

The Sioux

Carrying war clubs and lances, and decorated with almost every conceivable preparation of paint, the Sioux Indians were indeed a picturesque group. Their calumets of red pipestone from the famous Minnesota quarries were most elaborate. Their pipes curiously carved and fitted with flat wooden handles some four feet in length were frequently ornamented with the scalps of attractive birds. The chieftain might be arrayed in a magnificent robe of buffalo, while dyed porcupine quills arranged in a kind of mosaic scarf added a colorful touch to the personal embellishment of the braves. Unfortunately for those who came in contact with them, however, the Sioux were as hostile and as treacherous as they were picturesque.

The Sioux, who called themselves Dakota, a word meaning "allies," were the most populous nation of Siouan stock, giving their name to that great division of native Americans. The Dakota themselves were divided into several tribes — the Santee, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Yankton occupying Minnesota and the northern third of Iowa, while farther west were the Ogalalas, Tetons, Blackfeet, and others.

The Dakota were plains Indians with habits

and customs adapted to living in such a region. Little inclined to raise corn and vegetables, they depended almost entirely on the buffalo and other game for their food supply. Earth lodges and skin tepees formed their habitations. The acquisition of horses introduced a new epoch in their way of life by greatly facilitating their migratory movements and the pursuit of the buffalo.

Among the best-known leaders of the Sioux in the Iowa country were Waneta, Wabasha, and War Eagle. Waneta, a chief of the Yankton branch, early distinguished himself as a warrior and eventually attained leadership over several of the associated Dakota tribes. He fought on the side of the British in the War of 1812, was commissioned captain, and visited England. Tall, graceful, and dignified, ambitious and autocratic, Waneta held undisputed sway over northern Iowa just before the settlers came.

Wabasha the Second, unlike his belligerent contemporary, Waneta, was friendly to the Americans. Of a benevolent disposition, he used his influence to maintain peaceful relations with the white men. The same may be said of War Eagle, a Yankton chief who was noted for his oratory, splendid physique, and unusual intelligence. His grave is on a high bluff north of Sioux City overlooking the confluence of the Big Sioux and Missouri rivers.

The history of the Sioux is a record of many

wars. Often they fought the Ioway and the Sacs and Foxes along the Des Moines, Skunk, Iowa, and Cedar rivers, fiercely and to the death. Again it was the Chippeway from the region of Lake Superior who felt the force of their savage attack.

“Often is there war between us,
There are feuds yet unforgotten,
Wounds that ache and still may open!”

spoke Nokomis of the Sioux to Hiawatha.

The Great Council of 1825 was but one of many attempts to adjust differences between the Sioux and adjacent tribes. On that occasion Wabasha, chief of the Sioux, expressed a hope that hostilities might be permanently abandoned. “I am pleased,” he said, “at the prospect of peace, and was glad to smoke the pipe and throw the remains into the fire. When the peace is made I hope it is a lasting one.” Usually the Sioux gave little heed to the provisions of treaties in the settlement of tribal disputes.

Nor were hostilities confined to the savages. White settlers were constantly in danger and not infrequently subjected to attack, particularly during the years from 1850 to 1870 when pressure of settlement was especially persistent and irksome. Depredations of the Sioux were most likely to occur during the severest weather and when supplies were low.

The spring of 1857 found all northwestern Iowa snowbound and desolate. Unusual privations

had been endured by the settlers in their little cottages on the shores of Okoboji and Spirit lakes; but the suffering of the Indians was greater still. Their tepees offered far less protection against the wind and cold; and with their scanty supply of food exhausted, famine stared them in the face. This condition of affairs accentuated their enmity toward the whites whom they blamed for taking their lands, driving off the game, and causing their desperate plight. Hungry, cold, and with bitterness in their hearts, they sallied forth in small groups in search of food at the homes of the whites.

In February, 1857, one of these groups of hostile Sioux led by Inkpaduta, a tall and powerful chieftain with pock-marked face and squinty, near-sighted eyes which made him appear particularly repulsive, suddenly appeared at the village of Smithland on the Little Sioux River in Woodbury County. The settlers were terrorized but were not injured. Moving slowly up the valley of the Little Sioux, Inkpaduta and his followers became each day more insolent and vicious. When they arrived at the lakes on Saturday evening, March 7th, they were in a fiendish state of mind, and celebrated their arrival at the ancient Mecca of the Sioux by holding a war dance. This was a signal of warfare. On the following day occurred the disastrous Spirit Lake Massacre — one of the most horrible episodes in the bloody annals of the Sioux.

J. A. SWISHER