



# Prairie Pages

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## The Illini



**Adorned with feathers, the Illini hold lacrosse bats made from buffalo or deer sinew.**

Hundreds of years ago many different Native Americans lived in Illinois. Some of them were the Sauk, Mesquakie, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and Winnebago. The state is named after one tribe, the Illiniwek. The Illiniwek were composed of twelve smaller tribes. Among them were the Cahokia, Peoria, and Kaskaskia.

The Grand Village of the Kaskaskia was one of their biggest villages. It was located on the Illinois River near Starved Rock. Another village of the Illini was located on Lake Peoria. It was called Pimiteoui, which meant "Fat Lake." In southern Illinois the Illini lived in the villages of Cahokia, Michigamea, and Kaskaskia.

The Illini were migratory people. They traveled from place to place as the seasons changed. They also moved to get away from other tribes who often attacked them. In the spring and summer they lived in large villages located along the banks of rivers. In late summer and winter they divided into smaller bands and moved to hunting camps.

The Illini lived in different winter and summer homes. Summer houses were large rectangular lodges. Extended families (parents, grandparents, uncles, cousins, sisters) lived together in them. Winter houses were called wigwams. They were smaller and shaped like a dome. The Illini covered their homes with sheets of bark or rush mats woven from cattails.

The work of men was hunting and warfare. Men hunted buffalo, deer, bear, elk, and smaller animals. Sometimes they would chase the buffalo into an ambush and kill many that way. Sometimes they would light the prairie on fire and confuse the animals so they could kill them easier. Hunting buffalo was dangerous work. The bow and arrow and war club were the traditional weapons of the Illini. Guns were not used until Europeans made them available. The Illini often used guns to frighten enemies that has never seen them before.



**A woman dressing a buffalo hide.**

Women did most of the work in the villages. They built the homes. They prepared animal skins for clothing, robes, and blankets. They gathered firewood. They prepared the ground for the gardens. Women gathered wild plants, nuts, berries, and honey from the woods, wetlands, and prairies. They also raised squash, beans, and maize (Indian corn). They harvested the crops.

Women had a hard life.

The Illini relied upon many plants and animals to survive. The Illini did not waste resources. When animals were killed all parts were used. Sinews were used instead of thread for sewing and stretching hides. Hoofs were used for rattles in ceremonies. Skins were rubbed with animal brains to make them supple.

In the summer the Illini wore little clothing. Men and women tattooed their bodies when they became 25 years old. It was a sign of accomplishment. In the winter they wore robes made from buffalo hides.



**Women guarding corn from birds.**

An important Illini ceremony was the calumet dance, which was performed at special events. The calumet represented the god of peace and war. Carrying a calumet allowed people to travel unharmed through enemy land. The calumet was made of polished stone. It had a hole in it that was filled with tobacco for smoking. The calumet was shaped like a hatchet and attached to a long stem. The Illini decorated the calumet with feathers. White feathers symbolized peace. Red feathers symbolized war. The Illini also offered the calumet to the sun and earth when they wanted to have rain or good weather. The Illini believed in a Master of Life. They also believed in individual spirits (manitous) and prayed to them when they needed help. Individual wealth was not important. People who were able to give away objects were highly respected.

Men could not marry until they proved they were good hunters and warriors. When a man wanted to marry he first talked to his father. Next his family gathered presents. Then his female relatives carried them to the woman's lodge. Wealthy families took many presents. If the woman

did not want to marry, the presents were returned. If she accepted the proposal, her family sent gifts to the man's house. After several days of exchange, the bride was carried to her new home. Women lived with their husband's family.

Exchanging gifts was an important part of the Illini marriage ceremony. When a person died the grave was filled with items needed in the afterlife. Tobacco, bow and arrow, kettle, and corn were some of the gifts that were buried alongside the body. Men's faces were painted red. Dances of mourning were held. The family gave presents to the dancers.



**A shaman mixing medicine.**

Once the Illini occupied a large part of Illinois. As settlers moved into Illinois they needed more land. The United States government decided that the Indians must be relocated. In the mid-1830's the Illini were removed from their homeland to Kansas. Eventually they were moved to Oklahoma. Today the Illiniwek's descendants are known as the Peoria Indian Tribe of Oklahoma.

Written by Noreen O'Brien-Davis, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

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WebMaster: Karen E. Everingham