

The Battle of Adel

By ORA WILLIAMS

The Raccoon river, in its diagonal wanderings half way across the state of Iowa, turns abruptly from its prehistoric course to make a wide and sweeping bend near the center of Dallas county. The older channel was a short cutoff, which after the building of a small dam at the upper end, became the "Mill slough" for the mill at Adel, thus forming a real island of a dozen miles in circumference.

Long ago it was suggested this island might well be called "Battle Island." The reason was good. It was here, or on the site of the city of Adel, county seat of Dallas, that a notable battle was fought—perhaps the last one in what is now Iowa. It was a real battle too, though intended to be merely a massacre of a small band by a larger one. The victims were Indians of the Delaware tribe, always wanderers, but never savage. When the WAAC's were first being trained at Fort Des Moines, a bright young miss of their number made herself known to the State Historical department as an Indian of the Delaware tribe. She was proud of her ancestry.

About a century and a decade ago, the present site of the capital city of Iowa was the camp of the Sac and Fox confederated tribe of Indians, and it had been for a long time. In fact, it was on the ground now occupied by Des Moines' finest buildings that in 1835 the Sac and Fox people made a bold stand against an expedition from New France bent upon avenging the death in a fight in what is now Wisconsin of one DeNoyelles, a French officer. The red men won out. The Frenchmen ran out of food and made a hasty retreat through what we now know as Birdland park in Des Moines, back to Detroit (Michigan) or beyond.

The Sacs and Foxes had not been happy together un-

til they jointly had whipped the French army from Canada, after which they became one friendly family. They liked the place known as "Raccoon Fork,"¹ at the joining of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, and made their headquarters in that vicinity a long time. Numbering about two thousand, they were divided into groups. The principal one of these was under the personal direction of Pashepaho, a fighting chief of the tribe. He had engineered the assaults on Fort Madison, because it had been constructed and garrisoned in violation of the Treaty of 1804, and also was in charge when the Iowa tribe was cut up in Wapello county. His name meant "the stabber" and he lived up to the name, though refusing to join Blackhawk in his persistent troublemaking.

THE SAC AND FOX CHIEFS

At the time of the Battle of Adel there were several chiefs at Raccoon Fork and vicinity. In addition to Pashepaho, the aged Sac war chief, there were Keokuk, the Sac head chief; Kishkekosh, a Sac; and Poweshiek, a Fox of the immediate Mesquakie tribe. Keokuk, it will be remembered, was the acknowledged leader, the master mind, of the combined tribes; a wise counselor, peaceably inclined, who, with Poweshiek, had prevented the main body of the Sac and Fox nation from joining the Blackhawk adventure. Keokuk had his tent south and east of the present Fort Des Moines on what the early settlers called the "Keokuk Prairie." A big elm tree, which used to be referred to as "Keokuk's Lookout," still stands in the highway on the hill across the Des Moines river bridge, south from the Iowa Power and Light plant.

Each year the hunting season was opened by a series of great feasts and tournaments at Raccoon Fork. The outdoor games were probably played on "Keokuk's Prairie." The Delawares, living somewhere along the Missouri river in southwestern Iowa, sent a delegation

¹ Not to be confused with the "forks" of the Raccoon branches at Van Meter.—EDITOR.

to attend one of these springtime festivals—sometime between 1839 and 1842. The Delaware contingent consisted of twenty-four braves fully armed and mounted, but they were on a peace mission, to join their friends in the great camp at Raccoon Fork. Western Iowa was a beautiful land and they were not in haste. They crossed a number of streams of clear water and camped in fine groves. They came to the Raccoon river at nightfall. They would camp and thus be able to appear at the rendezvous of their friends in the early morning. They camped on "the island" that now joins the city of Adel. There was an abundance of maples and elms and oaks. Their chief, or headman, Neswage, laid his blanket down at the foot of a big tree, and they all slept well.

Unknown to the Delawares, was the fact that a party of Dakotah, or Sioux, Indians had been trailing the peace-loving visitors. The Sioux discovered the camp in the night. At dawn, the twenty-four Delawares were surrounded. "We are lost," cried Chief Neswage, "but will fight to the death." And so they did.

DELAWARE SURVIVOR SOUGHT HELP

One of the Delawares, and only one, survived. He crept from his concealment and ran with hot haste to Raccoon Fork to tell the tale of blood-letting to the Sacs and Foxes, friends of the Delawares. His story was believed. The call to arms was quickly sounded. Chief Pashepaho, at eighty years, too old to bounce into the saddle, was lifted to his seat a-horseback, to direct his last fight, leading a party of 500 Sac and Fox warriors, armed with bows and arrows, and other arms. At the Adel island they found proof of what had been told them. Of the band of twenty-four Delawares, twenty-three lay dead on the sands; but there also were twenty-six slain Sioux, showing the desperate character of the fight that had taken place. The tree near which Chief Neswage had slept was scarred

and bruised and four of the dead Sioux there attested to his prowess.

As to the sequel to the Battle of Adel little is known. Tradition has it that Pashepaho and his band of warriors followed the trail up the Raccoon valley "about 100 miles" and there overtook and punished the Sioux. It is also tradition that in this remarkable battle some 300 Sioux were killed and the Sac and Fox lost only seven men.

Where was this later battle fought? Well, "about 100 miles" up the Raccoon valley lies Swan lake in Carroll county, and near this lake since have been found many arrowheads and other evidences of a battle. It is almost certain the Sioux lost their last battle in Iowa at that place.

Since the time of Homer, it has been popular to tell of great victories in verse. Leonard Brown was a Des Moines school teacher, who in his spare moments indulged in rhyming. He published several pamphlets containing sketches in both prose and blank verse. He probably obtained the story of the Battle of Adel from Fulton, and so, memorialized in verse this little-remembered massacre of the Delawares:

PASH-E-PA-HO

By LEONARD BROWN

Inscribed to My Friend, John Evans

The Delaware chief, Nes-wa-ge, encamped over night near
the timber
North of the beautiful site of Adel, all then a wild prairie.
Gracefully waved the tall grass on the lowlands adjoining
the river;
Mower nor scythe had disturbed it. The deer and the elk
and the bison
Grazed on those grass-covered plateaus; while the huts of the
beaver
(Washed by the Raccoon—Asipala, the swift-flowing water)
Marked here the only fixed habitations since the mound-
builders' era.

Promptly at dawn rise Nes-wa-ge and band. The twenty-
four warriors

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