

# ANNALS OF IOWA

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## EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

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### MESQUAKIE INDIANS AND THE WHEELER-HOWARD BILL

BY E. R. HARLAN

The proponents of this bill owe to Mesquakies all patience in explaining its meaning in advance of their adopting or rejecting it. Such explanations should be in sympathy and patience. It should be made in the Mesquakie language. It should be given clearly to each individual who is entitled to vote upon it, so that he may feel certainty in his judgment that he knows what to expect without taking the opinion of any other person. He should know, if the bill becomes law, what that law would mean to his entire tribe, and he should know what it means to himself as an individual. He should feel what it means to his children. He, as an individual, is principally if not primarily interested, not only in Mesquakie property and government as a whole and as his individual part, but he should feel his responsibility for the time being, for the better or worse in the prospects and assurances of his ultimate descendants.

These Indians are farmers. They may not be the best, but they are certainly not the worst of Iowa farmers. They are embraced whether intended so or not, in every measure intended for the weal or woe of Iowa farmers.

In the first Roosevelt administration, an Iowa master-minded farmer was secretary of agriculture, James Wilson of Tama County, Iowa, fellow citizen with the Mesquakie Indians. He called into being "The Country Life Commission." A member of that commission was another Iowa man, master-minded as to agriculture and humanity, Hon. Henry Wallace, founder and then editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*. During the service to his country on that voluntary Country Life Commission, *Wallaces' Farmer* continued its influence in Iowa agriculture and morals

through "Uncle Henry" having previously called to his aid his son, Henry Cantwell Wallace, as editor, and another son, John P. Wallace, publisher, of *Wallaces' Farmer*. Henry Cantwell Wallace became then, or soon afterward, secretary of agriculture in the cabinet of President Harding, remaining in the administration of President Coolidge, and until his own death in that great office. During the absence of Henry Cantwell Wallace from Iowa in the cabinet, his brother John P. Wallace was joined in the responsibility of "Good farming, clear thinking, right living," and leadership in agricultural Iowa thereby, through calling to his side the "third Henry," namely, Henry Cantwell Wallace's son, Henry Agard Wallace, now (1936) secretary of agriculture in the cabinet of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

This writer was one of the thousands of Iowa people who knew, loved and benefited by "Uncle Henry" Wallace's clear and positive thinking.

On one occasion Uncle Henry stated, in effect: "The problem of country life will never be understood until it is conceded that life upon, and from occupancy of the land, is entitled to be considered as of right in every respect equal to life in towns and cities. It takes the production by a careful farmer and good manager, of twenty acres of a good farm for each member of his family, to produce and pay for his family expenses, when they are the same as the conveniences and necessities of the family of his brother in town. Until the farmer gets that into his own mind and gets the consideration for his enterprise into the minds and hearts of all his fellow citizens, he will not have obtained from life that which he and his family have earned."

In 1925 the Mesquakies were planning for their usual summer festivities called their Pow-wow. They asked this writer to provide for them on their program some good man who would talk to them. Henry A. Wallace was asked to serve, and gladly consented. He, in company with his uncle, John P. Wallace, and his friend, Mark Thornburg, then Iowa secretary of agriculture, went early on the morning of Mr. Wallace's appearance. They spent the entire forenoon applying their expert agricultural experience and philosophy in a study of the Mesquakies, especially with regard to their living conditions, agricultural enterprise,

social life and all the points that go to make good or poor fellow citizens. With the aid of an interpreter they interviewed two of the elder members of the tribe, James Poweshick, and Young Bear.

Mr. Wallace's address was most inspiring to the Indian men, women and children, for he spoke of corn and the food products, both native and introduced, in fact and in method of propagation. His address was never published, but remains part of the teaching of the more prudent of the leading members of the Mesquakie tribe, in their tribal talks upon methods and measures for bettering their conditions.

But *Wallaces' Farmer*, in the issue of September 18, 1925, contains the report or "story" resulting from Mr. Wallace's and Mr. Thornburg's consideration of their day with the Mesquakies, in Mr. Wallace's division of *Wallaces' Farmer*, "Odds and Ends." It is as follows:

Every year in September, the Tama Indians hold a pow-wow, and this year it was my good fortune to go with my uncle, John P. Wallace, and with State Secretary of Agriculture Thornburg, to inspect some twenty-seven different cornfields, in an effort to find out the ones most deserving of prizes. It was a splendid opportunity to find out the extent to which these Indians have adopted the corn growing methods of the white man. Most of the fields of dent corn are planted with a good strain of Reid obtained originally from white farmers in the neighborhood. We found a few fields which had been given really clean cultivation. In most of them, however, could be found such weeds as cocklebur, butter-print, morning-glory or sunflowers. None of the fields would make more than sixty-five bushels per acre, and most of them would average around forty-five bushels. Eighty-bushel yields of corn are practically impossible under the Indian system of farming, because they keep very few animals and have no manure to haul out on the land; because they grow practically no clover, and because they sell most of their grain and straw off the land. They really have a long way to go yet before they become good farmers in the white man's sense of the term.

The interesting thing about the Tama Indian agriculture is not so much the dent corn and oats which the men grow to sell in Tama, but to squaw corn, beans and squashes which the women grow for family consumption. The squaw corn is an eight-row white or blue semi-flint which is two or three weeks earlier than the dent corn. Of this the Indians make many food preparations, claiming that a much better tasting product results than when the deeper kernalled dent corn is used. Much of the squaw corn is harvested while it is in the milk, and the kernels are sliced off of it and dried. Every family has its beans, which

are grown on poles. These are real Indian beans about the size of kidney beans, and speckled in color.

In some way or other these Tama Indians seem to be unusually successful in maintaining a rather large population on a small area of land. There are 3,600 acres in the reservation, and of these only 1,500 acres are in crops. Nevertheless there is a population of 360 Indians, or one Indian for each four or five acres of crop land. In the case of the white farmers of Iowa we have one white person for each twenty acres of crop land. It would seem that the Indians must exist largely on corn, beans and squashes, without much meat, in order to maintain such a dense population.

The Tama Indians themselves interested us even more than their farming methods. Most of them still speak their own language. The old-fashioned Indian village which they had constructed on the pow-wow grounds quite fascinated us. A number of wickiups had been constructed from mats which had been made out of the leaves of the cat-tail plant. The central gathering place was constructed of poles set in the ground with the green branches of willows, poplars and maples laid across on top to give shade. In the center of it they put a kettle-drum or tom-tom, and six or seven of the older Indians sat around it and beat it, giving weird yells in time to the rhythm of the beat. Then the men came out in double file, stamping in rhythm to the drum beats. Inasmuch as they had bells at the knees and ankles, it was quite important that this stamping be done just right. Then the women came out swaying in time to the rhythm, but not prancing in the same vigorous way as the men. The whole thing has a strong barbaric appeal. The Indians look on many of their dances as expressing gratitude to Divine Providence for a favorable crop growing season. None of the white man's dances have in them a particle of the religious note which characterizes many of the dances of primitive peoples. It seems that we may have lost something thereby.

To the external eye, the Tama Indians do not seem to be leading such a very desirable form of existence. They do not have the same desire to become wealthy and spend their money in a conspicuous way, as we. They seek happiness in their own way, and apparently they find a fair measure of it. Perhaps they are getting as much joy out of life as we. The white man's dynamic civilization is making a great splurge in the world for the time being, but there is always a possibility that the historians of some dim, distant future age will look back and say that the white man of today made a great show for a time, but that the civilization finally withered because changes could not be made in social systems fast enough to meet the changed ways of life brought on by new inventions. In spite of their sky-scrapers, their automobiles, their telephones, and their hundreds of millions of people, it may be that in the long run the white people will have done very little more to justify their existence on this continent than the red Indians have done.—H. A. Wallace.

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