

The Council on the Iowa

Saukenuk was the principal village of the Sac Indians. Strategically situated at the mouth of the Rock River in the Illinois country, this large Indian community remained for many years the seat of one of the most powerful tribes in the Upper Mississippi Valley. There the squaws cultivated extensive cornfields on the fertile river bottoms, while the braves found game abundant along the streams and particularly upon Rock Island. Moreover, a cave at the lower end of Rock Island was supposed to be inhabited by a good spirit that watched over the welfare of the Indians.

But an evil day came in 1804 when the good spirit was impotent against the white man's whisky. Some of the tribal chiefs surrendered all of their lands east of the Mississippi and promised to move west whenever the country was surveyed and sold to settlers. By 1827 settlers began to arrive in the vicinity of Rock Island, and in the spring of 1829 a few white men actually took possession of part of the cultivated fields at Saukenuk. This was contrary to the terms of the treaty, for the land had not yet been surveyed, and George Davenport, the Rock Island trader, successfully interceded for the Indians, though he advised them to move across the river. Keokuk, the man of peace, established a new

village for his band on the south bank of the Iowa River a few miles above its mouth, but Black Hawk, the leader of the hostile band, insisted upon remaining at Saukenuk in defiance of orders from the military authorities at Fort Armstrong. In June, 1831, however, he learned that a large force of undisciplined militia was advancing upon his village and, realizing the fatal consequences of a conflict with them, he hastily decamped and sought refuge in the Iowa country.

It was a severe blow to the old chief. Expelled from his lifelong home, his tribe divided, Black Hawk brooded over the decline of his power and the waning fortunes of his people. But his young warriors still had faith in their bold leader. They counselled war, and the squaws clamored for their cornfields in Illinois. Nahpope and Winneshiek also gave him bad advice, promising aid from the Winnebago and ultimate support by the British in Canada. In the spring of 1832 Black Hawk decided to go on the warpath.

Having laid a plot to capture Fort Armstrong at one bold stroke, he planned to invade Illinois and drive out the settlers. To succeed he would need many warriors, so in April he went with his whole band — braves, women, and children — to Keokuk's village where he hoped to rouse the ancient fighting spirit of his tribesmen and gain many recruits. Well he realized that it was a final contest for tribal leadership. If he could win the support of Keokuk's

band he would be the acknowledged leader of the Sacs, but if he should fail Keokuk's supremacy would be all the more secure and his own cause would be only a forlorn hope. The wily Keokuk was no less aware of the decisive consequences of the occasion.

Into the village of his rival rode the proud old warrior Black Hawk at the head of his band. They came armed and painted for war, singing their most stirring war songs and beating their drums. A British flag was borne aloft. Black Hawk was clad in the uniform of a British soldier and carried a heavy cavalry sword. When the whole band had assembled, some braves proceeded to erect a war post in a level space not far from a lodge where a white spy lay concealed among some hides and other camp equipage. From his vantage point Josiah Smart, the spy, an Indian interpreter and friend of Keokuk, saw and heard all that happened.

According to his account as related by Perry A. Armstrong in *The Sauks and the Black Hawk War*, Black Hawk withdrew a few paces, uttered a terrific war-whoop, and hurled his tomahawk into the soft bass-wood war post, thus figuratively cleaving the skull of an enemy. In that manner he declared his enlistment for battle. Nahpope, the second in command, cast his tomahawk close beside that of his chief, and the other braves followed in quick succession. When the war post was filled with tomahawks, the braves joined hands in a large circle and

began their war dance, moving from left to right and keeping time with the drums. Faster and faster sounded the drums, faster and faster danced the Indians until the line was broken. Then each warrior, uttering a wild yell, rushed to the post and struck it with the poll of his tomahawk, thereby pledging himself to go on the warpath with his chief. After thus enlisting the braves continued the war dance, leaping into the air, bending low, or skulking behind imaginary trees, each exhibiting some intended feat of war according to his own impulse.

At last, when the warriors were beginning to show signs of exhaustion, the venerable Black Hawk stepped into the circle and approached the war post with majestic stride. Sixty-five winters had frosted his hair, but his carriage was erect and his eyes still blazed. Proudly he faced his tribesmen. A mighty cheer burst from the lips of the savage throng. Even Keokuk's braves joined in the shout. Never had Black Hawk received a lustier ovation, never was popular acclaim more welcome. Already the spirit of war was rampant. A sign from the old chief and the howling mob became silent, eager to hear every word. Then Black Hawk spoke.

“Headmen, Chiefs, Braves, and Warriors of the Sacs: For more than a hundred winters our nation was a powerful, happy, and united people. The Great Spirit gave to us a territory, seven hundred miles in length, along the Mississippi, reaching from Prairie du Chien to the mouth of the Illinois River.

This vast territory was composed of the finest and best land for the home and use of the Indian ever found in this country. The woods and prairies teemed with buffalo, moose, elk, bear and deer, with other game suitable to our enjoyment, while its lakes, rivers, creeks, and ponds were alive with the very best kinds of fish for our food. The islands in the Mississippi were our gardens, where the Great Spirit caused berries, plums and other fruits to grow in great abundance, while the soil, when cultivated, produced corn, beans, pumpkins and squash of the finest quality and largest quantities. Our children were never known to cry of hunger, and no stranger, red or white, was permitted to enter our lodges without finding food and rest. Our nation was respected by all who came in contact with it, for we had the ability as well as the courage to defend and maintain our rights of territory, person and property against the world. Then, indeed, was it an honor to be called a Sac, for that name was a passport to our people travelling in other territories and among other nations. But an evil day befell us when we became a divided nation, and with that division our glory deserted us, leaving us with the hearts and heels of the rabbit in place of the courage and strength of the bear. All this was brought about by the Long Guns, who now claim all our territory east of the Mississippi, including Saukenuk, our ancient village, where all of us were born, raised, lived, hunted, fished and loved, and near which are

our corn lands, which have yielded abundant harvest for a hundred winters, and where sleep the bones of our sacred dead, and around which cluster our fondest recollections of heroism and noble deeds of charity done by our fathers, who were Sacs, not only in name, but in courage and action. I thank the Great Spirit for making me a Sac, and the son of a great Sac chief, and a lineal descendant of Nanamakee, the founder of our nation.

“The Great Spirit is the friend and protector of the Sacs, and has accompanied me as your war chief upon the warpath against our enemies, and has given me skill to direct and you the courage to achieve a hundred victories over our enemies upon the warpath. All this occurred before we became a divided nation. We then had the courage and strength of the bear, but since the division our hearts and heels are like those of the rabbit and the fawn. We have neither courage nor confidence in our leaders or ourselves, and have fallen a prey to internal jealousies and petty strifes until we are no longer worthy of the illustrious name we bear. In a word, we have become subjects of ridicule and badinage, — ‘There goes a cowardly Sauk’.

“All this has resulted from the white man’s accursed fire-water united with our own tribal quarrels and personal jealousies. The Great Spirit created this country for the use and benefit of his red children, and placed them in full possession of it, and we were happy and contented. Why did he send the

palefaces across the great ocean to take it from us? When they landed on our territory they were received as long-absent brothers whom the Great Spirit had returned to us. Food and rest were freely given them by our fathers, who treated them all the more kindly on account of their weak and helpless condition. Had our fathers the desire, they could have crushed the intruders out of existence with the same ease we kill the blood-sucking mosquitoes. Little did our fathers then think they were taking to their bosoms, and warming them into life and vigor, a lot of torpid, half-frozen and starving vipers, which in a few winters would fix their deadly fangs upon the very bosoms that had nursed and cared for them when they needed help. From the day when the palefaces landed upon our shores, they have been robbing us of our inheritance, and slowly, but surely, driving us back, back, back towards the setting sun, burning our villages, destroying our growing crops, ravishing our wives and daughters, beating our papposes with sticks, and brutally murdering our people upon the most flimsy pretenses and trivial causes.

“Upon our return to Saukenuk from our winter hunting grounds last spring, we found the palefaces in our lodges, and they had torn down our fences and were plowing our corn lands and getting ready to plant their corn upon the lands which the Sacs have owned and cultivated for so many winters that our memory can not go back to them. Nor is this all.

They claim to own our lands and lodges by right of purchase from the cowardly and treacherous Quashquamme, nearly thirty winters ago, and drive us away from our lodges and fields with kicks of their cruel boots, accompanied with vile cursing and beating with sticks. When returning from an ill-fated day's hunt, wearied and hungry, with my feet stumbling with the weight of sixty-four winters, I was basely charged by two palefaces of killing their hogs, which I indignantly denied, because the charge was false, but they told me I lied, and then they took my gun, powder-horn and bullet-pouch from me by violence, and beat me with a hickory stick until the blood ran down my back like drops of falling rain, and my body was so lame and sore for a moon that I could not hunt or fish. They brought their accursed fire-water to our village, making wolves of our braves and warriors, and then when we protested against the sale and destroyed their bad spirits, they came with a multitude on horseback, compelling us to flee across the Mississippi for our lives, and then they burned down our ancient village and turned their horses into our growing corn.

“They are now running their plows through our graveyards, turning up the bones and ashes of our sacred dead, whose spirits are calling to us from the land of dreams for vengeance on the despoilers. Will the descendants of Nanamakee and our other illustrious dead stand idly by and suffer this sacrilege to be continued? Have they lost their strength

and courage, and become squaws and papposes? The Great Spirit whispers in my ear, no! Then let us be again united as a nation and at once cross the Mississippi, rekindle our watch-fires upon our ancient watch-tower, and send forth the war whoop of the united Sacs, and our cousins, the Meskwakies, Pottawattamies, Ottawas, Chippeways, Winnebagoes and Kickapoos, will unite with us in avenging our wrongs upon the white pioneers of Illinois. When we recross the Mississippi with a strong army, the British Father will send us not only guns, tomahawks, spears, knives and ammunition in abundance, but he will also send us British soldiers to fight our battles for us. Then will the deadly arrow and fatal tomahawk hurtle through the air at the hearts and heads of the pale-faced invaders, sending their guilty spirits to the white man's place of endless punishment, and should we, while on the war-path, meet the Pauguk, our departing spirits will be led along that path which is strewn with beautiful flowers, laden with the fragrance of patriotism and heroism, which leads to the land of dreams, whence the spirits of our fathers are beckoning us on, to avenge their wrongs."

What a stirring appeal to the patriotism of the tribe! Playing upon the dominant emotions of the Indians, Black Hawk wrought them into a state of savage frenzy. Already under the influence of the war dance and too much whisky, men and women alike gave free expression to their enthusiasm for

war. Even Keokuk joined in the applause. Nahpope made an impassioned speech in which he gave further assurance of military aid from neighboring tribes and predicted the formation of a great Indian confederation of the Mississippi Valley with a mighty army as numerous as the trees of the forest, under whose tread the very earth would tremble.

By this time the Indians were howling demons. There was no distinction between Black Hawk's band and their more peaceful hosts. Loudly Keokuk's headmen and warriors demanded that he lead them upon the warpath against the palefaces to avenge their wrongs. Nothing but a miracle could stem the tide of martial fervor.

It was a proud and happy moment for Black Hawk. The dreams of a lifetime were about to be realized. The success of his scheme to drive the white men out of the Great Valley seemed assured.

For Keokuk the occasion was fraught with equally potent consequences. Never had he been placed in such a critical and difficult position. Pledged to preserve peace with the settlers, he realized that his tribe was rushing pell-mell into war — into a hopeless struggle against insuperable odds. Open opposition to the prevailing opinion would mean loss of leadership, if not personal injury during the mad excitement of the moment. To temporize would seem like treason. It was no occasion for expedients or compromise. Whatever he should do must be decisive, and he must act at once.

But Keokuk was not called the Watchful Fox for nothing. He was intelligent, cunning, and masterful, with the courage of his convictions. When called upon to lead his braves to battle, Keokuk had decided upon his course of action. Without the slightest hesitation, he strode through the crowd of war-crazed savages and, walking directly to the war post, he placed his hand upon it. This was construed to mean that he was enlisting for the war and a great shout went up. The powerful Keokuk would have need of all his diplomacy and all his eloquence if he were to quell the lust for white men's blood. Perhaps only he and Black Hawk realized fully what was at stake. Calmly he waited for the tumult to subside. That was one of the most fateful and dramatic moments in the history of the tribe.

"Headmen, Chiefs, Braves, and Warriors of the Sacs", he began with studied deliberation. "I have heard and considered your demand to be led forth upon the warpath against the palefaces to avenge the many wrongs, persecutions, outrages and murders committed by them upon our people. I deeply sympathise with you in your sense and construction of these terrible wrongs. Few, indeed, are our people who do not mourn the death of some near and loved one at the hands of the Long Guns, who are becoming very numerous. Their cabins are as plenty as the trees in the forest, and their soldiers are springing up like grass on the prairies. They have the talking thunder, which carries death a long

way off, with long guns and short ones, long knives and short ones, ammunition and provisions in abundance, with powerful war horses for their soldiers to ride. In a contest where our numbers are so unequal to theirs we must ultimately fail. All we can reasonably expect or hope is to wreak the utmost of our vengeance upon their hated heads, and fall, when fall we must, with our faces to the enemy. Great is the undertaking, and desperate must be our exertions. Every brave and warrior able to throw a tomahawk or wield a war-club must go with us. Once across the Mississippi, let no one think of returning while there is a foe to strike or a scalp to take, and when we fall — if our strength permit — let us drag our feeble, bleeding bodies to the graves of our ancestors, and there die, that our ashes may commingle with theirs, while our departing spirits shall follow the long trail made by them in their passage to the land of spirits.

“It is my duty as your chief to be your father while in the paths of peace, and your leader and champion while on the warpath. You have decided to follow the path of war, and I will lead you forth to victory if the Good Spirit prevails. If not, and the Bad Spirit rules, then will I perish at my post of duty. But what shall we do with our old and infirm, our women and children? We can not take them with us upon the warpath, for they would hamper us in our movements and defeat us of our vengeance. We dare not leave them behind us, doomed to perish

of hunger or fall captive to the palefaces, who would murder the old and the young, but reserve our wives and daughters for a fate worse than death itself.

“I will lead you forth upon the warpath, but upon this condition: That we first put our wives and children, our aged and infirm, gently to sleep in that slumber which knows no waking this side the spirit land, and then carefully and tenderly lay their bodies away by the side of our sacred dead, from whence their freed spirits shall depart on the long journey to the happy homes in the land of dreams beneath, beyond the Evening Star. For we go upon the long trail which has no turn — from which, in a few short moons, we shall follow them, but they must not follow us. This sacrifice is demanded of us by the very love we bear those dear ones. Our every feeling of humanity tells us we can not take them with us, and dare not leave them behind us.”

Thus adroitly, while promising to accept the decision of the tribe, Keokuk compelled his people to think of the consequences. The half-drunken, blood-thirsty savages stood cowed before the terrible sacrifice that their chief required of them. Keokuk noticed the effect of his words and was quick to press his advantage. Turning to Black Hawk, he continued:

“To you, venerable Chief, do I appeal for an answer to what I have said. Your long experience upon the warpath tells you I have spoken the truth; yet, with all your wonderful eloquence, you have

urged us to this terrible sacrifice. Brooding over the oft-repeated wrongs committed by the palefaces upon you and your people, your mind has grown weak, until you have lent a willing ear to the whisperings of evil counsellors, who can not speak the truth because their tongues are forked, like the viper's.

“They came to you under the guise and pretense of friendship, and by the use of base flattery and hypocrisy gained your confidence, only to lead you into the crooked path of ruin and destruction. They are enemies of yours and your band, instead of friends. They first told you the British Father has promised you aid and assistance, in warriors as well as guns, tomahawks, spears, knives, ammunition and provisions, as soon as you should recross the Mississippi at the head of a hostile army. Why has he not furnished you these things, to enable you to raise, arm and equip your army, ready for war? This fact proves the whole story a lie, prepared no doubt by Nahpope or his cunning brother, Winneshiek, for the sole purpose of deceiving and misleading you and your band. The British Father is at peace with our Great Father at Washington, and neither knows of or cares for you or your grievances.

“The same evil counsellors have told you that the moment you shall sound your war whoop east of the Mississippi all the Indian tribes between that and the Illinois River will rise up as a single warrior and unite with you under your banner to avenge their wrongs upon the white settlers. What wrongs

have they to avenge? They are on terms of peace and good-will with these white settlers, and have no cause of complaint or grievance whatever. Yet they have told you that these Indians across the river were not only ready but eager to join you in a general massacre of the frontier inhabitants of northern Illinois, and are now only waiting your signal fires to be rekindled upon the watch-tower at Saukenuk to begin the slaughter. If this be true, why are not their great war chiefs here tonight? Where are Waubonsie, Red Devil, Big Thunder Shaata, and Meachelle? Why are they not here in person, or by their representatives, if it be true they are anxious to go upon the warpath with you? Their absence is proof conclusive that they have no intention or desire to join you in this suicidal undertaking.

“You have been deceived — aye, cruelly deceived — by these counsellors with a forked tongue, who are leading you into the crooked path of the Bad Spirit, and have no love for you or respect for your gray hairs or good name. I beseech you, by the noble character you have always borne, by the honors and trophies you have won upon the warpath, by the love you bear your gallant little band, by everything you hold sacred and dear, abandon this wild, visionary and desperate undertaking, and return to your village. Seed time is here, but your grounds have not been prepared for the planting. Go back and plant the summer’s crop. Arise to the dignity and grandeur of your honored position as the father

of your gallant little band; shake off the base fetters of the Bad Spirit which bind you hand and foot, and turn your feet from the crooked warpath into the path that leads to peace. In this way only can you save your true and trusty band from certain defeat, if not utter annihilation. If you still persist in going upon the warpath against the white people, then indeed may we bid farewell to Black Hawk, whose protecting spirit has forsaken him in his old age, and suffered his star of success — which has led him in triumph to a hundred victories on the warpath — to go down behind a cloud, never to rise again; and when the Pauguk comes, his lofty spirit will depart, groping its way doubtfully along the dark and crooked path to the land of dreams, un-honored, unlamented, and unwept.”

A solemn stillness settled over the whole village. In contrast to the recent hubbub, the silence was foreboding, oppressive. The braves were sobered. Infuriated men were pacified. Indian mothers pressed their babes to their breasts and waited with throbbing hearts and fearful ears to hear their fate. But the ardor for war had suddenly cooled. Even Black Hawk was completely overwhelmed by the avalanche of eloquence which swept everything before it. His dream of vengeance was shattered; his vision of a great Indian confederacy appeared only as a preposterous nightmare. He was a vanquished leader on the eve of his greatest war.

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