

Indian Amusements

The Indians had a good time in Iowa. And why shouldn't they? Nature was kind to them here. There was an abundance of game in the woods and on the prairies, while the lakes and streams furnished a plentiful supply of fish. Wild plums, crabapples, and wild grapes were found in the thickets. Hickory nuts, walnuts, and hazelnuts could be had for the picking. The rich soil of Iowa made it possible to raise gardens and fields of corn without much effort.

Sometimes in the heart of winter when cruel blizzards howled around their lodges and snow lay deep in the ravines and on the prairie there was suffering in the Indian camps. But when spring came this was forgotten. It must have been a joy to the Indians to watch the prairies change from the dull brown of winter to a riot of green and pink in the springtime. Summer, though, was the season which the red men liked best. Then all the Indians — men, women, and children — had great fun. This was the time for war, for feasting, and for making love.

Then the Indian boys had plenty of time to practice shooting with their little bows and arrows, or to kill birds with their sling shots. The Indian girls had their dolls. Sometimes these were

carved out of blocks of wood, sometimes they were made of deerskin stuffed with moss. Both boys and girls liked to play forfeits, a game in which the loser gave up something to the winner, and cat's cradle, which was played with a piece of string looped over the hands.

Although the Indian women had to do all the household work and tend the gardens as well, nevertheless, they too found some time for play. Shinny was one of their popular games. For this sport they used a club much like those used today, but the ball was made of deerskin stuffed with buffalo hair or moss. Such a ball did not hurt a player much if it hit her.

Another favorite game for women was a sort of ball play. In this game two balls attached to the end of a string about a foot and a half long were used. Each woman had a short stick in each hand, and with these she tried to catch the string with the two balls and throw them over the goal.

George Catlin tells of such a game on one occasion at Prairie du Chien when Wabasha's band of Sioux came over from Iowa to get their annuities. After a grand carouse the Indian braves, feeling generous, laid out a great quantity of ribbons, calicoes, and other items calculated to arouse the cupidity of the squaws, as prizes. The women were divided into two equal groups and the play began. The men, who were more than half drunk, took infinite pleasure in rolling about on the ground and

laughing to excess while the women were tumbling about in all attitudes and scuffling for the ball. Sometimes the play, waxing hot, brought the struggling contestants immediately over the heads of the sprawling braves.

Women also liked to play a game called bowl and dice. Six of the eight thin, flat, bone dice were circular and two were carved to represent horses or turtles. All were white on one side and dark on the other. The dice were shaken in a wooden bowl but not turned out. Among the Ioway, two whites counted two, one white counted three, all dark or all white counted eight, two turtles or horses of one color and the rest reverse ended the game and the opponent won.

Other games of chance were as much in vogue among the Indians as the white men. Guessing which of several moccasins concealed a bean or some other object was closely akin to familiar carnival shell games.

The Indian game of lacrosse was played quite generally by the tribes in Iowa. In this game the ball used was made of some hard substance covered with leather. The racquets or bats were about three feet long with a small net-covered loop at the end. Goal posts at a distance of half a mile or so were erected on a level stretch of prairie.

Zebulon M. Pike described such a game played at Prairie du Chien by a group of Sioux on one side and a combined team of Foxes and Winne-

bagoes on the other. Naked except for a breech clout and a curious adornment something like a horse's tail, two or three hundred savages battled for hours to win the game. The ball was thrown up in the middle and each side tried to drive it to the opposite goal. Sometimes a player caught the ball in his racquet and attempted to run with it to the goal, but if he was too closely pursued he tossed it to a flanker on one side or the other. Seldom did the ball touch the ground so skilled were the players in tossing and catching it. Whenever a player made a goal he received the shouts and plaudits of his friends. On this occasion the Sioux were victorious, more, Pike thought, from their superiority in throwing the ball than by their fleetness, for the Winnebagoes and Foxes seemed to be the faster runners.

Another favorite game was played with a hoop and a bow and arrow or javelin. Players contended in pairs, one running and rolling the hoop ahead of him while the other tried to spear it with a javelin or to shoot an arrow through it. Sometimes the hoop was thrown into the air instead of being rolled on the ground.

Dancing was as characteristic of the Indians as of any other people. Sometimes they danced in the evening merely to entertain one another, but more often they danced as a part of their religious or social ceremonies. The steps, postures, and participants depended upon the nature of the oc-

casion — whether it was the ritual of a tribal society, preparation for war or hunting, merely a form of entertainment, or the enactment of some ancient myth. Indian dances were usually symbolic and executed with much pantomime and mimicry. The different tribes did not all have the same dances, yet there was much similarity. The medicine dance was common, though performed with variations, as were also the buffalo dance, scalp dance, calumet dance, and various feast dances. Catlin described the slave dance, smoking horses dance, begging dance, dance of the brave, and the discovery dance. Women joined in some of these dances, but most of them were for men.

The principal musical instruments used at these dances were the drum, the rattle or tambourine, and a kind of flute or flageolet. The Indians also had a number of chants or songs for such occasions, expressive of joy, grief, love, courage, reverence, and admiration. Most of their tunes were characterized by a melancholy strain and had few variations.

When Pike and his men stopped at Wabasha's village on their way up the Mississippi the Indians entertained their visitors with their famous medicine dance, the ritualistic procedure for obtaining immortality. The performance, said Pike, was attended with many curious maneuvers. Men and women danced indiscriminately. They were dressed in their gayest costumes. Each dancer

carried in his hand a small skin of some description. The Indians would run at each other, point the skin, and give a puff. Then the persons blown at, whether men or women, would fall, and appear to be almost lifeless, or in great agony. Then they would recover slowly, rise, and join in the dance.

The discovery dance witnessed by Catlin at Keokuk's village in 1835 impressed him as an "exceedingly droll and picturesque performance." It was acted out with a great deal of pantomimic effect, without music or any other noise than the patting of the dancers' feet, which came simultaneously on the ground in perfect time. In groups of two or four the braves danced forward in a skulking posture, scanning the horizon with shaded brows for the approach of animals or enemies. Pretending to discover one or the other they would scurry back to signal their discovery to the leader.

Although games and dancing made up no small share of the amusements of the Indian, story telling, too, was a favorite pastime. Chiefs, warriors, and medicine men all had wonderful tales to tell. The story might be of some brave deed, or of some long ago event in the history of the tribe. It might be about the sun, or the moon, or the stars, or about trees or animals. These stories were handed down from father to son, and told over and over again so that they were never forgotten by a tribe.

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