

The Illinois Tribe by McKenna



The Illinois tribe is also known as the “Illini.” Illinois is a Native American word meaning “the men.” Some words the Illini say are “aya” meaning “hello,” and “nihka” (nee-ka) meaning “friend.”

Location: The Illini lived in the state of Illinois before the wars of the mid-1700’s forced them to move to Indian reservations in Oklahoma by the American government. The Peoria tribe of Oklahoma is made up of the original Illinois Indians.

Food: The men hunted game such as bison, deer, elk, mountain lions, bears, and turkeys using a bow and arrow. They would go on buffalo hunts where they would set fire in a C-shaped ring around the herds of buffalo and as they exited the ring the Indians would kill them with spears. Included in their meals were corn, beans, squash, and watermelon.

Homes: The Illini didn’t live in teepees. They lived in villages of large rectangular houses with walls made of woven reeds. These homes would keep large groups and families warmer in the colder climate they lived in. these larger homes would also allow room for their spiritual dances and other entertainment.

Clothing: Their clothing was made from the skins and hair of bison, deer, and other animals. The men wore very little clothing in the warmest months of the years, sometimes nothing but their leather moccasins. Women commonly wore knee-length skirts. They often covered their upper bodies with deer-skin cloaks, but sometimes they chose to wear no tops. In winter, the Illini warmed themselves in leather cloaks or robes from animal fur.

Art and Music: These were functional, social components of the tribe’s economic and belief systems. Some art included hide painting, weaving, fabric dyeing, quill working, and wood carving. They would also decorate their headbands and moccasins with dyed porcupine quills. Music played an important role in the famous Calumet dance. The Calumet is a long tobacco pipe used by Indians on ceremonial occasions, often as a sign of peace. Three instruments they played were the drum, rattle, and flute.

Family Life: Indian children had more chores and less time to play. They played toys and games like child-sized bow and arrows and corn husk dolls. The family was very close-knit and all shared in important chores for the day. At night they sang and danced to spiritual music.

Some Interesting Facts: Storytelling is very important to the Illinois Indian culture. The Illini tribe told lots of traditional legends and fairy tales. Some stories told were “The Snake Husband,” which is a story of a woman who falls in love with a handsome man who whistled at her in the woods. She marries him, but later discovers appearances can be deceiving. Also, “The Painted Turtle,” where a turtle falls in love with a beautiful girl and strives to win her affection. The tale explains the origin of a woman’s name.