

On the Warpath

“We are going to war, we must be brave, as the Great Spirit is with us.” So sings the war chief as, with medicine bag on back, he leads his men from the village. And the painted warriors shout “Heugh! heugh! heugh!”

Love of war came naturally to the Indian. His childhood plaything was the bow and arrow. His early memories were of the scalp dance, of returned warriors bounding into the circle about the council fire and recounting, each in turn, the story of the conflict and the glories that were his. He heard the cries of acclamation, and saw the favors bestowed by the squaws — ornaments of feathers and stained porcupine quills, bead-entwined wreaths, adulation. Taught to believe that his happiness here and hereafter depended upon his prowess on the battle-field, it is no wonder that he longed for the time when he, too, might follow the bloody trail.

This desire for personal distinction upon which standing in the tribe was based, coupled with revenge (there could be no peace until an injury was satisfied), and the want of territory in which to hunt, constituted the chief causes of war. The very mode of life which exposed the Indians to the wilful deprivations of hostile neighbors made necessary the cultivation of warlike habits.

The Sacs and Foxes for instance had a definite military organization, the men of the tribes being enrolled at birth in one of two war societies, each having its own chief, ceremonials, and so forth. The Kishko, or long hairs, carried a red standard and wore white paint to war, while the Oskush, or braves, painted themselves black and had a blue standard. The purpose of this division was to so stimulate rivalry that the members of each moiety would outdo themselves in order to bring home more scalps than the other.

Most tribes had a system of ranks and degrees, generally six, each with its own insignia and duties. A youth entered the lowest, winning promotion by deeds, and wearing his marks of honor only after they had been publicly accorded to him. Among the Sioux, a red hand painted on a warrior's robes indicated a wound. A black hand or an eagle's feather with a red spot meant that the wearer had slain an enemy, while a notch cut in the feather and the edges painted red added the implication that he had cut his victim's throat. The chiefship, seldom hereditary, might be won by skill in battle, eloquence, or personal popularity. Thus the war chief must be constantly alert to maintain his preëminence. The bravest, he. Watchful of the welfare of his men, for it was a disgrace to lose any, every battle-field saw his reputation as well as his life at stake.

A grave council of chiefs, braves, and medicine men preceded the decision to go on the warpath.

Perhaps one of the tribe had been found slain, a challenging blood red hatchet in his head. Revenge! Or youths, eager for renown, had reported trespassers on their hunting grounds. To war! Among the Ioway the war-bundle owner issued a general call for volunteers, addressed to "all those who consider themselves men enough to face the enemy."

Elaborate preparations followed, "ceremonials of fasts, ablutions, anointings, and prayers to the Great Spirit to crown their undertakings with success." All intercourse with the other sex was prohibited. Sacrifices were offered — even strips of flesh cut from their own breasts, arms, or legs. They took the purifying medicine sweat and smeared themselves with bears' grease, while the priests besought the gods and smoked the sacred pipe. Their dreams during this period of personal privation were fraught with significance, and, if unlucky, were sufficient to diminish enlistment or even to break up a war party.

The climax was reached in the war dance, designed to stimulate themselves and to intimidate the enemy. From dark to dawn, hideous with paint — red, usually, or black, though Keokuk's band wore white — the braves imitated the feats of battle, yelling, leaping, working themselves to frenzied furor. Then at daybreak, hoarse and weary, led on by the feathered head-dress of the chief, they began the march to the cadence of the shouts, songs, and prayers of the men, women, and children who

usually attended them a short distance on their way.

Cunning and surprise constituted the strategy of Indian warfare, though courage and skill were by no means lacking. Since the aim was to strike a swift and unexpected blow, escaping before the enemy could recover for retaliation, the war party travelled silently and at night, skulking in the ravines and hidden ways, employing a watchful sentry system, communicating by secret signs such as the cry of the fox and the hoot of the owl. Arrived in hostile territory, they held a whispered council, then separated, secreting themselves where they awaited the signal for attack, though it might be days before the propitious moment arrived. During the fight, the leader of the war party stayed in the rear with his sacred war bundle and sang and rattled to help his men. He himself took no part in the actual fighting, but got great credit if his party was successful.

The typical plains Indian went into battle stripped to breech clout and moccasins. His weapons, before the white man supplied him with guns and powder, were the scalping-knife and tomahawk formed from flinty rock, the bow and arrow, lance, and war club; his only defensive weapon being a circular shield of buffalo hide. Upon this, the most prized of warlike possessions, he lavished care and thought, attaching to it his "medicine" and scalps, and pinning his faith to the powers decoratively symbolized thereon.

Noncombatants were not recognized. What prisoners were not killed were adopted, particularly if

they were women or children. Every man was free to take all the honors he could, to strike and scalp where he pleased, but only the leader might divide the spoils.

The return of the war party was the occasion for additional ceremonies. If unsuccessful, the warriors stole noiselessly into the village, covered with shame and confusion. Mourning lasted for days, the men being morose and gloomy, the women extravagant in their expressions of grief. If successful, however, the braves returned with pomp. Upon approaching the village, they set up the shout of victory, repeating the death whoop as many times as they had scalps and prisoners. All rushed tumultuously to meet them, the women gay in their gaudy best. The whole party freshly painted themselves, then, with red scalps aloft on poles, dancing, singing, and beating the drums, they triumphantly entered the camp. Upon an oak war post painted red the exploits of the party were drawn with charcoal, and around this stake they danced the gruesome scalp dance.

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