

The Sacs and Foxes

After Getci Munito created the earth he took up some yellow clay and molded in his hand the image of a human being. Then he blew his breath upon it four times and it came to life. So it was, in Indian mythology, that the Sac Indians came into being. The Foxes were made of red earth. Their true name, however, is not Foxes at all, but Meskwaki, meaning "red-earth people". They were called Foxes, or rather Renards, by the French, because one day, according to tradition, some members of the Fox gens were hunting when they met some Frenchmen who asked them who they were. The Indians gave the name of their gens, and ever after that name was applied to the whole tribe.

The Sacs and the Foxes have figured more prominently in the history of Iowa than any other Indians — yet they were not native to the prairies west of the Mississippi. They came as intruders nearly two hundred years ago. Before that time the Iowa country was occupied, in a desultory manner, by Sioux, Ioway, and occasional bands of Illinois. While the Sacs and Foxes did not entirely eliminate their rivals, they did succeed in gaining possession of Iowa as far west as the Missouri slope and north to the upper forks of the principal rivers. As the actual inhabitants of this region, the Sacs and Foxes

were the Indians with whom the early settlers came in contact. From them the government obtained most of the land included in the State of Iowa.

Because of their intimate association for so many years, the Sacs and Foxes have often been considered as a single nation by the government and in literature. They were in fact separate tribes. The Foxes, a powerful and savage people, dwelt along the Fox and Wisconsin rivers when the French missionaries came to Green Bay. Their bravery was proverbial, but among neighboring tribes they had a reputation for being stingy, avaricious, thieving, and quarrelsome. While others submitted to white paternalism, the Foxes remained obdurate.

Living in a strategic location, they were in a position to cut off communication by way of the famous old Fox-Wisconsin route to the Upper Mississippi and the rich fur-bearing lake region of Minnesota. No Frenchman passed that way except at the risk of his life. Moreover, the Foxes made war incessantly upon the Illinois and the Chippeway, until at last the scalping knife became so busy there was no time for gathering peltries. Finally, in a bloody campaign, the Foxes were almost exterminated.

In 1733, however, an incident of fateful consequence occurred. A French officer was shot by the Indians while imprudently visiting a Sac village. The Sacs, conscious of their inability to atone for the death of so prominent a Frenchman, cast their lot with the remnant of the Foxes and sought refuge

beyond the Mississippi in the land of the Ioway. There the combined Sac and Fox tribes continued to prey upon French traders and pursue the timid Illinois. Even the punitive French expedition sent against them in 1735, though it penetrated to the Des Moines River, served only to unite the two tribes more firmly.

Unlike the Foxes, though also of Algonkian stock, the Sacs were circumspect, shrewd, and comparatively dependable. Whereas the Foxes were individualists, every man for himself, the Sacs had a higher regard for authority and tribal loyalty. Willing to fight if need be — and splendid warriors they were — the Sacs nevertheless took counsel and considered well the consequences before they raised the war whoop. During the strife between the Foxes and the French in Wisconsin, the Sacs, who lived near Green Bay, sometimes supported the Foxes but for the most part maintained an attitude of prudent neutrality. Only an accident of fate caused their alliance with the Foxes.

Although the Sacs and Foxes were united for purposes of war and mutual defense, they lived in separate villages and maintained the integrity of their social and political institutions. In 1805, Zebulon M. Pike found the Sacs living in four villages: one at the head of the Des Moines Rapids on the west side of the Mississippi, the second in Illinois about sixty miles up-stream, another on the Iowa River, and the last on Rock River in Illinois. The

first of the Fox villages he encountered was in Iowa above the Rock Rapids, another was about twelve miles west of the lead mines, while the third was near the mouth of Turkey River. Lieutenant Pike estimated that the Sacs then numbered 2850 and the Foxes 1750.

Being woodland Indians of Algonkian stock, their tribal organization, native customs, and material culture were naturally similar. In spite of their lust for fighting, they were intensely religious.

Each tribe was composed of gentes, and each gens had an hereditary chief who was socially of first importance but politically a figurehead. The chiefs of one tribe had no jurisdiction over the other — until the government recognized Keokuk as the principal chief of both. Even then his actual supremacy was dubious.

Sharing the notoriety of the eloquent Keokuk and defiant Black Hawk among the Sacs were Pashpahoh and Appanoose. During the period of Indian land cessions in Iowa, Poweshiek and Wapello were the most prominent Foxes. At about the same time Taima was head of their Medicine Lodge Society.

And now, for lo, these many years, the Sacs and the Foxes have been estranged, living apart. The old alliance is all but forgotten. The surviving Sacs reside in Oklahoma and Kansas, but most of the Foxes long ago returned to Iowa, bought some land near Tama, and there they are still living much as their fathers did.

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