

The Ioway

Among all the Indians who inhabited Iowa in historic times, the tribe that gave its name to this State is in some respects the most distinctive of all. Of Siouan stock were the Ioway, like the Winnebago, Omaha, Oto, and Missouri; but while they spoke the language of the Sioux, their material culture was peculiarly Algonkian. From ancient association they had learned how to make thread from fiber, bowls and spoons of wood, stone corn crushers, and houses of bark and mat. In decorative art they developed an exuberance seldom seen among the founders of the parent culture. As to their political and social organization, however, the Ioway were distinctly Siouan, closely identified with their linguistic relatives, the Winnebago, Oto, Omaha, Missouri, and Ponca.

Always a roving people, the Ioway left their primal home in the woodlands about the Great Lakes sometime in the remote past. According to the story of an old Oto chief, long before the arrival of the white men, a large band of Indians known as the Hotonga, or fish eaters, migrated to the southwest in search of buffalo. At Green Bay they divided. The Winnebago remained, while the rest continued the journey until they reached the Mississippi at the mouth of the Iowa River where they camped on the

sandy beach. There the Ioway band concluded to stay, but the others went on into the valley of the Missouri River.

The migrations of the Ioway by no means ended on the banks of the Mississippi, however. Eventually they moved inland to the Des Moines River, thence northward into Minnesota, where they tarried for a time at the pipestone quarries. From there, probably at the instigation of the Dakota, they drifted down to the Platte River, then into Missouri, and finally back into the Des Moines Valley. Continually harrassed by neighboring tribes, they seem to have been always on the move. According to tradition, the Sacs and Foxes nearly annihilated their principal village at Iowaville. Afterward the remnant of the once powerful tribe, depleted by warfare and weakened by pestilence, dwelt in northern Missouri and southwestern Iowa until the government took their land.

Though ultimately defeated in war, the Ioway were nevertheless able warriors, and good hunters and trappers as well. They were a broad-shouldered, heavily muscled people, but, with unusually wide mouths and pierced noses, they were not handsome. Restless, often defeated, ever on the move gypsy-like, they seem to have reflected something of their spirit and circumstances in their appearance, for they gave the impression of being "forlorn, down at heel", and shiftless.

Like the Sacs and Foxes, the Ioway braves shaved

their heads except for a tuft on the crown. To this was fastened a beautiful crest made of a deer's tail and horse hair. The deer's tail was dyed red and often surmounted with an eagle's quill. In the center of the patch of short hair was the precious scalplock, the symbol of the warrior, which was never cut but allowed to reach the greatest length possible. It was kept in a braid and passed through a piece of curiously carved bone. Outside of the bone and through this little braid was a small wooden or bone key which held the crest to the head.

The Ioway were divided into ten blood-kindred groups, or gentes, each gens bearing the title and distinguished by the badge or totem of the particular animal or bird from which they were supposed to have sprung — the Bear, Buffalo, Pigeon, Elk, Eagle and Thunder, Wolf, Red Earth, Snake, Beaver, and Owl. Each gens was likewise composed of four subgentes descended from the four brothers who founded the clan. Thus their social system was based strictly on caste. Rank was dependent upon birth, quite secondarily upon achievement. The civil chief of each gens was the eldest male lineal descendant of the oldest ancestral brother. As the Bear and Buffalo gentes were paramount, the chief of the Bear gens acted as tribal chief in the fall and winter while the Buffalo chief led the tribe in the spring and summer. Military affairs were directed by the gens war-bundle owners and those braves who had distinguished themselves in battle.

During the earlier years of Ioway occupation of the Des Moines Valley, probably in Revolutionary times, the tribe was led by the venerable Mauhaw-gaw, who was later murdered by the Sioux. He was succeeded by his son Mahaska, the best-known Ioway chief, a mighty warrior and a noble Indian.

At the height of their power the Ioway traded extensively in furs. At one time they also controlled the output of the red pipestone quarry in southwestern Minnesota. In 1676, Father André says they were poor, their greatest wealth consisting of buffalo hides and calumets. Though engaged in a small way both in manufacturing and agriculture they were primarily hunters. They had to be, for they were great meat eaters.

In 1836 the Ioway withdrew to Kansas where some of them still dwell on the Great Nemaha Reservation. Others are in Oklahoma along the Cimarron River. To-day they are a vanishing people: their native culture is all but dead. Of the few who remain not one keeps up the ancient rites.

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