

Buffalo Hunting with Keokuk

A gloomy spirit pervaded the Sauk and Fox villages. It was early spring of 1833 and the confederated tribes were on the verge of starvation. Crushed and humiliated in the Black Hawk War, their fields untilled, the remnant of Black Hawk's band had flung themselves on Keokuk for protection. The task of feeding so many hungry mouths throughout a long winter had taxed the resources of Keokuk and his followers.

While the white squatters were preparing to enter the Black Hawk Purchase, the Sauk and Fox Indians were planting their crops in the Keokuk Reserve. This reservation, on both sides of the Iowa River, included portions of Johnson, Muscatine, Louisa, Washington, and Des Moines counties. It would require more than a bountiful harvest to sustain the confederated tribes during the following winter. Since it had been customary for the Sauks and Foxes to supplement their crops with a buffalo hunt, Keokuk issued a call for the chiefs and headmen of both tribes to convene at his village.

Keokuk's principal village was located on the right bank of the Iowa River "about twelve miles" from its confluence with the Mississippi. It was

there that preparations for the expedition were made. Solemn religious rites were observed, for the Indians obtained a large supply of their meats and pelts from these annual summer forays. The hunt usually took place during the months of June, July, and August, when the buffalo were fat and their hair thin. At this time the flesh was in the best condition for food and the pelts easiest to dress on both sides for the making of clothing, shields, bags, ropes, snowshoes, tents, and boat covers.

A hunting party, like a war party, was well organized. Sometimes the leader was the head of a family or kindred group; again he might be appointed to his office with certain ceremonies. In as much as Keokuk had just been recognized by the United States as the head of the confederated tribes, it was natural that he should head the hunting party.

The duties of a leader were numerous but well-defined. He decided the length of the day's journey and the night encampment. Moreover, since the main body on a tribal hunt was composed of old men and children, squaws and papooses, the leader had to throw a cordon of brave and trustworthy men around them. Although the Sauks and Foxes were originally a canoe people, a transition to horses was noted after the Black Hawk War. Hence a goodly number of the buffalo hunters in 1833 were prob-

ably mounted.

Whether on the trail or in camp, the Indians always kept close together. Stalking the buffalo alone was prohibited under penalty of flogging. If a man slipped away to hunt by himself, thereby scattering a herd and causing serious loss to the entire tribe, punishment as severe as death might be incurred. The destitute condition of the confederated tribes would have forced Keokuk and his chiefs to invoke drastic measures for the slightest infraction of the rules of the hunt. Apparently the Sauk and Fox hunters were well disciplined, for no such crimes were mentioned.

Early in the summer of 1833 Keokuk set out for the headwaters of the Iowa River. An Indian trail followed the west bank of the Iowa River to Wapello's village which was located five miles upstream near the present site of Wapello, Iowa. Wapello was first among the Foxes, and second only to the wily Keokuk in the councils of the Sauks and Foxes. A large party of Foxes, including Wapello himself, joined Keokuk. Although Wapello preferred to hunt on the headwaters of the Skunk, he realized the Sauk hunters must have strong support because of the implacable hostility between the Sioux and the confederated tribes. Thus, the Sioux had paid scant attention to the Neutral Line agreed upon by their chiefs and the Sauks and Foxes at Prairie du Chien in 1825. The creation of the Neutral

Ground in 1830, although it formed a forty-mile barrier between them, could scarcely be expected to ward off Sioux depredations, particularly when the buffalo themselves showed a preference for grazing in this area.

Leaving Wapello's village the combined body continued up the right bank of the Iowa River to present-day Columbus Junction, following the general route afterward selected for the Rock Island railroad. They crossed to the left bank a few miles below the English River. At this point was another Indian village. In as much as the buffalo hunters were headed for the prairies near the sources of the Iowa River, their trail followed the Iowa onward past the present site of Iowa City.

The popularity of the headwaters of the Iowa as a grazing place for the buffalo is attested by a map of 1835 on which Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea referred to this beautiful stream as the "Bison" River. Lea and his dragoon companions encountered small herds of buffalo along the upper reaches of the Skunk, the Iowa, and the Cedar rivers in 1835, and succeeded in killing a number of them. It was the first time Lea had seen the "lordly beast in his home", a clear indication that the buffalo was more common at that time in the northern part of Iowa than in the southern district.

Keokuk led his fellow tribesmen past what is

now the Amana colonies, the Tama Indian reservation, Marshalltown, Eldora, and Iowa Falls. Ten days after leaving their village near the mouth of the Iowa, the hunters discovered signs of buffalo. Although the exact region is not known, if the Indians traveled twenty miles a day they must have arrived in the Neutral Ground somewhere in present-day Wright or Franklin counties. Keokuk promptly ordered his men to encamp and the squaws were soon busy setting up shelters and preparing the evening meal. The next day Keokuk sent out small parties to make observations. That evening the hunters returned and reported a small herd of not over 300 buffalo. The satisfaction with which this news was received was dispelled when scouts declared they had "discovered signs of the Sioux; saw large smokes, and had no doubt they proceeded from their encampment." A council of war was immediately called.

Some of the more fiery warriors were in favor of advancing that very night and attacking the Sioux at dawn. Others, more conservative, favored removing the women and children to safety before making an attack. After listening gravely to the speeches of his headmen, Keokuk rose to lend his counsel to the assembled tribesmen. Eloquenty he related the many depredations that the Sioux had committed against the Sauks and Foxes, denouncing vehemently the brutal manner

in which the Sioux had butchered many of the women and children who had crossed the Mississippi River above Prairie du Chien following the defeat of Black Hawk at Bad Axe. "Scarcely a warrior in my presence but what has lost some friend or relation by the Sioux", he thundered. "Now is the time to chastise our enemies. Let us surround their camp this night, and, by the rising of tomorrow's sun, we will not leave a Sioux to relate the fall of his comrade!"

The assembled warriors greeted this plan with applause. An eye-witness declared: "Fire glistened in their eyes, they brandished their spears — drew their knives, and returned them to their scabbard — eager for the fight they had in view." After a short pause, Keokuk commenced pacing back and forth across the council lodge. Suddenly he stopped, remembering his promise to Major General Winfield Scott at Fort Armstrong the previous fall. Throwing down his spear he cried: "Warriors, I have been commanded by my Great Father not to go to war with the Sioux. I have promised, and will *keep my word*." A murmur of dissent ran through the lodge. Sensing the opposition of his men to such a conciliatory plan, Keokuk cried out in a stern voice: "I will go to the Sioux camp tomorrow — *I will make peace! OR FALL IN THE ATTEMPT!*"

The determined manner in which their chief spoke swept away all objections to the course he

proposed to follow. The council accordingly broke up and Keokuk immediately repaired to his lodge and was seen no more that evening. A party of braves visited Wapello to discuss the situation. A man of few words, Wapello was firm in his opinion that Keokuk would never return, and that the Sioux, if they once got a peace party in their power, would certainly kill them. "But", he concluded, "if Keokuk falls, we will avenge his death."

The next morning at dawn the sleeping camp was aroused by the trample of horses' hoofs. It was Keokuk leaving camp with three young braves who had volunteered to accompany him. Mounted and armed, the four emissaries of peace slipped quietly out of the still drowsy encampment without speaking a word. As soon as they were out of view the whole camp became a scene of confusion. Hastily each warrior prepared to follow his chief. Suddenly the "Village Crier" proclaimed in a loud voice that Keokuk had commanded that "no one must follow him — but remain in their camp, and be prepared for what might happen."

Meanwhile Keokuk and his three braves pushed their horses along at a brisk trot. As they neared the enemy the wily Sauk revealed his plans. Two of his men were to remain behind in such a way that they could watch the meeting between Keokuk and the Sioux but not be seen

themselves. Should their chieftain fall they were to hasten back with all speed to warn their fellow tribesmen.

After traveling about eighteen miles, the four ascended a slight elevation whence the Sioux camp suddenly burst into view. It was situated on a gentle rise immediately in front of them with a valley intervening. Keokuk concealed the two young men who were to remain behind on the top of the hill. He then advanced boldly across the intervening lowland with his companion toward the Sioux encampment which they discovered to be fortified. On his map of 1835 Lieutenant Lea notes a fort about sixteen miles south of Clear Lake in what is now northwestern Franklin County. Its position in the northern or Sioux cession of the Neutral Ground would correspond with the probable position of the Sioux encampment.

The moment the Sioux caught a glimpse of Keokuk the whole camp sprang into action. Meanwhile Keokuk had halted on the bank of a small creek a hundred yards away and made signs for the Sioux to come to him. Two flag bearers started immediately, followed by ten well-armed men. When they reached the creek, Keokuk motioned the flag bearers to cross but ordered the others to remain behind. To his astonishment, however, the whole force plunged into the creek and started across. The flag bearers reached the

other side first and advanced to shake hands. Keokuk instantly seized the insignia from the nearest flag bearer and placed a fur hat upon the emissary's head. His companion did the same. Then Keokuk, waving the flag, rode toward the armed Sioux who had just crossed the creek and were advancing to shake hands with him.

Suddenly one of the Sioux seized Keokuk's whip and attempted to drag him from his horse. Fortunately for Keokuk the whip was fastened to his wrist by a string which snapped and allowed the Sauk chieftain to regain his saddle. Meanwhile another Sioux had secured his horse by the bridle. Finding himself in this critical situation, Keokuk rose in his stirrups and, smiting his breast, told them his name was Keokuk. But the Sioux were apparently unmoved by this for his companion was also surrounded. Amazed at this gross violation of the rules of peace, Keokuk glanced hurriedly around to see if a way out could be found. Suddenly he discovered a gun presented at him! He exerted all his strength to break the Sioux's grip on his horse but all in vain. Reinforcements had joined the Sioux, and Keokuk perceived another gun raised at him in the rear. He now began to think that he would fall a sacrifice, since resistance seemed useless.

All at once the two Sauk braves who had been stationed on the hill, charged at full gallop upon the Sioux who gave way before them, retiring

backwards with their guns cocked. Keokuk and his companion wheeled off in the best manner possible, keeping their faces towards the enemy. The Watchful Fox then called to the Sioux: "We wish to make peace!"

"Meet us at this place tomorrow for council", the Sioux replied.

"We will", shouted Keokuk.

Then the four Sauks set out at a brisk canter for their camp. According to Keokuk, "They soon reached the high ground, wheeled their horses, and took a view of the Sioux as they retired. They discovered that the whole party of Sioux warriors had advanced against them, and were then slowly returning to their camp."

As they were returning home, Keokuk requested his faithful companions to explain to the chiefs and warriors what had taken place. They reached their encampment just as the sun was setting. While still at some distance their approach was discovered by Keokuk's favorite wife, who, contrary to orders and unknown to the camp, had mounted a swift horse, gone in pursuit, and returned in advance to give the news of their safe return. The four Sauks galloped into camp at a breakneck speed and were met by all the warriors. But Keokuk himself rode on to his own lodge at the farther end of the camp, threw himself from his horse, and was immediately surrounded by his wives and children.

Meanwhile the three young braves related to their fellow tribesmen what had taken place. "We are requested by Keokuk", they concluded, "to say that whatever you may determine upon he is ready to execute, but will give no opinion." The chiefs and warriors of the confederated tribes agreed upon meeting the Sioux in council the next day as Keokuk had promised. They then sent a messenger to inform him of their resolutions and to congratulate him upon his success.

The next morning Keokuk was mounted on his horse at the first streak of dawn. Mustering his men quickly the Sauk and Fox warriors took up the line of march toward the Sioux camp. A motley array of women and children brought up the rear. When they arrived on the hill overlooking the Sioux camp they all dismounted except Keokuk. The warriors gave their "looking glasses" to the women and boys, mounted them on their horses, and manoeuvred them so as to show a strong force. Then Keokuk, together with his chiefs, braves, and warriors, advanced on the Sioux village.

After crossing the creek, the Watchful Fox halted his party and advanced slowly with his chiefs. But it suddenly occurred to him that if the Sioux fired upon them, all the chiefs might be killed, while they were drawn up in battle order. Distrustful of such treachery, Keokuk requested the chiefs to halt while he alone advanced toward

the Sioux camp. He was well mounted on a proud charger that pranced and showed his rider to great advantage.

"On his near approach", Keokuk afterwards related, "he discovered that the advance line of Sioux warriors were painted black — and when about fifty yards off, the Sioux fired their guns in the air, grounded their arms, and threw down their powder horns." The Sioux chief advanced alone to meet him and shook hands. "They were old acquaintances," according to Keokuk, "having been to Washington city together. The whole party of Sioux now rushed up to shake hands with Ke-o-kuck, and his chiefs and warriors, who had all come up. The Sioux women running with their children on their backs, called aloud — 'We have made peace with the Sacs.' "

A large space had been cleared off by the Sioux for the reception of the Sauks and Foxes. Both tribes were ordered to arrange themselves in a line facing each other. As Keokuk related, "The high priest, or master of ceremonies, proceeded to the fire in the middle of the square, cut a slice of flesh from a *roasted dog!* went to the Sioux chief, and calling upon the Great Spirit to witness the sincerity of their hearts in making peace, placed it in his mouth. He then proceeded to Ke-o-kuck, and went through the same ceremony — and continued alternately, giving to the Sioux and Sacs and Foxes, until all had partaken of the sacred

morsel of consecrated meat — after which they were treated with a feast of buffalo meat and marrow bones — shook hands and parted."

Keokuk and his party returned to the creek where their women and children had made an encampment. Soon the Sioux warriors made their appearance, dancing around the Sauks and Foxes in a menacing manner. Unmoved by such a pantomime, the confederated tribesmen folded their arms, looking with utter contempt on the Sioux who presently returned to their camp. That evening the Sioux chieftain, with two of his followers, paid a visit to Keokuk and his chiefs.

Early the next morning Keokuk and his warriors, mounted and armed, rushed upon the Sioux camp, and surrounded it. With blood-curdling cries they dashed hither and yon, displaying feats of daring horsemanship as if in battle. They then dismounted and began to dance. This dramatic episode closed the ceremony between the hostile tribes. The Sioux promised to keep the peace four years while the confederated tribes consented to make peace but did not stipulate the length of time. The Sioux promptly broke camp and started westward to their own hunting grounds.

The Sauks and Foxes were free to continue their buffalo hunting unmolested. Although equipped with guns, most Indians considered it a greater honor to kill the buffalo with the time-honored weapons of their ancestors. Their skill

as hunters was revealed some years later, when Keokuk with a score of his chiefs and warriors were at the Stuyvesant Institute in New York City viewing some of George Catlin's paintings. As Catlin related: "I was exhibiting several of my paintings of buffalo-hunts, and describing the modes of slaying them with bows and arrows, when I made the assertion which I had often been in the habit of making, that there were many instances where the arrow was thrown entirely through the buffalo's body; and that I had several times witnessed this astonishing feat. I saw evidently by the motions of my audience, that many doubted the correctness of my assertion; and I appealed to *Kee-o-kuk*, who rose up when the thing was explained to him, and said, that it had repeatedly happened amongst his tribe; and he believed that one of his young men by his side had done it. The young man instantly stepped up on the bench, and took a bow from under his robe, with which he told the audience he had driven his arrow quite through a buffalo's body." Such exploits may have occurred in the great hunt of 1833.

Day after day the hunters returned to their camp with trophies of their success. With but slight variations it may be said tribal regulation governed the cutting up and distribution of the various parts of the buffalo. The skin and certain parts of the carcass usually belonged to the hunter

who made the kill. The remainder was divided among the helpers, thereby giving the poor and disabled an opportunity to procure food. The butchering was usually done by the men on the field, each hunter's portion being taken to his tent and given to the women as their property. The squaws then cut the meat into thin slices and strips and hung these on a framework of poles to dry in the sun. When fully "jerked" the meat was put into rawhide packs to keep for winter use. In addition to the meat, a quantity of marrow was preserved in bladder skins and the tallow was poured into skin bags.

Very little of the carcass was wasted by the Indians who hunted in what is now Iowa, for the buffalo was by no means as plentiful as across the Missouri River. The sinew furnished bow strings, threads for sewing, and fiber for ropes; the horns were manufactured into spoons and drinking vessels, and often worn as an insignia of office. The hair was woven into lariats, belts, and personal ornaments. No wonder that the tribes of the plains looked with veneration upon the shaggy bison.

The Sauks and Foxes remained at their camp until they had killed eighty buffalo. They then began their long trek down the Iowa River to their villages near the Mississippi. The thanksgiving ceremony must have been truly impressive for enough meat had been gathered during Chief

Keokuk's successful Buffalo hunt in northern Iowa to insure that no one would go hungry during the long winter months that lay ahead.

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