the trap divides all the fish he has caught during the night into shares, which he goes about and distributes among his friends and kinsfolk, providing first of all for all those who gave his assistance in the enterprise. The Arikara did not dry fish for future use, but took only what they cared to eat fresh.

The trap may be used several times after the first setting, but finally the time comes when all have satisfied their taste for fish, when the water has become too cold for comfort in operation. That time may be not very late in August; but when the time does come, the gate is finally closed, the baits are thrown into the pan, and all is abandoned to the action of the river current, which carries all away down-stream on the backward course of all the Arikara tribal migration, in the line of all things of the Arikara past.

³If a fish was small it was boiled whole after removal of the viscera; if large, it was cut into three pieces to fit it into the boiling kettle and to facilitate cooking. The head was not removed, but the entire fish was cooked.