

The following piece is taken from *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture* by Gene Weltfish (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 124-29.

“Prologue

The Lost Universe is an account of one year in the life of a six-hundred-year-old American Indian nation that continued its existence within the United States through the Civil War period, retaining its integrity as a nation until it was uprooted and dissolved in 1876.

This is the story as told directly by the citizens who were part of it in those last years and who, in the course of their lives, saw it become a lost universe.”

Chapter 12: Closing Episode of Planting Period

The first several pages of this chapter describe the end of planting season when the corn plants move past their seedling, or very young and delicate, phase. Seedlings need to be healthy so they can grow into strong, mature corn plants. This is an important time for the Pawnee who leave their homes, and the corn plants, during the summer as they go on their annual bison hunt. A poor crop might mean the difference between living or dying during the following winter. A special young corn ceremony took place each year to help assure a healthy corn crop.

“Until this ceremony was completed, no woman could go into her field and begin to weed and cultivate it. Now the women all went into their fields carrying their hoes. First they would pull out the weeds one by one from the corn hills by hand and then pile up the earth around the young growing plants. The corn was hilled up so high around the plant that the leaves barely stuck out at the top; they were compared with an earth lodge with the smoke issuing out of the smokehole in the roof.

It was early morning and the dew had fallen, and as the women worked around and around the corn hills their bodies would get soaking wet. After they had hilled up the earth around the plants, the women would kneel close to the hill and pat it all around with their hands to make it smooth and even. The woman’s left side, as well as her face and hands, would become covered with mud. To mention this fact to a woman on her way home from the fields would be the height of presumption. On the way home everyone took a swim in Beaver Creek and washed off their hoes. Again the young women splashed with their feet on the surface of the water and tried to make as loud a report as possible by slapping the surface of the water with their hands. The old man again sat up on his earth lodge and addressed the community at large. He reminded everyone that the women were now “disfiguring themselves” for him, getting all muddy, and that while their hoes were still full of mud, all of them [the people in the village] would be eating the food that the women had raised. Some of the women went in groups to cultivate the previously planted fields of their new daughters-in-law, singing while they worked together and again enjoying a festive meal at their daughter-in-law’s house afterward.

Now at the beginning of June everyone’s mind was turned to completing the preparation for leaving on the summer hunt. They would weed and cultivate the corn plants and hill up the earth once more just before leaving, when the plants were about 3 ½ feet high. The present Nebraska farmer says, ‘Knee high by the fourth of July’ and the Pawnee said, ‘Tall enough to tickle the horse’s belly.’”