

AN ORIGINAL STUDY OF MESQUAKIE (FOX) LIFE

II

Following the council of Mesquakie Indians with Des Moines teachers which was held February 18, 1928, the interest of schools and teachers in the Mesquakie Indians of Iowa continued. So many questions came into the Historical Department to be answered on this group of Indians that an Indian Life School was attempted by Curator Harlan as an effort to put into the hand of teachers in Iowa schools, such direct and first hand aid to their teaching of pioneer and Indian Life as he could. Meetings were held on the banks of a small stream on a wooded plot near Altoona, Iowa, with no accessories or advantages for the teachers that the Indians did not need in such a camping place as they make in their usual proceeding in 1928 their occasional hunting and trapping trips. There was no heat except such as they provided for Indians' needs, and no illuminants except the moon, which was near full, no seats except the natural sward whose irregularities formed the arrangement of persons participating as either audience or management. The curve of the brook and the pitch of the ground toward it formed the natural stage and auditorium of the Indians' choice.

***** Ere man learned
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,
And spread the roof above them—ere he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,
Amid the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks
And supplication.*****—Bryant.

INDIAN LIFE SCHOOL

(Talk between Dr. Melvin R. Gilmore¹ and E. R. Harlan on the one part and Young Bear and Jim Poweshiek on the other, George Young Bear, interpreter. Stenographic record and transcript by Harriet King Card.)

Tuesday evening, August 28, 1928.

Mr. Harlan: I want to tell Young Bear through George, the occasion of this meeting.²

¹See Who's Who in America for 1928, page 868, for Dr. Gilmore.

²The end of each of these paragraphs indicates a pause during which George Young Bear interpreted the words of Mr. Harlan or of Dr. Gilmore into Indian, or the words of Young Bear or of Jim Poweshiek into English.

For some time there have been from one to a dozen of those who teach our children in the Des Moines city schools coming to the Historical Building, or otherwise asking our assistance in their preparation to teach these children Indian Life. It occurred to me that there might be an arrangement for a few teachers to hear the Indians' answers to their questions, and in other ways to get acquainted with you and your way of living; for that reason only was this series of meetings planned.

From the fact that there are about two and a half million white people in Iowa and but three hundred and eighty of the Sac and Fox tribe that in 1846 and earlier occupied the lands where we are now, it seems like the white people ought in some way to arrange to become better acquainted with you and your ancient ways. This is meant to help you show your white friends, who may be here during the week and Sunday and Monday, that it is not at all impossible to meet and get acquainted with you.

The books that we study tell us what lands, now in the state of Iowa, you inhabited a hundred years ago. If our books have it right, in about 1810 to 1820 there were a number of tribes that we ought to know more about. They are your own, the Sioux, Winnebagoes, Iowas, Omahas, and Pottawatamies. But we can learn this also from you. I thought that during this week we might have a talk about each of those different ones. Let us tell you what our books teach us, and then hear you tell us what you know of these different tribes.

Now, I would like to hear your thoughts about this plan. What do you think of it? Would it be agreeable to you and your people, and can we make of it a benefit to both your people and to our own?

Young Bear: My friends, as I look upon the face of each one of you I realize that our race will soon be no more in the future, because the conditions of our homes are changing. Each year we can see the difference as the new generations come. There is a great deal of change. We are losing our customs, habits, and many of our arts are past and gone. The government is educating our people, sending our children to school, and when these children come back to our homes they are not as we have taught them. They learn things from the books, therefore their habits are formed and they go out

into the world more like the white people, and so all these things will be all past in a few more years, and those of you who are interested in us, I hope that some good will be accomplished between us, and toward the understanding of our people and your people, and so any questions that you may ask will be welcome, and we will attempt to answer the best we can.

Mr. Harlan: I propose that this group of teachers have the benefit, as you do too, of Dr. Gilmore's being with us. I want to introduce Dr. Gilmore to you as being the truest man in regard to the Indians and other races that it has been my pleasure ever to meet. Not only is he true and just, but he was born in Nebraska, and as a boy and as a student in the colleges he perfected himself in his knowledge of the Indians' use of plants and plant life. He has associated with, lived with and respected the Indians of other tribes and languages. During the week he will be able to ask questions and to answer questions which will contribute to this very good purpose that you and I would like to see brought about.

Then I propose that those of us who are here and find you willing to give us whatever information that you feel we ought to have—I propose that anything we ask of you should be a question which, if you were to ask us, would seem to us to be fair and right. That is, we would like to know, for instance, all about the way you conduct your family. But we will not ask you any question that we would not want you to ask us about our family. Whatever is said tonight will be in the spirit that will help us to understand your ways. We will write it down, and then tomorrow evening that question will be asked of you and of Dr. Gilmore. We will see that it is all right, and, if answered, will be a contribution to the knowledge of these folks who teach Indian Life.

If it is a question that would not be right to ask about my children or my wife, then you and Dr. Gilmore will pay no attention to that question, and no one will inquire any further about it. I know from my association with you and your people that white people are often not very tactful about the way they try to inquire into your way of living. This body, and every one that is in this group will be just as nice and just as respectful of you as they would expect you to be re-

spectful of them. With that arrangement we believe it will be a happy experience.

Now, we recognize that you, Young Bear, being around sixty years old, who, when you first remember, were in your father Push e ton e qua's house, that you, as a boy must have learned from him or from some one else, a good deal the same as my children have learned from their teachers in school. You must have learned the things that made you a good man, and Jim Poweshiek, over seventy years old—say sixty-five years ago, when he was five years old—he must have been taught such things as made him a good man. I wish you would teach us how, a hundred years ago, the Indian boy or girl got his knowledge. How were they taught these lessons?

Young Bear: We all know that to seek knowledge is one of the hardest tasks for any one to take, and so it is with us, and tonight there are probably more people than this that would like to hear just the things we are talking about, but they have no time. And so it is with us. Sometimes there may be a council, there may be some knowledge that has been acquired by our old people—would be taught to our people, and they are called together to one lodge. There may be a few that would go, and so the human being is almost the same everywhere. And in the teaching of our customs and habits and our legends and the stories and ceremonial rites, the record has been made. But we find everywhere the books that you read—the books that have been recorded of the habits of our people—were made long before the white people settled this country. The travelers and explorers and traders would come through the village and stay for a day and go away and write their records. Of course the people today depend on those records. They learn about the Indians only from those records. The records even that are these days made by the men who came on in our own reservation—they are made often by men that went out from Washington to learn our sacred ceremonies, about our customs and our rituals, our beliefs—they come out to learn these and to make record of them, and of course they often do not meet the right kind of our people. We have various classes of Indians. Some live just according to their own way, and of course they will do anything, when some white man comes along they expect to be compensated

by the white man, and so the white men are misinformed, but if the white man would go to the thinking Indian, the Indian who tries to do what is right—they cannot, by giving money or presents—they cannot get the information, and so the records that you get are something entirely wrong. Your people have been misinformed. And so it is with our children. We are teaching things that our parents taught us, and there are many ways that they are teaching it. We teach the lesson through experience and through talks, and through showing how to do things, and so we live throughout the course of our lives. Each thing has to be taught during the certain age from the very beginning. Year after year things are taught to us until the knowledge that we have in our old age has become thorough.

Any question that any one wishes to ask will be answered, and the question asking anything I do not know, I will admit that I do not know. Of course, Mr. Harlan knows me well, and I always tell him what I know.

Mr. Harlan: Let me ask Young Bear to go back in his own recollection to when he was a little boy, and tell us of some one who showed him something that has been good for him all his life. Tell us the name of the person and the circumstance under which he learned that lesson.

Young Bear: It is hard to remember certain things that make us good later on in life, because the things that are taught to us are taught to us little by little, from year to year, and so we cannot remember certain ones or names, but, however, later on in life we remember them and we think about them.

As I remember in early childhood, the right and wrong was taught to me by my parents. They showed me what was right and what was wrong. They taught me not to do what was bad, and so one of these things was not to take the things that belonged to some one else. Stealing has been taught to us as being one of the worst evils to be done by any one, and the life that is taught to us is that if any one takes the road that is not right he will not have life—he will not live long, but the one who keeps his life clean will live long and will be looked upon by the Great Spirit.

Kindness is another thing that is taught to us—to be kind

to all living things; to be kind to the poor, and to be kind to every one, and so if we see any one who is old and feeble and tottering along we should not laugh, we should not mock him; if we see any one crippled, we should not say anything, but favor him and feel kind toward him.

To make friends wherever we go is another thing. We were taught to respect every one and to be friendly, and so one of the things that is taught to us is to be free with everything that we have. In those days food was regarded as one of the greatest gifts any one could give; and so the food, if we have food, if we have plenty we should not think only of ourselves, but of our people first, and so we should give—give—and always give as much as we can. If we see any one, if we see old people in a lodge by themselves, having a hard time, we should go over with food and enter their lodge. We should give them the things that will make them comfortable. And so the custom was, in the old days, that whenever a family is sick and cannot get their own food and cannot make their own things, that it was up to the people to help them, not for pay, but just kindness, to help one another. If the old people who live in a house by themselves, they should be helped. And so it was the duty of every young man who was able to do anything, it was to help the old people and give them food or whatever they needed. In this way the Great Spirit blesses the young people, and it is because of this they live long. Why is it that a young man helps his old people? It is because the thing that has been taught to us is that the Great Spirit blesses and makes those young people live long, those who help the old people. The old people when they live to be of old age, they do not live to an old age because they have taken care of themselves, but they are blessed by the Great Spirit, and so the young man who helps them are those blessed by the Great Spirit.

We should not say things that are not so. To lie to one another is an evil thing, and we should not lie to one another, and when we say the things that are true we should not be ashamed to tell one another the truth. Be true to one another, be true to your friends, be true to every one, because the one who lies is not the one who is looked upon by the

Great Spirit, but truth is the thing that the Great Spirit wishes to have, and he blesses the children who tell the truth.

So there are a great many things as we grow old—things the old people were taught by their parents to teach their children to lead the life that is full of kindness and love. And they were taught to go out to hunt, so they came upon white men's homesteads everywhere, and as they went by a schoolhouse all of the children came out. They came and threw rocks, sticks, and threw everything at the horses and at our people, and so our old people supposed white people teach their children in their schoolhouses to throw at people. They teach the things different than the Indians teach, and we don't want our children to be taught those things.

Mr. Harlan: I wonder if we can, all of us, now, consider what Young Bear could tell us tomorrow evening that would apply to our own job, as teaching our children, or teaching our pupils in school; and so if any one has queries, write them out, and if you come in the evening Dr. Gilmore will arrange them so the queries will bring out whatever our Indian friends can give us of their own culture in the direction that the queries point. I wish we could have Dr. Gilmore tell us, and George interpret it, so Young Bear and Jim will understand.

Dr. Gilmore: It occurs to me that the teachers might leave their queries today, and tomorrow it will be easier and more economical in time.

Mr. Harlan: Dr. Gilmore, I am anxious that these Indians learn what other Indians you have visited and studied, so that whenever the name is mentioned among them they will see that your learning comes from their own relations or with those not related to you. I want them to know you.

Mr. Gilmore: Well, Mr. Harlan said I was born in Nebraska—in eastern Nebraska, in the Omaha country. I was used to seeing the Omahas and Pawnees when I was a small boy—saw them traveling from their homes to trading posts at Elk Horn. I was acquainted with the Indians, and saw them as friends. It was after I was in college that I first came to know the Omahas well. I was teaching in a college in Nebraska near Lincoln, and was at the same time doing graduate work in the University of Nebraska, when I went on an experimental

trip on the Omaha reservation. I got acquainted with them then, and learned a number of interesting things from them about their native plants and their uses, and also of their old time agriculture. When I came back to the University I was talking of the interesting things I learned from the Omahas, it was suggested that I make that my special study. Then I made a special inquiry into the Omahas' use of plants, and from that to other tribes of the Missouri region.

I then extended my study to the Pawnees, the Poncas, the Sioux, the Mandans and others. I was curator of the State Historical Society of Nebraska. Some years after that I went to North Dakota as curator of that state, and got acquainted with the Aricaras, the Mandans, and as I had been well acquainted with the Pawnees, I went down into Oklahoma to make a study of them. While I was still in Nebraska their chief visited that state. He was then eighty-three years old. He said he wanted to visit his homeland before he died, so I took him out along the Platte River. He showed me where he was born, his old village scenes and many things of old time life. On the way back to Lincoln he said to me one day, "I have in mind to give you a Pawnee name." He considered for some time, and mentioned two names he had in mind. He spoke up again and said, "I have now made up my mind." And when he returned home he made a declaration of the name, and so I have always felt acquainted with the Pawnees and the Aricaras—since they are of the same stock. When I went to North Dakota the Aricaras felt especially friendly to me because I bore a Pawnee name.

I have gone to all these people in a friendly way, acknowledging them as my teachers. They have been very kind to me, and have taught me what I know. It is by their teaching that I am able to teach white people Indian lore, especially of the Poncas and the Aricaras. They are people of superior culture. Yet the white people have not learned so much about them as they have about some other tribes. The Mandans for instance are better known. Yet the Mandans and other tribes learned from the Aricaras and the Pawnees. It was these people who came from the Southwest, and taught the other tribes, and so they have been glad for me to record their knowl-

edge. They have felt slighted that the people that they themselves taught before white men came, have come to be considered by white people to be of superior culture, when in reality they borrowed their culture from them. For that reason the Aricaras especially have been very desirous for me to get all of the information I can before it is too late, because the old people have died, and the young people of the tribes are not learning things alone of their own tribes.

I have learned from these people, not only what I started out to do—their knowledge of native plants, and of their agriculture, but also of the native animals and birds and mammals, and their knowledge of geography, their systems of teaching the children, their educational system, how their children acquire their education, and everything of interest that concerns the old-time people. To me there is a strange ignorance in white people. It seems to me that the white people know more of the native peoples of foreign lands than they do of our own people here. So I have tried to lead white people to know some of the beautiful things that there are in America, and something of the worth of the life and teachings of the races that are native to this country.

In my association with these tribes, and more especially with the Pawnees and the Aricaras, they have often said that they do not feel me to be a stranger. They feel as though I am one of them, and I have been invited to take part with them in their sacred rituals. I have been through these societies, taking part in the rituals, and have made record of these things. They are not printed yet, but a good deal of the work that I have done in plants has been printed by the Bureau of American Ethnology, in the Thirty-third Annual Report,³ and many of these other things that I have learned from them I have not yet published.

After several years in the service of the state of North Dakota I was called to the Museum of the American Indian in New York, and have since then been in field work with the tribes. I have got acquainted with the Iroquois, and have some interesting information from them.

³*Thirty-third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1911-12, page 39. Also see Dr. Gilmore's articles in the *ANNALS OF IOWA*, "Folklore concerning the Meadow Lark," Vol. XIII, p. 137; "The Ground Bean and the Bean Mouse and their Economic Relations," Vol. XII, pp. 606-09.

Mr. Harlan: Would you like to ask Dr. Gilmore anything about these different things, or the people he was acquainted with?

Young Bear: I have listened to my friend's talk, and every word that he uttered is true. I believe in everything he said, but of course I do not understand or do not know anything about the people he spoke of. However, I know several tribes, and the people that we understand—there are several of us that understand each other—we have the same customs, habits and beliefs—we are almost the same, and also are friendly to these tribes, and every one of these tribes we have visited and become acquainted with, but our friend and the people he spoke about—I do not know anything about those people.

Mr. Harlan: I believe you can all see, you, Young Bear, and Jim, and Dr. Gilmore, how much those of us sitting by can learn. If, as you talk to one another before us during the week, Young Bear should inquire of Dr. Gilmore about the customs of the Pawnees or the Aricaras or any other, and will let us hear the question and answer, and if you, Dr. Gilmore, should ask of Young Bear and his people any thing of interest here in the meeting, we can have as much benefit as you two do. That is my thought of what a school is. It need never be called a school, and yet we are all learning very, very much. Because Dr. Gilmore has paid special attention to the plants, I am going to suggest that if Dr. Gilmore can spare the time, perhaps Thursday morning, he and Young Bear can spend some time looking at the native plants in this region which Dr. Gilmore is interested in, and he can explain the plants to Young Bear as he understands them and has learned from other people.

Dr. Gilmore: And Young Bear can tell me things from his people that I do not know.

It may be well to say that these tribes that I have been speaking of—I was speaking of two interesting stocks—our Indians here are of another stock—I do not know a word they are saying, because I have not worked with any of the tribes that speak Algonquin—I spoke of two tribes of the Cadoan stock, and several other tribes that I mentioned, that are entirely different from the Siouan stock, and both entirely different from the Algonquin, with different customs and different

blood, just as there are different divisions of the white race. For instance, Slavonic, Teutonic and Celtic. There are more than fifty, nearly sixty different Indian stocks, and these different stocks comprise more than two hundred languages. For instance, each one of these stocks may have contributed to the number of Kiowa as only one stock, and many of the others may have from several up to two dozen languages—languages related to each other, yet not intelligible to each other, as there are Germans and Swedes and Hollanders, and each of these languages may have several dialects, just as you know the Germans and Swedes and several in Norway. So I mention that there are several tribes of these stocks, but Young Bear was not acquainted with these other people. I have never been thrown with any of the people of his stock except a little boy with the Chippewas—there was one in North Dakota—and that is all I know of the Algonquin, except also a little boy of the Pottawattamies. My acquaintance has been mostly Cadoan and Siouan and Iroquois. The Iroquois is a great stock of New York and Canada, and the Cherokee in the South.

Mr. Harlan [to George Young Bear]: Will you tell your father what Dr. Gilmore has just said of the diversity of the stocks?

Dr. Gilmore: There are many different stocks in America, just as there are in Europe, of the white people.

Mr. Harlan: Now, I want Young Bear to learn from Miss Mershon how it is you go about teaching Indian Life?

Miss Mershon: I am afraid we never had much success doing it. We have so little material we can use. Just exactly how do you mean?

Mr. Harlan: When a class comes to you and you have a study of Indian Life. Just what do you do?

Miss Mershon: At the beginning of the work I generally try to find out what they would like to know, and make a list. And then, of course, during the last semester's work⁴ I knew much more about it myself. That has to be true when we have no texts. When the children of the third grade, seven or eight years old, have no texts, and we find out what they want

⁴The semester's work referred to was done after the Council of the Indians and teachers was held, a report of which is published in the first division of this article.

to know—for instance, about the houses, I generally talk about our own homes first, and then about the Indians' homes.

Mr. Harlan: George, explain that to your father. Now then, if you are giving to them the information they want to know about the Indians' houses or homes, what have you in the shape of a book?

Miss Mershon: That's what I have been anticipating. We have had nothing to go on. I felt better equipped to teach after I was out here last spring than ever before.

Dr. Gilmore: Are you acquainted with the Hand Book of the American Indian published by the Bureau of American Ethnology, sometimes referred to as the Encyclopedia?

Miss Mershon: Yes, I go to that, but it must all come from the teacher. The teacher has only what she can get from books. We have nothing definite on Indians in our own locality.

Mr. Harlan: George, will you make that plain to Young Bear. Now in that line Dr. Gilmore has studies and notes, and I believe a manuscript which, when it is published, ought to supply you, Miss Mershon, and any one in your situation, substantially what you are seeking, and my part in the matter here would be to have Dr. Gilmore acquainted with that problem, even more, perhaps, than he is, and that he connect that with our own Indian resources of this state. This is the object and all the object I have. Tell your folks, too, George, so we can make all minds alike.

Young Bear, our books tell us that in the earliest time, the earliest people, learning, education, was gained from the wisest men in just talks this way. Even the Nazarene taught those who believed him, blessed them, and taught his faith in just conversations, sometimes with no more people about than are here, and that has been studied for thousands of years afterwards. And so your people, in talking around your fires in winter have done this. Without any pretense at all this evening we have had an interchange of thoughts of the different races and different languages, and have talked of the different problems that we all have. I wish we could recollect with what seriousness, and I would say success, we have met in this little party in this way.

Now, we understand that all these people that Dr. Gilmore has mentioned are races in the world's history who have had

similar problems and similar experiences. Among the experiences of each one have been spiritual experiences, through, for instance, the art of music. I would like to have some music by Jim on his flute. Just enough of it so that each evening the rest of the week we can get together on the experiences or the enjoyment of it. I want Young Bear and Jim to understand this idea. Jim, did you bring your flute?

Jim: Yes.

Mr. Harlan: Will you get it? Later in the week I hope Dr. Gilmore will give to you all the thoughts he gave to me today, about this. And while Jim is getting ready I wish our friends would reflect just a little upon the fact that these sounds that we hear today will not be the same as from our violins or saxophones. I have always felt like we can associate the notes of the flute with the notes of the doves or the whip-poor-wills, or any sound in nature, as he will play it for us. If I am mistaken about that, Dr. Gilmore will correct me at a later time.

George Young Bear: He is playing a certain class of music—songs, and he wishes to know if any one cares to hear any particular song. He knows different kinds of songs—songs he played, and there are two particular songs that he has always played. The two are love songs, and the meaning of these love songs he always tries to explain. Some people are interested in these songs, and they want to know them, and he has mentioned two or three of his friends that he has tried to teach.

Dr. Gilmore: I was going to suggest that Indians have different kinds of instruments for different classes of music—there are different classes. I mention sentimental songs, and there are songs for other purposes, as other races have ballads, and other types of songs. Indians have victory songs, songs of war, and songs in relation to all phases of life, and so they have different instruments for different emotions. The flute is for sentimental songs and love songs.

Mr. Harlan: Let me ask that he play some one song, some one melody, until we get it in our own natures, to see if we cannot get it this week. Let's stick to one until we get the spirit of it? What is the song about?

(Jim plays on his flute; the teachers applaud.)

Jim: The origin of this song is unknown. Our own people have sung this song for generations, and it tells of a certain couple. It is a young man and a young woman who were very much in love with each other, and of course eventually married. They had a lodge of their own and they were very happy. They lived together for some years, and finally there was some difficulty between them. They began to quarrel, and began to find fault with each other. They were very unhappy. They began to worry over the future. Finally the young woman became so unhappy and so dissatisfied with her lodge that she decided at last to leave, to go out alone, and become of her whatever may happen to her. And so she goes out—left her home with a heavy heart, worried and saddened, and so she sings this song. The title of it is "I am going away."

Mr. Harlan: Can you sing it, Jim?

George: He said he would try to sing it—of course he is not much of a singer.

Mr. Harlan: I am going to say this. That if Young Bear and Jim will sing this tomorrow night, and these folks will try to learn it, Dr. Gilmore and I will try it.

Dr. Gilmore: You are promising too much.

Mr. Harlan: Well, anyway, nothing would please me better than to have some one try to sing it. What is "Ni be no"?

George: It means "I am going away."

Jim plays his flute, then sings the song "Ni be no."

Mr. Harlan: Well, I think that song might be treated as the end of the evening. I can't see why we cannot get a great deal of good out of this experience and this exchange of thought. So far as I know this is the only record ever made of a Mesquakie conference as an aid to the teaching of Indian Life by white teachers in schools. Whether one song or a dozen makes no particular difference until the music and the meaning of it is understood by the pupils being taught. I would like to have Miss Rhode or Mrs. Card make a record of your criticism or particular questions as to the value to you of this method. I want also to canvass the subject of the comfort of the evening. By tomorrow evening Dr. Gilmore will have some additional ideas, all within proper scope, and if you miss it, it will, I think, be to abuse an opportunity.

[To be continued]

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