

## CAPTURING EAGLETS IN THE AERIE

The Arikaras practiced the method of capturing adult eagles<sup>1</sup> at pits prepared for the purpose as well as the taking of eaglets from the aerie just before they were able to fly. When an Arikara eagle catcher discovered an aerie which was not already known and claimed by right of discovery he would note the situation and publish his claim. His rights in it were recognized by others in the same manner as any other personal property. The claimant to an aerie would return to it from time to time to watch the growth of the young eaglets in order that he might not lose them by flight. When the eaglets were about ready to fly and leave the aerie the man would take them home and keep them captive until their plumage was complete. He tethered the eaglet to a heavy log which had been placed on the roof or on the arbor platform in front of his house. Here he kept the birds, watering and feeding them until grown and their plumage was complete. When they had reached this stage he plucked the tail feathers, and one or two from each wing and set the birds free.

When a man, who had an eagle nest claim, went out to capture the eaglets he was accompanied by a helper who stayed on the ground and took care of the birds as they were lowered to him from the nest. As a safeguard against serious injury from their talons, an old soft piece of deerskin was used in capturing the eaglets. This piece of deerskin was advanced towards the eaglet and when its talons were entangled therein the bird's feet were tied together and attached to a long rope by which it was lowered to the assistant. He secured the bird and if another eaglet was to be taken the process was repeated. Care was taken in preserving the order of the nest so that the birds would return from year to year, thus the man holding claim to an aerie by discovery would have an annual crop of valuable eagle plumes for his own use or for trade. When a man found an eagle nest not previously discovered, and established his claim, custom confirmed his proprietary rights in it as in any other possession and anyone trespassing upon it would be punished. If a man's rights in an eagle nest were invaded the trespasser might make an

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the eagle pit to capture adult eagles is described in another paper. Gilmore, Melvin R., Arikara Account of the Origin of Tobacco and Catching of Eagles, Indian Notes, Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 26-33 (Jan. 1929) Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York.

amicable settlement with the rightful claimant by the payment of a horse, a good suit, or other property according to the number of birds taken. Fourrings, many years ago had claim to an eagle nest in a certain place south of the present town of Beulah. A man once desired some plumes from him, offering a horse in exchange for the feathers of one eagle tail. Fourrings refused the trade. The man was disappointed and angry and was determined to cause the abandonment of the nest so that Fourrings would be deprived of his yearly crop of plumes. With this idea in mind, he took stalks of a certain species of grass (*Calamovilfa longifolia*) and used them to clean his pipestem, wiped the cleanings on a pebble and laid it in the nest thereby causing the birds to leave.

Eagle feathers were prized very highly by the Indians because of the dangers and difficulties encountered in obtaining them. Since eagles inhabit solitary places, building their aeries on crags and cliffs, and because these strong birds are dangerous antagonists, it was not an easy matter for a man to secure eagle plumes. It was an undertaking that required courage, patience and pertinacity of purpose. In addition to the ordinary perils connected with such an adventure there was also the danger, during wartime, of encountering the enemy. So the possession of eagle plumes was evidence of hardships endured and of dangers dared. Due to the fact that the eagle is such a majestic bird, and that many dangers and difficulties are encountered in obtaining the plumes they have become emblematic of valor and worth. In the use of eagle plumes as tokens and emblems their significance and splendor are enhanced by the attachment of tufts of horsehair to their tips. Just as the use of the eagle's plume evokes the thought of the powerful and lofty flight of the bird, and of his keen and far-reaching vision, so does the use of the horsehair remind one of the strength, fleetness, intelligence, courage and faithfulness of that noble animal. So when we see a man rightfully wearing a splendid eagle plume headdress we think of the glorious deeds he must have accomplished before the council authorized him to be invested with such tokens of dignity.

Spruce and pine gums were used in attaching eagle-down feathers or tufts of horsehair to the tips of eagle plumes because their adhesive qualities were as effective as glue and more conveniently used. The odors, too, are more pleasant than glue. Chewing was another use for these gums, and when no

longer pliable it was dried, pulverized and used as perfume. Gum was gathered where it naturally exuded from the trees and was also obtained by extraction from pine or spruce woods especially from knots. After the wood had been fragmented to suitable size, it was boiled in water. As the temperature increased, the resin rose to the surface and was removed by the use of a spatula, which was then dipped into a vessel of cold water causing the resin to harden. The resin was removed from the spatula by drawing it between the teeth. Before doing this, the operator first greased his mouth with tallow in order to prevent the resin from sticking. The resin was stored in skin bags for use at home. Both pine and spruce trees grew at considerable distances from the vicinity of the Arikara villages on the Missouri River consequently their resins could only be obtained directly by expeditions into the regions where these trees grew. Most of this commodity, however, was obtained by importation through intertribal trade with the people living in the regions where these trees abound. There were no spruces nearer to the Arikara country than the Black Hills area, which was several hundred miles distant in the country of the Dakotas. Pines were not so far away, because the range of the western yellow pine, *Pinus ponderosa*, extends into the region of the headwaters of the Little Missouri River in the southwestern part of North Dakota.

For another perfume, the tips of pinecones were used. These tips were removed, dried, pulverized, and the powder mixed with pulverized resin from either pine or spruce thereby creating a different odor than the pulverized resin alone. Piles of driftwood cast by the spring freshets of the Missouri River were searched for pine cones lodged there by the falling water, which had carried them down from the headwaters of the Missouri and its tributaries. Pine and spruce needles were used for incense and twigs and leaves of arbor vitae, *Thuja occidentalis* L., were imported from a considerable distance to the northeast in Manitoba and Minnesota for incense and perfume.