



JAMES POWESHIEK

1854—1950

Lineal Chief of the Mesquakies

A MESQUAKIE CHIEF'S BURIAL

By EMORY H. ENGLISH

Amidst the radiance of an autumnal afternoon, as a glowing October sun was sinking in the haze of a western horizon, the mortal remains of Jim Poweshiek, lineal chief of the Mesquakie Indians, were lowered to a last resting place.

The quiet beauty of the day of his funeral, the rich coloring of the setting, the attendance of neighbors and friends, both Indian and white, the simple dignity and religious character of the service, with tributes voiced both in English and his native tongue, all contributed to an occasion just such as the honored chief would have wished, for he loved the beauties of nature, revered Manitou, and craved the esteem of his fellow man.

The funeral service was held at two o'clock October 9, at the Iowa Indian reservation home of a daughter near Tama, where he had long resided. The tribal burial ceremonies took place later a mile distant at the grave located on a beautifully wooded hillside overlooking the Iowa river, in the west burying ground of the reservation, where Jim was born and enjoyed his long life.

Ninety and seven was the span of his years, all given him in Iowa, to which his parents returned from Kansas a year previous to his advent. Since the days of the last traditional Indian Pow Wow, his strength had been declining. Weak, feeble and palsied, with his family about him, the end came peacefully Sunday afternoon, October 8, 1950.

Poweshiek has been a historic name in Iowa, and this great-grandson of the renowned chief of the Mesquakie tribe, descendants of the famed Foxes, honored and exemplified the qualities and traits of his forefathers. His death removed the oldest living member of his tribe, leaving a younger generation to carry on tribal leadership and responsibilities.

Jim had embraced the Protestant faith and attended the United Presbyterian mission church built for his people on the reservation. His early years were devoted to the religious and tribal ceremonies of his fathers, but with his family in later days he accepted the new order of worship, but without discredit or abandonment of earlier teachings. The Rev. Louis Mitchell, a member of the Mesquakie tribe, and pastor of the United Presbyterian mission church, conducted the funeral service, speaking in the Mesquakie native tongue, assisted by the Rev. Leo Thomas, of the Open Bible mission, who spoke in English, both also addressing those gathered at the burial rites. The bearers were Russell Kern, Tama county sheriff, M. V. Hyland, Tama attorney, Ed Davenport, Frank Waseskuk, Peter Wagoner, and Elder Sorensen, a Mormon elder at present working in the reservation.

Following the Christian ministers at the grave, brief Mesquakie rites were conducted by Frank Push-ton-equa, a descendant of Chief Push, a former well-liked chief. The tribal ceremonies included the placing in the casket of vessels containing food. The relatives and members of the tribe who passed by dropped bits of tobacco on the blanket of the chief which enveloped his body. With the closing of the grave, arches of tree limbs were placed over it with a pale green flag on which appeared the insignia of the grizzly bear clan, of which Jim and his descendants are members. Survivors of the chief are Mrs. Charles (Mary) Davenport, daughter, with whom he lived, another daughter, Mrs. Ida Snowball, of Sioux City, two sons, Jonas Poweshiek, of Altoona, Iowa, and Horace Poweshiek of the reservation, and a sister, Mrs. Whitebreast; also surviving are twenty-one grandchildren and thirteen great-grandchildren.

Jim Poweshiek's parents were among the Mesquakies in the Sac and Fox nation, who were removed to Kansas after the sale of lands in Iowa. The group originally were Foxes, having come from Illinois after the Blackhawk war. All were quartered adjacent to Agency City

in the Ottumwa, Oskaloosa, Eddyville area. Sac and Fox lands in eastern Iowa previously had been ceded to the government, and settlers had come into Iowa in great numbers.

Then, on October 11, 1842, Chiefs Keokuk and Poweshiek and twenty-one each of their chief men, met Gov. John Chambers, of the Territory of Iowa, at Agency City. A sale of the remainder of the Sac and Fox lands in central Iowa was negotiated, opening up these lands to the white settlers. A warranty deed was signed on behalf of the Indians by Keokuk and twenty-one Sac leaders, and by Poweshiek and twenty-one headmen of the Foxes, and a promise reluctantly made by the Indians to vacate the eastern portion of the lands as early as May 1, 1843.

The terms of this treaty required the Indians to remove west of a line running north and south through the Painted Rocks on the Whitebreast fork of the Des Moines river. Here they were permitted to remain three years, but at the end of this period all their land east of the Missouri was to be vacated. Later in May, most of the Indians moved up the Des Moines river, above the temporary line of Red Rock.

The pathetic incidents of the era are recalled as a lamentable chapter in the history of the tribe. When spring came again they withdrew, but Poweshiek and his people lingered in Jasper county as near his old home as possible. The township in that county where he remained the longest bears his name. Then also he tarried along the banks of the Des Moines and Grand river in southern Iowa. Keokuk and his band had camped south of Raccoon Forks, east of the present location of Fort Des Moines, but before October 11, 1845, quietly withdrew to the land assigned to them in northeastern Kansas, where the individual allotments consisted of 160 acres and a house, with stock and implements provided.

Before these agreements were fulfilled, a faction of the Indians created a disturbance, and Chief Poweshiek died unexpectedly and in some mysterious way. At the time it was charged that he was murdered by those who did not want allotments, schools, and other of the progressive things for which he had stood. He lies buried in an unknown grave in Kansas.

The discontent grew, and dislike of Kansas increased. Many fell sick, and some died. They longed for Iowa and as early as 1850 began to return two or three or more at a time. There was a general exodus in 1853, and in 1856 the Iowa legislature made legal their residence here, requesting the government at Washington to pay their annuities in Iowa. These payments were not resumed until 1867, and since have been continuous. In relocating in Iowa, the tribe selected and purchased with their own funds the first eighty acres in Tama county, which subsequently have been increased to over 3,300, on which they have lived and prospered in the intervening years.

Formerly it was the custom to make frequent and long excursions out in the state for the purpose of hunting and fishing, just as in the early days of the territory when Iowa was famed as their hunting grounds. But the state game laws and the barbed wire fences entirely cut off these industries, and the Indian mind was forced to seek other and more domestic and civilizing occupations. The pony herd grew smaller each year, and in the last several decades was almost entirely supplanted by the individually-owned auto. They rarely paddle in canoe in the Iowa river any more, though it flows through their vast acres, is dammed below, and furnishes a fine pond of still water. Thus gradually one by one the conditions changed, and tended to lead them—particularly the young—into the habits and vocations of their white neighbors.

Their local government is through a council of management and the council has a chief. With the passing

of Jim Poweshiek and others of the older generation the clans are less and less emphasized, and the younger generation is looking forward rather than to the past. The Mesquakie language was handed down by the spoken word until 1867, when it was written, using the English alphabet in keeping tribal and personal records.

As a young man Jim Poweshiek showed energy, and became known as intelligent and thrifty. He took interest in farming pursuits, and was one of the first tribesmen to build a frame house on the Tama tract. He became greatly interested in the improvement of the young people and added his influence to the establishment of reservation schools. Among the first to perceive the need of educational training, he understood and approved the new way of life now opening to them. He provided means for the continued education of his own children, sending the boys to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the girls to the boarding school at Toledo, and his youngest daughter graduated from the high school at Tama.

Becoming one of the tribe's outstanding men, he was a prominent member of the tribe council and a leader in their ceremonies. A musician of some ability, he was in demand as a flute player. As one of the organizers of the Pow Wow in 1912, now an annual affair, he located the event on his own grounds, dedicating the area to athletics, and for many years was president of the Pow Wow association. He was proud to receive appointment as a Federal policeman on the reservation, and as chief of the group served as such thirteen years, the others being Sam Lincoln and John Canoe. Their principal duties were to prevent the sale of liquor to members of the tribe.

Jim's Indian name was Ba-Wi-Shi-Ka, meaning Shedding Bear, and he was born September 15, 1854, the son of Me-De-Ne-A and Mi-No-Qua-A. Both he and Young Bear were fast friends of the late Curator Edgar R. Harlan, of the Iowa Historical department, and often

visited the new building. These men and others of the tribesmen aided in many ways to improve the conditions surrounding the youth of the Mesquakies in their semi-isolated location. Their example will forever be regarded as having lasting value in the lives of those who come after them, profiting by the uplift inspired by their teaching and pattern of life.

NEW ALBIN NAMED FOR YOUTH

Question arose recently as to the origin of the name of New Albin, the town of 600 inhabitants in the farthest northeastern corner of Iowa. Supt. George Smokey, of the New Albin consolidated school, is authority for the statement that before the Clinton, Dubuque & Minnesota railway built their line through there, one of the financiers of the project established the townsite and purchased considerable real estate. He was J. H. Rohmberg, who had a son named Albin. When the town plat was filed the town was called New Albin, named after his son.

The railroad was built in 1872 and the original train register at the depot shows that regular train service was first established in October that year. R. F. Giles was the first agent at the new station.

FEDERAL CONTROL OVER STATE MILITIA

In the effort of Delegate James Madison to secure Federal control over the state militia to prevent its neglect by the states, as debate developed in the long deliberations of the Constitutional convention, he said: "As the greatest danger is that of disunion of the states, it is necessary to guard against it by sufficient powers to the common government, and as the greatest danger to liberty is from large standing armies, it is best to prevent them by an effectual provision for a good militia." Whereupon only partial Federal control was granted, but this was more than a hint that no state had right to withdraw from the Union, and that military force would be used to prevent it.

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