

WAKON DECORAH.

BY ELIPHALET PRICE.

The exhuming of the remains of Wakon Decorah a few years since, from their primitive resting place upon the Iowa River, near the village that bears his name, and the re-interment of them in the public square of the town of Decorah by its citizens, has awakened some inquiry concerning his personal appearance and those events in his history which live in the remembrance of those who were acquainted with him. And, as we have frequently seen and conversed with him and know something of his history, as it was understood by the traders and Indians during his life-time, we submit this brief reminiscence in preservation of some of the incidents in his life.

The name of this distinguished chief was "Wakon Decorah,"—Waukon in the Winnebago language, means a "Snake." Decorah, it would be difficult to translate, "Corah" being an Indian word signifying "Light," and "De" a French honorary prefix, with about the same meaning that the word "Esq." expresses when affixed to the name of John Smith. We have heard his name translated to mean the "White Snake." To distinguish him from his son when spoken of, he was usually called "the Blind Decorah," having lost his right eye by a knife in the hand of his son, who was engaged in a fight, in which his father had interfered for the purpose of separating the combatants.

Decorah was the most distinguished of the Winnebago Chiefs, being the great Council Chief of the nation. Next to him in rank stood "Whirling Thunder," the commanding War Chief of the Winnebagoes.

It was the calm, prudent and wise counsels of Decorah that prevented the nation from engaging in a war with the United States in 1825, at the time that they were in the occupancy of the country bordering upon the waters of the Wisconsin.

The councils of the nation which were held near Fort Winnebago about this time, for the purpose of considering the subject of peace or war, found in Decorah an active and zealous advocate for peace, while the stirring eloquence of the young chief "Dandy," had aroused and awakened throughout the nation a feeling of hostility towards the whites, who, he had induced them to believe, could be easily exterminated or driven from their ancient hunting grounds. Gov. Cass, who was then governor of the Territory of Michigan, and superintendent of the north-western Indians, becoming alarmed at the preparations for war on the part of the Winnebagoes, invited the chiefs to accompany him to the City of Washington. Eleven of them with Wakon Decorah at their head, accepted the invitation. No persuasion on the part of the interpreter sent by Gov. Cass to invite them to accompany him to Washington, could induce Waw-pa-no-dah to accept the invitation. This chief, known as the orator of the nation, seldom left his hunting grounds on the Wisconsin, to go among the whites; when he did, it was not for the purpose of barter, but with a view to a display of his proud and lofty carriage, his person being on such occasions, decorated in a costly and ostentatious manner; from which circumstance he was better known among the whites by the name of the "Dandy." A little incident in the history of this chief was wont to produce some merriment in the military circles of Fort Crawford, and is as follows:

In the spring of 1834, one of his braves was accused by Lieut. Harris with having killed a horse belonging to the garrison of Fort Winnebago, while it was under his command. Harris ordered the Indian to be arrested and taken down to Fort Crawford, where he appeared and accused the Indian of the charge before Col. Taylor, the commandant of the post, (afterwards President Taylor.) Harris, who was a graduate of West Point, and who had never been in a battle, commenced his speech against the Indian, by detailing with great minuteness the grounds of his suspicion, there being no positive

proof upon which to convict him. As soon as he had concluded his remarks, the chief Waw-pa-no-dah arose and commenced a defense of his brave, in a calm argumentative manner. After satisfying himself that he had successfully answered and refuted the argument of Harris, he paused for a moment, as his eye swept proudly over the officers gathered around him. The low tremulous sound of the bells upon his person, the flashing of his jewels, the nodding of his plumes, and the dark frown that lowered upon his brow, as he stood forth erect, proud of his savage origin and his native wilds, gave him the appearance of one who felt that he had triumphed. Turning to Col. Taylor and fixing his eye intently upon him, he burst, upon the close of his speech, with a peroration of satire directed against the lieutenant, brilliant with expressions of savage bitterness and Indian sarcasm. Pointing to Harris with an upward curve in the arm and downward distant pointing of the finger, his head thrust forward by a stooping posture, and his eye blazing full upon Col. Taylor, he exclaimed: "The young man who comes here to speak for his dead horse, I am told, has never been upon the war-path. It may be true, and yet he is no coward, for my people have often met him at the midnight hour, brisking along the forest pathway that leads from his fort to the wigwams of the young squaws of my people."

It was during the trip of the Winnebago chiefs to Washington in 1825, that we saw Decorah for the first time. He was sitting by the side of Gov. Cass, at an experimental lecture upon chemistry got up at Peal's Museum in New York for the gratification of the chiefs. What seemed to surprise them the most during the lecture, was their inability to remove the hand from the open top of a glass reservoir after the air had been exhausted from it. Everywhere on their way to Washington great military parades were got up for the purpose of impressing them with the military power of the United States. In the harbor of New York they were taken on board the seventy-four gun ship "Ohio," when two or three broad-sides were fired.

Upon the return of Decorah to his people on the Wisconsin, he was enabled through his representations of the military power of the United States, to successfully subdue the war feeling of the nation, and sooth the hostile feeling towards the whites which had been aroused by the eloquence of Waw-pan-no-dah.

Soon after the removal of the Winnebagoes from the Wisconsin to the neutral ground in Iowa, Decorah and his band took up their residence on the Iowa River near the present site of the town that bears his name, in the County of Winneshiek.

The last time that we saw him was at the payment of the Indian annuities at the agency upon Turkey River, in 1842. His form was much bent by age, and he walked with a feeble and tottering step; from the forehead to the top of his head he was bald, while the sides and back part of it, were concealed beneath a thin covering of long iron-grey locks. He was about five feet in height, and was perhaps the shortest and smallest chief in the nation at that time. It was said that he was 81 years old, and the oldest Indian living, in the Winnebago tribe. For several years he had spoken but seldom in the councils of the nation, and was everywhere regarded by the Winnebagoes as the father of the tribe.

The door-sill of the council chamber at the agency was elevated above the ground about a foot. As the old chief approached it one day for the purpose of entering the chamber, he reached out his hands to grasp the door-frame upon each side, but missing it, he tottered back and was in the act of falling, when two of the younger chiefs sprang forward and caught him under the arms, held him up and assisted him to enter the chamber. This act of kindness immediately attracted the attention of those white persons who were looking on, and who were familiar with the Indian character. They knew that if it had been any other chief they would have permitted him to fall, and then indulged in a hearty laugh. There was something in the stature and in the expression of the counte-

nance of Wakon Decorah, aided perhaps more by his blindness than anything else, that always reminded us of Stephen Girard, the great banker of Philadelphia, whom we had often seen. We believe that a portrait of this chief may be seen in the Indian gallery at Washington; if so, we trust that the public spirited citizens of Decorah will at some future day order a large and well executed copy of it, to be hung up and preserved in the court-house at Decorah.

ANECDOTE OF GOV. GRIMES OF IOWA.

The following story of ex-Governor Grimes is vouched for by one who knew him well:—The Legislature had just convened at the capital of Iowa. Gov. Grimes had arrived the night before, and taken rooms at a certain hotel—at least so a young aspirant for office from a distant portion of the State ascertained, as he drove up and alighted from his carriage at the steps of that public house. The hostler threw out his trunk, and the landlord conducted him to his room, leaving the trunk in the bar-room. Wishing his trunk, the young man demanded to have it brought up, and seeing a man passing through the lower hall, whom he took to be the porter, he gave his commands in an imperious and lofty tone. The order was obeyed, and the man charging a quarter of a dollar for his services, a marked quarter, that was good for only twenty cents, was slipped slyly into his hand, and was put into his pocket by the man, with a smile.

“And now, sirrah!” cried the new arrival, “you know Gov. Grimes?”

“O yes, sir.”

“Well, take my card to him, and tell him I wish an interview at his earliest convenience.”

A peculiar look flashed from the man's blue eyes, and with a smile, extending his hand, he said:

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