

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLVI

ISSUED IN MAY 1965

No. 5

Copyright 1965 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



The Watchful Fox

Written grandly in the annals of early Iowa is the name of Keokuk. As a chief of the Sacs he stands out preëminently among all the leaders of that powerful tribe, rivalled only by Black Hawk. Intelligent, crafty, cautious, and vain, Keokuk was always alert in his own interests. In contrast, Black Hawk was outright, scorning affectation and deceit, patriotic, and bold — qualities of character not to be found in the Watchful Fox. Black Hawk was the man of war, looking longingly at the hills and valleys of his youth, fighting for his people and their heritage, and losing his fight all the way. Keokuk was the man of guile, the talker, achieving his ends and high rank by dint of words and scheming. A man with a persuasive tongue was Keokuk, an orator unsurpassed in a tribe that was famous for the eloquence of its chiefs, adroit, convincing, always projecting new and devious ways of accomplishing results to his own advantage. He looked into the face of the wind and cut and reefed his sails accordingly.

Keokuk was born at Saukenuk, near Rock Island, about 1780. His mother is said to have been a half-breed, the daughter of a French trader. Not a chief by birth, since he belonged to a non-ruling gens, Keokuk rose to that position through his ability in politics and his happy faculty of always putting the best foot forward on public occasions. His name, Kiyokag in the Sac language, meaning "one who moves about alert," is descriptive of his early youth. He watched for opportunities and seized every advantage.

While still young he was permitted to attend the tribal councils. Later he was made tribal guest-keeper. This was his first step forward. Supplied with every means of rendering hospitality for the tribe, and at tribal expense, Keokuk played the genial host to perfection. His lodge soon became the center of the social and political life of the tribe. With this advantage he built his political fences rapidly and well.

The social organization and traditions of the tribe provided many barriers to the ambitious Keokuk, but he did not permit this to deter him. He set himself against the rigid customs and ironclad taboos of his tribe, not openly and aggressively, but quietly, unpretentiously, diplomatically. A veiled attack being his method, he stood always in the background playing one faction against another. As time passed he became the leading councillor in the Sac assembly.

At an early date he perceived that it was futile to oppose the power and strength of the white men, so he veered his own course accordingly. Always he curried the white man's favor. When the settlers began to crowd the Indians out of their beloved village of Saukenuk, Keokuk accepted the advice of the traders and willingly moved across the Mississippi to the Iowa country, as Poweshiek and the Foxes had done long before. Peace at any price he counted better than war with the whites. With some of the warriors he lost prestige, but most of the tribe followed him to the new village on the Iowa River. The more belligerent faction turned to Black Hawk for leadership. Thus the Sacs who had dwelt together in harmony longer than they could remember were hopelessly divided.

The decisive contest for leadership of the united tribe occurred in the war council at Keokuk's village in April, 1832. Black Hawk with his band of three hundred braves came with plans for a great Indian confederacy capable of driving the settlers out of the Mississippi Valley. The venerable chief urged his fellow tribesmen to take up their tomahawks and go on the warpath to avenge the wrongs of their people. Under the influence of the war dance and the spell of his patriotism, the warriors rallied to the cause, and it seemed for the moment that the will of Black Hawk would prevail. Then Keokuk spoke. In a few words he won the attention of the war-bent braves, and then

swiftly, adroitly, and with matchless skill he painted such a terrible picture of tribal sacrifices that the warriors who had been most clamorous for war sat silent and abashed. The glory of battle and revenge had suddenly faded. Keokuk was master of the situation, Black Hawk the discredited rival. The old chief's courage and tribal loyalty were no match for the younger man's diplomacy and eloquence.

Too proud to face the humiliation of accepting the dominance of Keokuk and too courageous to be deterred by fatal consequences, Black Hawk led his little band of warriors on the warpath. Meanwhile, Keokuk hastened to Fort Armstrong to assure the authorities of his own friendship. Deftly he played the part of a faithful ally. While Black Hawk fought for the ancient home of his people, Keokuk followed the wiser but less noble policy of peaceful submission to the purpose of a stronger race. And when the war was over, when Black Hawk's band had been almost wiped out and Black Hawk himself was a prisoner, Keokuk was in a position to assume the unchallenged leadership of his tribe. His formal recognition as high chief of the Sacs and Foxes was made the final act of the long drama of his struggle for supremacy, and to the very end Keokuk played the rôle of the shrewd and subtle schemer that he was.

The Sacs and Foxes had assembled at Fort Armstrong. Keokuk was there, confident and dig-

nified as became a big chief. Black Hawk was there, a prisoner of war, defeated and humbled before his own people, yet willing to accept his fate. After the assembled chiefs and warriors had listened attentively to the greetings of Major John Garland and President Jackson's speech to Black Hawk in Baltimore had been read, Keokuk answered in a happy vein, speaking of new days, new friends, and a new nation moving forward in peace and contentment.

Major Garland then arose again and announced that the Great Father in Washington would from that time on acknowledge Keokuk as the principal chief of the Sacs and Foxes and that he wished Black Hawk to consent to that plan. Black Hawk, upon hearing the interpreted version of these remarks, got the impression that the President had said he must conform to the counsels of Keokuk. That was too much for the proud spirit of Black Hawk to bear. Springing to his feet, agitated, trembling with rage, he spoke in his old imperious manner.

I am a man — an old man. I will not conform to the counsels of any one. I will act for myself; no one shall govern me. I am old; my hair is gray. I once gave counsel to my young men. Am I to conform to others? I shall soon go to the Great Spirit where I shall be at rest. What I said to our great father at Washington, I say again. I will always listen to him. I am done.

A great furore was caused by these words

wrung from the heart of the old chief. He had made peace with the government, but he had not supposed that he would be made a ward of Keokuk. In vain the interpreter tried to explain. At last Keokuk arose and turning to the deposed chief, he spoke as though admonishing a child.

Why do you speak so before the white men? I will speak for you. You trembled; you did not mean what you said.

Then, addressing the council, he continued.

Our brother who has again come to us has spoken, but he spoke in wrath; his tongue was forked; he spoke not like a man or a Sac. He knew his words were bad. He trembled like the oak whose roots have been wasted by many rains. He is old; what he said let us forget. I have spoken for him. What I have said are his own words — not mine. Let us say he spoke in council to-day — that his words were good. I have spoken.

What a consummate politician! In the realm of achieving his own ambitions Keokuk had no equal among the Indians. And the principal factor of his success was his eloquence. He had a marvelous faculty of saying precisely the right thing at the right time. He spoke rapidly, dramatically, and with great intensity. Word pictures, richly colored and highly imaginative, flowed easily from his lips. His eyes glowed, his whole being became animated as he threw himself into his discourse. Possessing a rich, powerful voice, his enunciation was particularly good so that not a syllable was lost to the listener. On his trip east in 1837 he

spoke before thousands and in every case his dignity of bearing and mastery of the situation made a striking and profound impression on his audiences. He was compared favorably with Webster, Calhoun, and other orators of the day.

But Keokuk was not merely a politician and an orator. He was more than that; he was a warrior. Though reason and expediency made him friendly toward the whites, his early life was full of heroic exploits against the Sioux. Keokuk was a strong, active man, of medium height and well-knit. As a youth he excelled in the various feats of strength, speed, and endurance practiced by his people. In horsemanship and dancing he was particularly proficient. Indeed, Keokuk might be dubbed "the man on horseback." He loved fine horses and always owned the best mount and richest accoutrement obtainable on the border. George Catlin, who painted Keokuk on horseback, attests to that. "The horse that he rode was the best animal on the frontier; a fine blooded horse for which he gave the price of 300 dollars, a thing that he was quite able to, who had the distribution of 50,000 dollar annuities, annually, amongst his people. His horse was beautifully caparisoned." And he could ride his horse. Incident after incident might be related of the superb horsemanship of Keokuk.

In his first battle, when he was scarcely more than a boy, he killed a Sioux warrior with a spear. The exploit was given conspicuous notice by his

fellows because both he and his victim were on horseback at the time and since the Sioux were preëminently the horsemen of the plains, the Sacs looked upon the deed as an extraordinary achievement. A feast was prepared in honor of the event. Keokuk was elevated to the rank of a brave at once and granted all the rights of manhood, though still a youth. As an appropriate distinction he was permitted to appear on horseback on all public occasions thereafter. This unique honor Keokuk enjoyed until his death. Even though the rest of the tribe were afoot in processions or ceremonials, Keokuk might ride, and Keokuk did ride, alone and proudly among his people.

Despite his policy of peace, Keokuk had hot blood in his veins, and could give a good account of himself on the warpath if necessary, though that was not his favorite method. The way to get things done in his opinion was by using ingenuity, not war-clubs. But if necessity demanded, the war-club was not to be ignored. Many incidents in his earlier career attest the truth of this statement. Always, though, it was against the red man, not the white, that his weapons were used.

Much mention is made of an incident that occurred when Keokuk and a small band were on a hunting trip near the borders of the Sioux country. A large band of Sioux, mounted and prepared for war, came suddenly upon them. The Sacs, surprised and outnumbered, were prepared to lose

their scalps, but Keokuk, undaunted, took command of the situation. Instructing his braves to form a circle, dismount, and shoot from behind the shelter of their horses, he saved the day. Again and again the Sioux charged the entrenched Sacs, but to no avail. Finally, giving it up as a bad job, they withdrew from the scene, defeated. This battle increased Keokuk's reputation for valor as a warrior and ability as a leader.

On another occasion, while with a party of braves on the northern prairies hunting buffalo, he came upon a party of Sioux, painted and prepared for war. His village being unprotected during the time of the hunt, Keokuk surmised that it was the object of their expedition. Outnumbered and unprepared for battle, Keokuk realized that only strategy could save his people. While the enemy was engaged in a war dance and all was hubbub in their camp, Keokuk, astride his fastest pony, rode furiously into their very midst. Demanding to see their chief he said: "I have come to let you know that there are traitors in your camp. They have told me that you are preparing to attack my village. I know that they told me lies, for you could not, after smoking the pipe of peace, be so base as to murder my women and children in my absence. None but the cowards would be guilty of such conduct."

The Sioux, caught by surprise, looked upon him with open-mouthed amazement and then crowded

around him, threateningly. In a loud voice and with bold gesture, Keokuk continued: "I suppose they told me lies, but if what I have heard is true, then the Sacs are ready for you." Turning quickly, just as the Sioux were about to throw themselves on him, Keokuk dashed to safety. Back in his own village he and his party awaited the attack which did not come.

Even as a warrior, bold and valiant though he was, he resorted to diplomacy whenever it served his purpose. He saw no advantage in risking his life in combat if his wits could save him. Yet he was no coward, as his action demonstrates. He was simply the wily, calculating strategist, a dangerous foe in the field as well as a formidable antagonist at the council fire or in the forum.

At the end of the Black Hawk War the object for which Keokuk had been aiming for so many years was at last achieved. He was formally recognized by the government as the supreme chief of the confederated tribes of Sacs and Foxes. This arrangement was not received with much favor by the Indians, particularly the Foxes, who had been gradually drawing away from the Sacs. Keokuk's regime served to widen the breach rather than to close it. Nevertheless he was able, by his own power and the support of the government, to maintain his eminent position.

By the terms of the treaty of 1832 the Sacs and Foxes surrendered the Black Hawk Purchase but

retained a tract of four hundred square miles on the Iowa River which included Keokuk's village. Four years later Keokuk's Reserve was ceded to the United States, and the Indians moved to a new location on the Des Moines River where Keokuk built his lodge near the old trading post at Iowa-ville. In later years he had his principal village near the mouth of Sugar Creek, not far from the present city of Ottumwa.

Meanwhile all was not well among the Sacs. The old embers of bitterness that had existed within the tribe burst into flame. Led by Hard Fish, the adherents of Black Hawk's old British band openly attacked Keokuk's administration of affairs. He was charged with entering into a conspiracy with the traders to defraud the Indians and particularly the followers of Hard Fish. Moreover, the disbursement of the annuities by Keokuk was alleged to be partial, if not corrupt, but he always managed to suppress the opposition.

Many times his life was threatened because of his dishonesty, and on one occasion it was more than threatened. While some of the Indians were returning from a visit to the half-breeds near the mouth of the Des Moines River the ill-feeling between the Keokuk faction and the Hard Fish faction, which always manifested itself when whisky was flowing, turned into action with the result that Nahseuskuk, one of Black Hawk's sons, wounded Keokuk in the chest. The injury was so

severe that the chief had to be taken home in a canoe and it was some time before he recovered.

In 1845 Keokuk led his people out of their old Iowa haunts and into the State of Kansas. By that time profligacy and dissipation had laid strong hands upon the old chief. His declining years were filled with disgrace. Found to be untrustworthy, he was no longer in good repute with anyone. His inordinate love of money necessary to satisfy his thirst for vainglorious display had found him out. In everything he went to excess — in ostentation, in the exercise of authority, in revelry. He became a confirmed inebriate. His dominant will and insatiable ambition, being turned to the gratification of selfish desires, invoked his ruin no less than the same qualities directed toward proper ends had made him a great leader.

Within three years after leaving Iowa, early in 1848, Keokuk was dead. Some said that he died from a severe attack of delirium tremens, but others reported that he had been poisoned by a member of his tribe whom he had defrauded. Whichever version was correct, the passing of Keokuk was sordid. As the warp and woof of his life was of many hues, the tapestry of his career contained brilliant achievements in which the nobler strands of his nature were uppermost, but in the end the whole fabric was one drab expanse, unrelieved by any vestige of former grandeur.

F. R. AUMANN