Arikara Creation

The Great Sky Spirit, Nesaru, sometimes called the Great Mystery, was the master of all creation. Below the sky was an endless body of water where two ducks eternally swam. Nesaru made two brothers, Wolf-man and Lucky-man, who commanded the ducks to swim to the bottom of the great water and bring up some earth. With this earth, Wolf-man made the Great Plains and Lucky-Man made the hills and mountains.

The two brothers went down beneath the earth and found two spiders. They explained to the spiders how to reproduce. The two spiders produced many kinds of animals and plants, including human beings. However, they also produced a race of evil giants.

These giants were so evil that Nesarn eventually had to destroy them with a great flood. However, Nesarn loved human beings and saved them from destruction.

How Corn Came to the Earth

A long time ago giants lived on the earth, and they were so strong they were not afraid of anything. When they stopped giving smoke to the gods of the four directions, Nesaru looked down upon them and was angry. "I made the giants too strong," Nesaru said. "I will not keep them. They think that they are like me. I shall destroy them by covering the earth with water, but I will save the ordinary people."

Nesaru sent the animals to lead the ordinary people into a cave so large that all the animals and people could live there together. Then he sealed up the cave and flooded the earth so that all the giants drowned. To remind himself that people were under the ground waiting to be released after the floodwaters were gone, Nesaru planted corn in the sky. As soon as the corn ripened, he took an ear from the field and turned it into a woman. She was the Mother-Corn.

"You must go down to the earth," Nesaru told her, "and bring my people out from under the ground. Lead them to the place where the sun sets, for their home shall be in the west."
Mother-Corn went down to the earth, and when she heard thunder in the east she followed the sound into the cave where the people were waiting. But the entrance closed behind her, and she could find no way to lead the people out upon the earth. "We must leave this place, this darkness," she told them. "There is light above the ground. Who will help me take my people out of the earth?"

The Badger came forward and said: "Mother-Corn, I will help." The Mole also stood up and said: "I will help the Badger dig through the ground, that we may see the light." Then the long-nosed Mouse came and said: "I will help the other two."

The Badger began to dig upwards. After a while he fell back exhausted. "Mother-Corn, I am very tired," he said. Then the Mole dug until he could dig no more. The long-nosed Mouse took the Mole's place, and when he became tired, the Badger began to dig again. The three took turns until at last the long nosed Mouse thrust his nose through the ground and could see a little light.

The Mouse went back and said: "Mother-Corn, I ran my nose through the earth until I saw light, but the digging has made my nose small and pointed. After this all the people will know by my nose that it was I who dug through the earth first."

The Mole now went up to the hole and dug all the way through. The sun had come up from the east, and it was so bright it blinded the Mole. He ran back and said: "Mother-Corn, I have been blinded by the brightness of that sun. I cannot live upon the earth any more. I must make my home under the earth. From this time all the Moles will be blind so they cannot see in the daylight, but they can see in the night. They shall stay under the ground in the daytime."

The Badger then went up and made the hole larger so the people could go through. When he crawled outside the Badger closed his eyes, but the rays of the sun struck him and blackened his legs and made a streak of black upon his face. He went back down and said: "Mother-Corn, I have received these black marks upon me, and I wish that I might remain this way so that people will remember that I was one of those who helped to get your people out."

"Very well," said Mother-Corn, "let it be as you say."
She then led the way out, and the people rejoiced that they were now upon the open land. While they were standing there in the sunshine, Mother-Corn said: "My people, we will now journey westward toward the place where the sun sets. Before we start, any who wish to remain here--such as the Badger, Mouse, or Mole--may do so." Some of the animals decided to return to their burrows in the earth; others wanted to go with Mother-Corn.

The journey was now begun. As they travelled, they could see a mountainous country rising up in front of them. They came to a deep canyon. The bluff was too steep for the people to get down, and if they should get down, the opposite side was too steep for them to climb. Mother-Corn asked for help, and a bluish-grey bird flew up, hovering on rapidly beating wings. It had a large bill, a bushy crest and a banded breast. The bird was the Kingfisher. "Mother-Corn," it said, "I will be the one to point out the way for you."

The Kingfisher flew to the other side of the canyon, and with its beak pecked repeatedly into the bank until the earth fell into the chasm. Then the bird flew back and pecked at the other bank until enough earth fell down to form a bridge. The people cried out their thanks. "Those who wish to join me," said the Kingfisher, "may remain here and we will make our homes in these cliffs." Some stayed, but most journeyed on.

After a while they came to another obstacle--a dark forest. The trees were so tall they seemed to reach the sun. They grew close together and were covered with thorns so that they formed an impenetrable thicket. Again Mother-Corn asked for help. This time an Owl came and stood before her, and said: "I will make a pathway for your people through this forest. Any who wish to remain with me may do so, and we shall live in this forest forever." The Owl then flew up through the timber. As it waved its wings it moved the trees to one side, so that it left a pathway for the people to go through. Mother-Corn then led the people through the forest and they passed onward.

As they journeyed through the country, all at once they came to a big lake. The water was too deep and too wide to cross, and the people talked of turning back. But they could not do this, for Nesaru had ordered Mother-Corn to lead them always toward the
west. A water bird with a black head and a checkered back came and stood in front of Mother-Corn, and said: "I am the Loon. I will make a pathway through this water. Let the people stop crying. I shall help them."

Mother-Corn looked at the Loon and said: "Make a pathway for us, and some of the people will remain with you here." The Loon flew and jumped into the lake, moving so swiftly that it parted the waters, and when it came out on the other side of the lake it left a pathway behind. Mother-Corn led the people across to dry land, and some turned back and became Loons. The others journeyed on.

At last they came to a level place beside a river, and Mother-Corn told them to build a village there. "Now you shall have my corn to plant," she said, "so that you, by eating of it, will grow and also multiply." After they built a village and planted the corn, Mother-Corn returned to the Upper World.

The people, however, had no rules or laws to go by, no chiefs or medicine men to advise them, and soon they were spending all their time at playing games. The first game they played was shinny ball, in which they divided into sides and used curved sticks to knock a ball through the other's goal. Then they played at throwing lances through rings placed upon the ground. As time went on, the players who lost games grew so angry that they began killing those who had beaten them.

Nesaru was displeased by the behaviour of the people, and he and Mother-Corn came down to earth. He told them that they must have a chief and some medicine men to show them how to live. While Nesaru taught the people how to choose a chief through tests of bravery and wisdom, Mother-Corn taught them songs and ceremonies. After they had chosen a chief, Nesaru gave the man his own name, and then he taught the medicine men secrets of magic. He showed them how to make pipes for offering smoke to the gods of the four directions.

When all this was done, Nesaru went away toward the setting sun to prepare a place for new villages. Mother-Corn led the people in his tracks across plains and streams to this country where Nesaru had planted roots and herbs for the medicine men. There they built
villages along a river that the white men later called the Republican River, in Kansas.

On the first day that they came to this country, Mother-Corn told them to offer smoke to the gods in the heavens and to all animal gods. While they were doing this, a Dog came running into the camp crying, and he accused Mother-Corn of doing wrong by going away and leaving him behind. "I came from the Sun," he cried, "and the Sun-god is so angry because I was left behind that he is sending the Whirlwind to scatter the people."

Mother-Corn called on the Dog to save the people by appeasing the Whirlwind. "Only by giving up my freedom," the Dog replied, "can I do this. No longer can I hunt alone like my brother the Wolf, or roam free like the Coyote. I shall always be dependent upon the people."

But when the Whirlwind came spinning and roaring across the land, the Dog stood between it and the people. "I shall always remain with the people," he shouted to the Whirlwind. "I shall be a guardian for all their belongings."

After the wind died away, Mother-Corn said: "The gods are jealous. If you forget to give smoke to them they will grow angry and send storms.

In the rich earth beside the river the people planted her corn, and then she said: "I shall turn into a Cedar-Tree to remind you that I am Mother-Corn, who gave you your life. It was I, Mother-Corn, who brought you from the east. I must become a Cedar-Tree to be with you. On the right side of the tree will be placed a stone to remind you of Nesaru, who brought order and wisdom to the people."

Next morning a Cedar-Tree, full-grown, stood in front of the lodges of the people. Beside it was a large stone. The people knew that Mother-Corn and Nesaru would watch over them through all time, and would keep them together and give them long life.