

Die Colonisten und die Indianer

The Unusual Relationship
Between the Meskwaki Nation
and the Amana Society

by Peter Hoehnle

A Meskwaki woman and two children pass by a man from the Amanas (possibly the author's great-great-grandfather William F. Moershel). In the background is the Zimmermann Kitchen House—now the Ronneburg Restaurant. (Photo by Friedrich Oehl)



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Two of Iowa's most ethnically and culturally distinct groups—the Meskwaki Nation and the Community of True Inspiration—chose to isolate themselves from American society in order to protect their religious and cultural traditions. The Inspirationists took the highly unusual step of forming a communal society. The Meskwaki purchased land, an action then without precedent among American Indian tribes.

Yet these two groups, of such different origins, ended up living within 40 miles of each other along the

Iowa River and interacting through trade and friendship beginning in the 1850s.

Known initially as the Community of True Inspiration, the Amana Society originated in the religious tumult of early 18th-century Europe. Founded in 1714, this Christian sect practiced farming and believed that certain specially endowed individuals, known as *Werkzeuge* (instruments), were inspired to deliver God's word. Like many Pietist sects then, the Inspirationists were pacifists, refused to swear oaths, and did not observe a water baptism ceremony, believing that

baptism by the Holy Spirit came to the true believer directly and that the outward symbol of water was unnecessary. They worshiped in simple prayer meetings conducted by lay elders. The group suffered decades of persecution from unsympathetic religious and state authorities. In 1842, under the leadership of *Werkzeug* Christian Metz, the Inspirationists liquidated their German assets and began the process of relocating to the United States.

The Meskwaki, or "People of the Red Earth," trace their lineage to the eastern coast of the present United States, including the Niagara Falls area. The tribe originated within the Central Algonquian tradition and shares cultural and linguistic characteristics with the Sauk, Kickapoo, Menominee, and Potawatomi. Meskwaki oral tradition places the tribe in Ohio and southern Michigan. By the time of their first recorded contact with Europeans in 1665 or 1666, they had been driven to the Green Bay area of Wisconsin. At that time they may have numbered as many as 12,000 people.

The French traders and missionaries who encountered the Meskwaki found them fiercely independent in their efforts to disrupt the French fur trade. Over time, the Meskwaki emerged as an important political, economic, and military force in the Great Lakes region. By 1712 tensions between the Meskwaki and the French resulted in the start of a series of wars that continued until the 1730s. The French sought the complete extermination of the Meskwaki and, despite prolonged and fierce resistance by the Meskwaki, nearly succeeded; the tribe was greatly diminished, down to less than 1,000. The tribe sought refuge in 1733 with their allies, the Sauk, in Illinois, and eventually established small communities in what would become Iowa. The Meskwaki and Sauk remained distinct tribes, with separate leaders, villages, and cultures. In 1804 some Sauk members visiting St. Louis signed a treaty ceding their Illinois lands to the United States. The treaty recognized these Sauk as representatives of "the United Sac and Fox Tribes." The Meskwaki (mistakenly called the Fox) were thus legally tied to the Sauk (the Sac) by the government.

Because of land cessions demanded by the federal government in the 1830s, the Meskwaki began to move farther into Iowa Territory, away from the Mississippi. Subsequent treaties led to the cession of all Meskwaki land in Iowa and a treaty stipulation to relocate to reservation land in Kansas. Continuing their tradition of resistance and resilience, however, many Meskwaki remained in Iowa.

The Inspirationists' first contact with American Indians (though not the Meskwaki tribe) occurred

in November 1842, when a five-member group from Germany explored land options on the former Seneca Indian Reservation near Buffalo, New York. Prominent Germans whom the Inspirationists had contacted upon their arrival in the city had recommended that they look at the reservation, which was about to be opened to settlement.

The Inspirationists soon began negotiations to pur-



This is believed to be Sauhetenoqua Leaf, standing by one of the Amana kitchen houses. She wears a traditional Amana blanket. (Photo by Friedrich Oehl)

chase a 5,000-acre tract from the Ogden Land Company, a private firm then acquiring land from the Seneca. Company officials assured the Inspirationists that they would have immediate possession. Only later did the Germans learn that the Seneca had been promised a two-year period to remain on the site, and since Ogden had not completed its purchase of the reservation lands, it could not provide a valid deed. The result of this situation was an ongoing struggle over property rights.

Negotiations with individual Seneca did provide the Inspirationists with some tracts of land by the spring of 1843, when the first group arrived from Germany and settled on the property, some occupying recently vacated Seneca cabins. The Seneca who remained continued to press their claim to the property. Ultimately, the Inspirationists agreed to pay the Seneca a fee for a one-year contract during which the Seneca agreed "not to undertake anything to harm the settlers."

The Inspirationists established four villages on the Buffalo Creek lands: Lower Ebenezer, New Ebenezer, Middle Ebenezer (at the site of the Seneca community known as Jack Berrytown), and Upper Ebenezer (at the site of a Seneca village known as Dyo-nah-da-eeh or "hemlock elevation"). They created a formal communal system, in which all land and property were held in common, families ate in central kitchens, and church elders meted out job assignments.

Interaction was reasonably peaceful as the two groups struggled to coexist on the contested reservation land. But misunderstandings, faulty information, and questionable dealings by the Ogden Land Company led to conflict and animosity. Eventually the Seneca appealed to the U.S. government to negate the treaty that had transferred land to Ogden; this would negate Ogden's contract to acquire the land and therefore invalidate the Inspirationists' contract. The Inspirationists successfully petitioned Congress to sustain the treaty. But with the encroachment by the city of Buffalo, they now faced higher real estate prices and water-power disputes. In fall 1854 they dispatched a committee of four to look at land in Kansas Territory.

Their guide was Charles Journeycake, a prominent Delaware tribal leader. Journeycake showed them several tracts of largely Indian-owned land in the eastern portion of the territory. But they were

unable to reach a purchase agreement. This, coupled with sickness among committee members and, perhaps, increasing turmoil over slavery, influenced the committee to abandon Kansas. Returning to Ebenezer, the committee reported unfavorably on their Kansas search.

A second committee visited eastern Iowa, leading to a decision to begin to buy land, and in June 1855, a third committee began purchasing land in the vicinity of the Iowa River—3,300 acres of government land and more from speculators and farmers. They started constructing homes and barns and tilling the soil.

The coincidences of the Inspirationists' attempts to purchase land near Meskwaki lands—first in Kansas and later in eastern Iowa—do not surprise Meskwaki members today. According to tribal historian Jonathan Lantz Buffalo, a Meskwaki/Inspirationist geographic connection had existed even in the region of Niagara Falls and Ebenezer, where the Inspirationists first settled, because as far back as the early 1700s, a small group of Meskwaki had been absorbed and acculturated by the Seneca in that area.

The Iowa land that the Inspirationists bought was already known to the Meskwaki; they had hunted, fished, and gathered food from the prairies, woods, and waterways as they moved into the interior of Iowa as a result of land



Above and right: Both the Meskwaki and Amana people relied on the land by hunting, fishing, harvesting timber, and gathering wild edibles.

cessions in the 1830s. The tribe followed a traditional pattern of planting in spring, hunting in summer, and harvesting in late summer; during the winter they lived in smaller, often family-based, campsites.

In 1839 and 1840, Meskwaki leaders Wacoshashe and Poweshiek moved their bands to a site on the south side of the Iowa River. These combined bands gave the Meskwaki village a population of at least 500 people. Nearby, the federal government, as it had for many tribes, established a model farm for the Meskwaki and hired a man to plow and fence some 800 acres for them to farm in Euro-American fashion. At the same time a fur trader named Patterson, employed by Pierre Chouteau & Co. (formerly known as the American Fur Company), established a trading house nearby. For three years, the Meskwaki lived in the village during the summer, trading with Patterson, cultivating small garden plots in their own ways, hunting, fishing, and burying their dead. In 1842, the government demanded that they leave the area. But many Meskwaki were intent on remaining and maintaining their traditional ways rather than moving farther west.

After the Meskwaki movements westward, Patterson's trading house became the first general store in Iowa County, serving the needs of incoming white settlers. The 800 acres that had been cleared for, but never farmed by, the Meskwaki eventually came into the possession of Charles E. Whiting, who sold the land to the Amana Society on Independence Day 1855. Adjacent to the land, the Inspirationists began

to establish South Amana, the third of seven villages, in 1857. (The first two Inspirationist villages were on the north side of the river.) The timber along the river and just west of South Amana became known as *die Inje Busch* (the Indian Woods), a name still used today.

A story among the Meskwaki, but which does not appear in Amana sources, is that the Amana Society provided funds for the Meskwaki to purchase 80 acres of land in Tama County, which formed the nucleus of their tribal settlement, in 1857. According to deed records, about ten miles away the Inspirationists were also buying land, 1,340 acres, between about 1855 and 1857. The land had been bought either in the event that it would be needed for another Amana village or simply because it was public land available at government prices and could be sold later at a profit. They held this land until the late 1860s.

A strong sense of religiosity marked both groups. The religious beliefs of the Inspirationists were the primary reason they had migrated from Germany and New York and adopted communal living. The Meskwaki have appreciated that the Inspirationists never attempted to convert them, unlike the white missionaries who had encroached on the settlement in the late 19th century. As Johnathan Buffalo says, "One of the connections of the Amana people and the Meskwaki is that we're both very religious, and without trying to convert each other. We respected their religion, their belief. And they recognized us as very religious people."





COURTESY GORDON KELLENBERGER

Selma Kellenberger Tschopp (left) and her sister Frieda Kellenberger Schoettmer pose with a few Meskwaki camping near West or High Amana, circa 1920s. For this occasion, the sisters are not dressed in traditional Amana women's garb.

Modern Meskwaki tradition suggests that not only were tribal members anxious to maintain a connection to their former village site, but that they also recognized a figurative kinship with the Amana people. For both groups, communal ownership of land provided security and a barrier against an outside world of which they did not wish to be part. The purchase of land was, in effect, a purchase of religious and cultural freedom. To the Meskwaki, owning their own land freed them to some extent from the federal government's control and allowed them to interact with, or reject, white society as they saw fit. They had defied federal authorities who wanted them to live on a reservation owned and controlled by the government. Isolated from many of the federal government's attempts at assimilation, they were able to maintain traditional ways. Their interaction with the Amana Society represented a half-way compromise with white society.

Likewise, for the Inspirationists, interacting with the Meskwaki did not involve an accommodation to white society. While European in origin, the Amana people chose to be self-reliant and separate from the larger Euro-American society, which they viewed as worldly and ungodly. As part of their communal life, they attended 11 church services each week. They were paid no wages for their work but were provided with

all material needs, such as food, clothing, housing, and medical care.

In many ways, land came to define the two groups. To be a member of either, in part, means to belong to a physical community, as one anthropologist puts it, "localized in space; a place which is home." Both groups have long been noted for land stewardship. Both forged a mystic, highly emotional attachment to their settlements, which continues today in the form of strict controls on land use and trespassing. While both groups recognize the political and economic significance of owning land, a deeper cultural awareness of the natural environment continues to influence modes of land management. Disputes within both communities (such as those in Amana concerning hunting rights and access to timber lands) reflect, by their intensity, how passionately the groups identify with the land.

Because of the large areas of forest and the interest in preserving and improving these tracts, both the Amana Society farms and the Meskwaki Settlement were intensively studied by the Iowa State University Forestry Department in the 1950s. Large timber tracts remain, and even today one can trace the borders of the Amana Society property and the Meskwaki property in aerial photos simply by following the edge of the timber, contrasted to the cleared and plowed ground of neighboring landowners.

Both groups relied on the land and, to some extent, still do today. They hunted game, fished in the Iowa River (sometimes at the stone weir), gathered wild edibles, and used the timber for fuel and shelter. They used native materials for furnishings, to make their homes comfortable and to express themselves artistically. Both groups made wood carvings. The Meskwaki used bulrushes as an interior wall of their wikiups. They wove cattails into mats, basswood into baskets, and yarn into belts. The Amana people wove wool into blankets and made willow baskets. Handcrafted objects and traditional skills are still valued and preserved in both communities.

Long before the Inspirationists settled in the area, Meskwaki men were accustomed to trapping, fishing, and hunting there, and continued to do so on Amana land all through the 19th century and well into the 20th. The Amana people do not seem to have resented this sharing of their natural resources. The Meskwaki traded furs and pelts for manufactured goods and perhaps medical care. Local

tradition notes that some Amana men went trapping with Meskwaki visitors and formed friendships, sometimes spending the night in the Meskwaki camps.

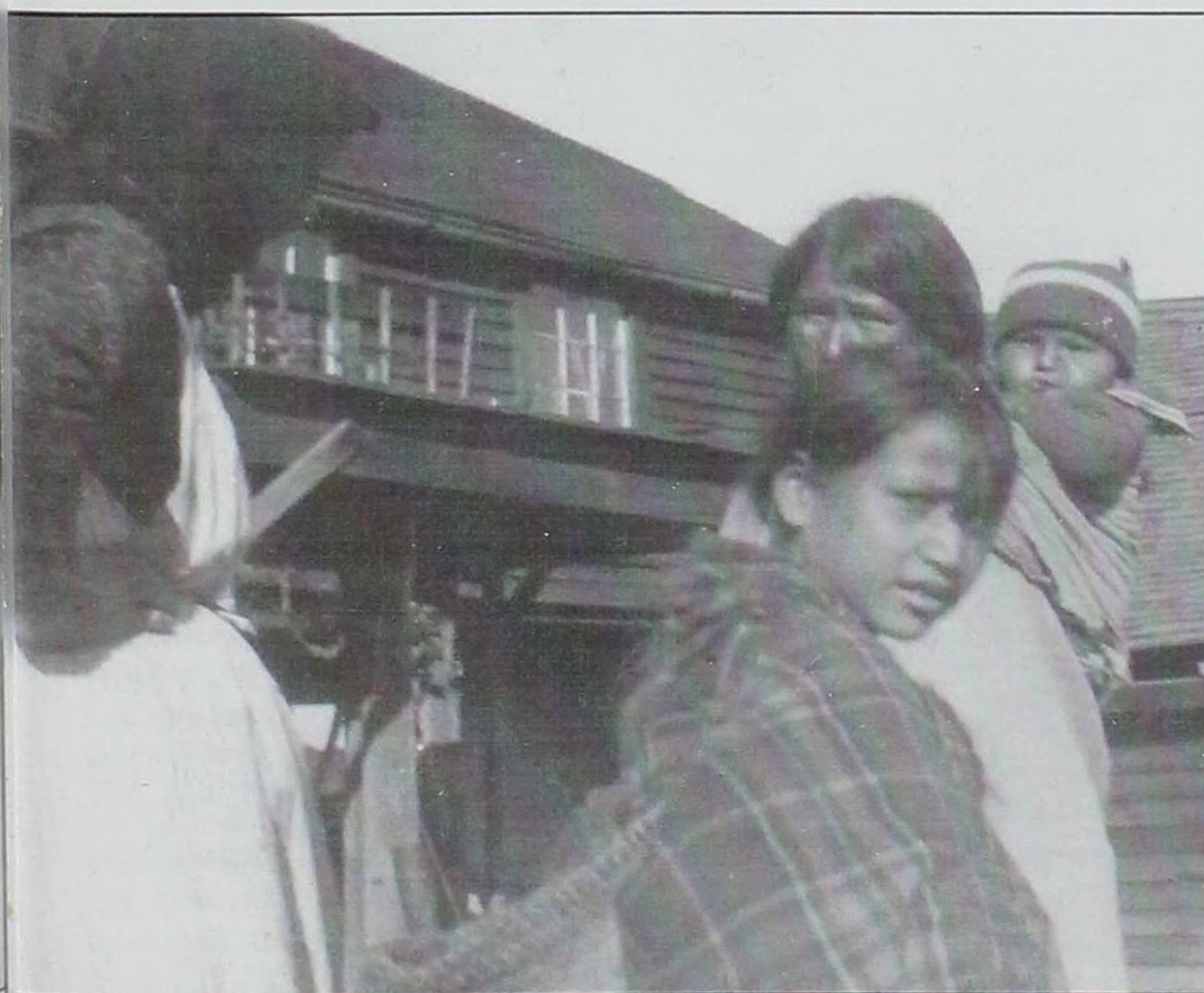
The main exchange and interaction between the Amana and Meskwaki people, however, took place at the 52 communal kitchen houses. Under the communal system, Amana church elders assigned housing and jobs; much of the work was on the farmland and in the gardens, factories, craft shops, and kitchens. Many of the Amana women were assigned to work in a kitchen house, which comprised a dining room and kitchen and was attached to the residence of the appointed manager and, if married, her family. At each kitchen house, meals were prepared for 30 to 40 Inspirationists, who ate at long tables. The men ate at one time, and the women at another.

Meskwaki women sometimes visited the kitchen houses. In some instances

AMANA HERITAGE SOCIETY



Amana kitchen workers preparing vegetables. Meskwaki and Amana women often interacted at the many kitchen houses in the villages.



COURTESY OF MADELINE ROEMIG BENDORF

As an Amana woman in a dark bonnet looks on (far left), three Meskwaki stand outside the Heinze Kitchen House. The scene was photographed by Friedrich Oehl about 1900.

food was given to them as gifts. More often, the kitchen staff traded food for baskets, beads, and beadwork. In a cashless society, the Amana people were accustomed to bartering and trading goods and services with each other. The food that they traded typically included lard for cooking, bread, flour, garden produce, and *kuchen* (open-topped fruit custard pie).

Sometimes the visits filled a Saturday afternoon with socializing as well as trading. The Meskwaki women sat on the floor, opening their bags of trade goods and showing their wares to the kitchen workers. The Meskwaki favored colorful regalia; they adorned their clothing with beadwork and jewelry and wore their hair in a particular style. For Amana women, raised in an austere world where adults wore plain, unadorned clothing in blue or black, the Meskwaki manner of dress was "a novelty and a delight," according to Henrietta Ruff. "We were always happy when they came," recalled Henrietta Hergert Leichsenring. In later years, recollections of the clothes worn by Meskwaki women and their practice of carrying babies on cradleboards strapped to their backs were among the most vivid and frequently recalled memories of the Amana residents.

Meskwaki also stopped at the village meat markets. There they obtained fat left from sausage making. As one 19th-century observer of the tribe noted, "Nearly everything they eat is cooked in lard, and a meal of hot fried cakes, pork, and coffee is all-sufficing." They also acquired cracklings and headcheese. Made of the leavings from butchering hogs, both were popular dishes in German communities.

Aside from food, the trade good perhaps most valued by the Meskwaki was the traditional Amana blanket. Turn-of-the-century photographs show Meskwaki holding or wearing the unmistakable patterned blankets woven in the Amana woolen mills. Modern-day Meskwaki writer Ray Young Bear references the blankets in his short stories and in one poem refers to a woman seated on "a red woolen blanket from the Amana Colonies. A prized but costly item among ladies of the Settlement." Traditional Meskwaki burial practices involved wrapping the body in a blanket that, according to older tribal members, after the mid to late 19th century came exclusively from the Amana mills.

An additional exchange between the Amana people and the Meskwaki involved language. Some Meskwaki tribal members learned a little German, and some Amana residents learned some of the Meskwaki language. A character in a short story by Ray Young Bear learned the German words for onion and potato "to hasten the trade." During World War II, German language skills played an interesting role in the experi-

ence of two young Meskwaki soldiers who served as code talkers. The two soldiers were instructed to interrogate a young German officer. The captured officer told the Meskwaki soldiers, "You talk just like my grandmother." Apparently the Meskwaki soldiers were using certain pronunciations, phrases, and idioms of a dialect dating from the Inspirationists' departure from Germany in the 1840s and still used among the elderly in the Amanas—though no longer common in contemporary Germany.

Stories and memories, especially from childhood, attest to the fabric of positive interactions between Meskwaki tribal members and Amana residents. Helene Rohrbacher Leichsenring of Amana recalled receiving necklaces from Meskwaki girls her own age. William E. Heidel, born in 1895, noted that "some of us boys made friends" with the Meskwaki camped around the Amana Lily Lake. He learned to shoot and trap and was permitted to ride Meskwaki ponies. "It was from these Indians that I learned how to swim a little easier way than I knew before." When Walter Leichsenring of South Amana was a child, he hid one time in order to observe a Meskwaki ritual in the *Inje Busch* nearby. Discovered, he was invited to watch. For years thereafter Meskwaki members traveling to South Amana stopped and visited Leichsenring or invited him to their nearby camp.

One High Amana native remembered that when the Meskwaki visited her village in the 1920s and 1930s it was an "exciting" and "happy" time, something out of the ordinary, "like something out of a fairy tale."

Contemporary newspaper references also preserve meaningful experiences. When Homestead's town baker, Herbert Moershel, acquired a dog named Yakoo from the Meskwaki Settlement, the *Amana Society Bulletin* joked that "the dog is lucky that his master is able to speak [the Meskwaki] language as fluently as German and English." Moershel also purchased fox furs from Meskwaki trappers and then resold the furs. "The foxes that they trap or kill are brought to West Amana for sale," an article in 1931 stated. "[The trappers] visit Herbert in his home, and at Christmas time they presented Mrs. Moershel with a handsome basket woven from hickory sprouts; the basket is surely artistic, and Mrs. Moershel values it highly." When Herbert Moershel died in a car accident in 1939, Meskwaki friends attended his funeral service. Later they left a wreath of woven leaves on his grave.



THIS PAGE: PHOTOS BY CHARLES SCOTT; ITEMS LOANED BY RAMONA GERARD, BARBARA SELZER HOEHNLE, ELEANOR AND PETER HOEHNLE, GORDON KELLENBERGER, HAROLD PITZ, AND WENDY ZIEGLER



These Meskwaki handcrafted items were traded or given as gifts to Amana residents and have been treasured for years. Clockwise from top left: beaded watch fob; baskets (set on a shawl woven in the Amanas); beaded necklaces; beaded leather charm bag; and fur hat (with lining and embroidered initials probably by the Amana recipient). Photos on right show front and back of a heavily beaded charm bag.



As a child growing up in Middle Amana, William Jeck was drawn to Native American customs and formed lasting friendships with Meskwaki tribal members. As an adult, he attended the funerals of Meskwaki friends such as George Young Bear. When Jeck died in 1978, his family invited a Meskwaki friend to offer a prayer at the burial; the prayer was delivered in the Meskwaki language.

Following a smallpox outbreak at the Meskwaki Settlement in 1902, government agents ordered the burning of all structures and Meskwaki property to prevent the spread of the disease. According to Meskwaki oral tradition and memories, the Amana Society sent clothing to the tribe at this difficult moment.

Pushetonequa, a longtime tribal leader, was born in a camp along the Iowa River near the Amana villages. Into the 20th century he made occasional visits to the site of his birth, as recalled in a local paper at the time of his death in 1919.

One elderly Meskwaki woman told her granddaughter that when she was young, there were three communities in Iowa where a tribal member could walk down the street and not be made to feel ashamed: Tama, Iowa City, and the Amanas.

In 1932, reeling from the effects of the Great Depression, the outmigration of young people, and a general dissatisfaction with the restrictions of communal life, the members of the Amana Society voted to abandon communal living and form a for-profit corporation. The Great Change, as it came to be known, meant that Amana residents were able to purchase their own homes and work for wages at the businesses managed by the new Amana Society. Each adult member of the society was issued a share of stock. The corporation provided free burial and medical services.

The Great Change seems to have puzzled the Meskwaki. In the context of the American Indian experience, what happened at Amana must have seemed like the allotment policy of the 1880s, when the federal government allotted plots of land on U.S. reservations to individual Indians, thus dismantling their tribal ownership of land. A present-day Meskwaki woman recalls her grandmother telling her that the Great Change was when the Amana people "got allotted," and that she felt sorry for them, one imagines, in the way that she mourned the impact of allotment on other tribes. The Meskwaki grandmother believed that the Amana people had little say in the matter, and that it came about because the Amana Society lacked the

federal recognition that the Meskwaki continually had of tribally held lands.

Once the Amana communal kitchens closed, in 1932, the Meskwaki-Amana relationship appeared to decline. Meskwaki women, perhaps uncomfortable with visiting private homes, did not appear in the villages to trade, and it seems that Meskwaki no longer camped in the Amana timber. A contributing factor to this decline may have been the almost simultaneous trend among the Meskwaki to discontinue the practice of winter camps.

Yet some interaction survived. In the 1930s young men on the Meskwaki and Amana baseball teams played against each other. Other post-1932 examples show up in the *Amana Society Bulletin* and local papers. Until 1991, when processing at the Amana Meat Market ended, tribal members continued to purchase 40-pound boxes of cracklings. Amana bread and, especially, headcheese, were favorite purchases by Meskwaki visitors to the Amanas. The traditional appeal of headcheese seems lost on modern Meskwaki, who are occasionally dispatched to purchase it at the Amana meat market for use in a Ghost Dinner, where the favorite foods of a departed individual are eaten.

Through resiliency and determination, both the Meskwaki and the Amana people successfully preserved their cultural and religious traditions. For over three-quarters of a century, communal life flourished in the seven villages and 26,000 acres known by most Iowans today as the Amana Colonies. Today the Meskwaki Settlement comprises more than 8,000 acres of communally held land. Although each group chose to separate itself from the larger American society, their unusual relationship lasted for decades. ♦

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PHOTO BY PETER HOEHNLE

A YEARLY TRADITION for area residents and tourists is to stop by Lily Lake in the Amanas when the surface is covered with the spectacular blooms of the lotus (often mistaken as water lilies).

A Meskwaki tradition also centers on the lotus. Called *waki'pimin* in Meskwaki, the lotus was a food source at least as early as the late 18th century, when the tribe lived near the Mississippi River. About the size of bananas, lotus tubers are similar to potatoes. The tubers were boiled, strung on basswood string, and hung to

dry for winter use. Lotus tuber was also an ingredient in medicine administered to the convalescent. Lotus seeds (*oskishi'kuk*) were also dried or eaten fresh.

Amana residents today recall the Meskwaki camping in tents around the lake at harvest time, and a 1921 account notes that the women gathered the tubers out of the mud at the bottom of the lake in the fall. One Meskwaki tribal member vividly remembers watching her great-grandmother in 1972 dive into the water to retrieve the tubers from the muck.

As they were with other natural resources, the Meskwaki were careful not to overharvest the tubers. Stewardship of the lotus bed was reinforced by a tribal legend that a giant snapping turtle lived at the bottom of the lake; if an individual took more tubers than needed, it would dispatch smaller snapping turtles to attack the offender.

The special relationship of the Meskwaki with Amana inspired the use of the lotus as the logo for the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway, which meanders for 70 miles through this historically and visually rich region of Iowa.

—Peter Hoehnle



NOTE ON SOURCES

Much of the author's research involved personal communication with the following individuals: Harry Ackerman, Jeremy Berger, Elizabeth Dickel Bleschmidt, Johnathan Lantz Buffalo, Suzanne Wanatee Buffalo, Thomas Burgher, Jon Childers, Erna Neumann Fels, Dan Hollrah, Emilie Hoppe, Henrietta Hergert Leichsenring, Helene Rohrbacher Leichsenring, Marietta Moershel, Elizabeth T. Momany, Helen Sontag Moser, Henry Moser, Elizabeth Rettig Parvin, Harold Pitz, Ivan Reihmann, Larry Rettig, Carolyn Ruedy, Donald Wanatee, Jerry Youngbear, Carolyn Zuber, Carroll Zuber, and Cornelia Moershel Zuber.

The word "Meskwaki" has several variant spellings. The spelling used in this article is the one used by the tribe today.

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Various pertinent articles appeared in the *Amana Society Bulletin*, *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, *Oxford Leader*, and *Williamsburg Journal-Tribune*. For more on the Iowa State University Forestry Department study, see *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Sept. 10, 1953, and Sept. 4, 1954.

Complete annotations to earlier versions of this article are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City center).