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WAR EAGLE'S GRAVE AT SIOUX CITY

THE PALIMPSEST

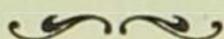
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War Eagle

On a high bluff overlooking the confluence of the Big Sioux and the Missouri rivers at Sioux City, stands a monument erected in honor of War Eagle, the last Sioux Indian Chief to dwell in the Iowa country. From the foot of the bluff to the river's bank, in the early days, a timbered area about a half mile in width extended for some distance along the banks of the Big Sioux River. In this wooded area, the War Eagle band of Indians established their camping grounds. Appreciative of the beauties around him, War Eagle would frequently ascend the bluff and sit in quiet meditation as he viewed the panoramic scene that lay before him. When the old chieftain died, his friends selected as his final resting place a favored spot at the summit of the bluff.

But who was War Eagle? What were his interests, his activities, his influences — his contribution to Iowa history? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered completely. Historians have searched in vain for exact biographi-

cal data. The time and place of War Eagle's birth seem not to have been recorded. Indeed, many of the detailed facts of his early life are unknown. From other substantial and interesting facts that seem to be well founded, however, a fair appraisal of the old chieftain may be made.

War Eagle was a Santee Sioux Indian. He was born perhaps in what is now eastern Minnesota, or possibly in western Wisconsin, in the decade between 1780 and 1790. He spent his youth in the central Minnesota region, in an area not far from the headwaters of the great Mississippi. Just why he was given the name "War Eagle" is unknown. Among his own people he was sometimes called "Huya-na," meaning "Little Eagle" — a name that seems more appropriate. As a friend of the white man, he sought paths of peace, rather than exploits of war. Had he been a warrior he might have been more renowned, but not more worthy of remembrance.

When War Eagle was a lad in his teens, Colonel Robert Dickson, energetic British explorer and fur trader, came to the Santee region where he found the family of War Eagle in positions of influence. About 1797 Dickson married an Indian girl — a sister of Red Thunder, one of the prominent chiefs of the Sioux. Some authorities say that Dickson's wife was also a cousin of War Eagle. However this may be, it is evident that

there was a friendly and cooperative relationship between the two men.

But War Eagle was a forthright individual with opinions of his own. Moreover, he was a lover of peace and a friend of the early Americans. He was not disposed to follow permanently the leadership of British agents. During the early years of the nineteenth century, it is said that War Eagle had been associated with Tamaha, a chief of the Sioux and a devoted friend of Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike. It is clear that this alliance, or one akin to it, had a far-reaching effect on War Eagle. Through gifts obtained from the British and by intermarriage into the tribe, Dickson had established confidence with the Santee Sioux, and was able to influence many of them to join the British. But not so with War Eagle. His friendship for Tamaha and particularly his unswerving loyalty to leaders of the American cause were stronger than his ties to Colonel Dickson. At the expense of his prestige among his own people, the Santee Sioux, War Eagle remained loyal to the United States and strengthened his ties of friendship with the Americans.

War Eagle was "naturally of a quiet and friendly disposition." When the Santee became hostile toward the whites and started their outbreaks, he did not want to participate. He therefore left Minnesota, and was eventually destined

to make his home along the Big Sioux River in Iowa. But this transition was neither immediate nor direct. War Eagle reached his Iowa home by traveling southward down the Mississippi to St. Louis, and thence at a later date, northwestwardly up the Missouri River.

Reports relative to War Eagle's marriages differ somewhat in detail. Some have said that while he was yet in the Minnesota area, among his own people, he married a Santee Sioux girl — Mazakirawin by name — and that she became the mother of seven children. Others believe that after his migration into the Northwest he married a Yankton Sioux.

During the War of 1812 War Eagle was employed carrying dispatches on the Mississippi River for the government. In this connection it is likely that he came in contact with Manuel Lisa and other traders and explorers who were interested in the development of trade with the Northwest. These traders extended their influence and power in keeping friendly relations between the Missouri River Indians and the government. To this end, the American Fur Company employed men upon whom it could rely to further the friendship with the Indians. War Eagle's courage, keen intellect, and unswerving loyalty stamped him as the man to send among the Sioux of the Missouri.

Manuel Lisa, it is said, "made him a messenger

on the Missouri River" — a position of trust and honor. War Eagle continued in the employment of the American Fur Company for many years, as a guide and as a carrier of mail and dispatches. He retained always the respect and confidence of the white settlers and at the same time became a leader among the Yankton Sioux of the Missouri River region.

Having been adopted into the Yankton tribe, War Eagle subsequently became one of their chiefs and a man of great influence in the advancement of peaceful relations between the Indians and the whites. According to A. R. Fulton: "He was, both physically and mentally, a splendid specimen of his race, being tall, muscular, and gifted with intellect above the common order. His prestige in the council among his people was very great, for but few excelled him in oratory." Moreover, he and his descendants played a significant role among the early pioneers of the Northwest.

It is widely reported and commonly accepted that War Eagle was one of the chiefs sent to Washington in 1837 to negotiate the signing of the treaty with the Sioux. It was at this time, we are told, that he received from the hands of President Martin Van Buren an American flag and a medal as a token of friendship. On one side of the medal was a picture of the president, with the words "Martin Van Buren, President of the

United States, A. D. 1837." On the other side were the clasped hands of an Indian and an American officer, with the legend "Peace and Friendship." This medal was kept by the descendants of War Eagle for many years. It should be noted, however, that War Eagle's name is not attached to the Sioux Treaty of 1837.

Living along the upper Missouri River in the Yankton Sioux area, War Eagle and his family came in contact with many American explorers and fur traders. One of these frontiersmen was Theophile Bruguier who had adopted the manners and customs of the Sioux. Bruguier dwelt for a number of years among them, and married two of the daughters of War Eagle. When it appeared that white settlers would soon press in upon the Sioux and cause them to move further westward, Bruguier resumed the role of the white man. With his Indian wives he selected a new home at the juncture of the Missouri and the Big Sioux rivers and became the first permanent white settler in the vicinity of present-day Sioux City. There War Eagle lived with Bruguier on the border between civilization and the Indian country until the end of his career.

An advocate always of peace and harmony between the two races, a stalwart defender of right, War Eagle was not infallible. He was not the master of his own destiny. His "besetting sin," it

is said, "especially toward the latter part of his life was a fondness for strong drink." Exposure while intoxicated, it is believed, hastened his death in 1851.

The Sioux Indians had a peculiar method of disposing of their dead. Usually the deceased was wrapped in his blanket or robe and then laid up in a tree top or placed upon a scaffold made of poles for that purpose. This was done so that nothing could hinder the spirit in its flight to the new hunting ground. But with War Eagle it was different. Perhaps because of his close association with white settlers, or perhaps because of his distinction as a chief, a site was selected at the summit of a nearby bluff, and he was laid in a grave something after the fashion of the white man. But there were evidences of the lingering Sioux custom. The grave was about four feet in depth. The body was wrapped in a blanket and laid in without a coffin. Sticks were then placed across the top of the grave and covered with earth, leaving an open space at the head of the grave about one foot square, "that the spirit of the departed might have egress, as it winged its way to the celestial hunting-ground on high."

For more than a half century after the death of War Eagle his grave remained unmarked. Meanwhile, the remaining Indians had pushed on westward, and white settlers had taken their

place. Retaining the name of the Indian tribe, white settlers had established the flourishing city of Sioux City. In 1913 the "Tribe of the Sioux," an organization of Sioux City businessmen, considered a proposal to erect a monument to War Eagle on the bluffs of a newly acquired city park, and the removal of the bones of War Eagle to that spot. It seemed more appropriate, however, to acquire the site of the original burial, then owned by Colonel J. W. O'Grady of Winnipeg, Canada, and erect a memorial there.

In 1914 the trustees of the War Eagle Memorial Association visited the site of War Eagle's grave. Plans were made to secure the land and mark the grave with a marble tablet until sufficient funds could be obtained to erect a suitable monument and convert the area into a memorial park. It was not until 1920, however, that this area was acquired by the city of Sioux City, and it was two years later, in 1922, that the War Eagle monument was dedicated.

On Saturday afternoon, October 21, 1922, Sioux City paid tribute to War Eagle when a large number of its citizens witnessed the unveiling of the War Eagle memorial and the dedication of War Eagle Park.

The memorial was unveiled by Mrs. Julia Bruquier Conger, a granddaughter of War Eagle, and her daughter, Mrs. Mercy Conger Bonnin.

Invocation to the "Great Spirit" was made by the Reverend Charles Snyder. Judge A. O. Wakefield gave the dedicatory address, and Constant R. Marks presented a brief biographical sketch of War Eagle. As a concluding feature of the program, descendants of War Eagle sang a Sioux hymn in their native language.

The memorial is a substantial stone structure bearing the inscription:

WAR EAGLE

A Member Of The Sioux Nation Who Died
In 1851 And Is Buried At This Place.

This Monument Is Erected
In Memory Of His Friendship
To The White Men

It is fitting that Iowans today should pay tribute to an Indian chief who placed a high value upon his friendship with the white man.

JACOB A. SWISHER