

The Winnebago Leave Iowa

The removal of the Winnebago during the summer of 1848 was one of the most colorful incidents in Iowa and Upper Mississippi steamboat history. It was a difficult task; but, if newspaper accounts can be relied upon, the profits accruing to the owners of the steamboat *Dr. Franklin* amply repaid them for their work.

By the treaty of 1846 the Winnebago had agreed to cede their claims and privileges in the Neutral Ground and remove northward to a spot provided by the government. A strip of land at the mouth of the Crow Wing River was finally designated. Since over two thousand Winnebago were involved in this transfer, a detachment of troops from Fort Atkinson was ordered to accompany them. Five hundred head of cattle were taken along for subsistence; while three hundred teams were required to haul the baggage which made up this Indian camp. At Wabasha's village the party was to be picked up by steamboat and carried as far as St. Paul, but when the Indians assembled on the prairie just below Wabasha's village, they refused to move another foot. Captain Russell Blakeley has left a report of the episode.

After the agent had nearly despaired of success, the only alternative left was to send to Capt. Eastman of Fort Snelling for additional troops, which, with a six-pounder, were sent under the command of Lieut. Hall, to see whether he could encourage the fellows to go. In canvassing the situation, Lieut. Hall became suspicious that the chief, Wabasha, whose village was just above the prairie upon the Rolling Stone creek, had in some way encouraged the Winnebagoes not to go. He arrested Wabasha and brought him on board the *Dr. Franklin*, and chained him to one of the stanchions of the boat on the boiler deck, evidently with the intention of frightening him; but after a short time he thought better of it, and released him. This was regarded as a great outrage to this proud chief, and it was not regarded in favorable light by those having charge of the Winnebagoes, who numbered over two thousand souls, besides Wabasha's band; but it finally passed without trouble. All the men in charge of the Indians were constantly urging them to consent to the removal, and talks were almost of daily occurrence, which would always end in Commissary Lieut. J. H. McKenny's sending down to the camp more flour, sugar, meat and coffee, realizing that when their stomachs were full they were more peaceable.

One morning the troops, agent, and all in charge, were astounded to find the Indian camp deserted; not an Indian, dog or pony was left. The canoes that had brought part of them were gone as well. Everything in camp that could hunt was started to find them. The *Dr. Franklin* was sent down the river to overtake them if they had gone in that direction, and I think it was three days before they were found. They had taken their canoes and gone down the river to the mouth of the Slough, and thence had gone over into Wisconsin and were comfortably encamped on the islands and shores of the river, but were nearly

starved. They promised to return to their camp the next day in their canoes. About ten o'clock the next day those on watch saw them coming out of the head of the Slough some three miles above the steamboat landing. It was one of our beautiful summer mornings, with not a ripple on the water; and when these two thousand men, women, children, and dogs, passed down, floating without even using a paddle, except to keep in the stream, all dressed in their best, they presented such a picture as I have not seen equaled since. They were disposed to show themselves at their best. Lieut. McKenny met them at their camp with provisions, and the old *status quo* was re-established.

The Winnebago were fearful lest the Sioux should object to this removal into their country, and so it was decided to send the *Dr. Franklin* to St. Paul for the purpose of picking up the principal Sioux chiefs to meet the Winnebago in council. When the Sioux were gathered together they presented a colorful spectacle. Each chief was fitted out from head to foot with a new suit consisting of blue frock coat, leggins, moccasins, silk plug hat, white ruffled shirt, and a small American flag. After several days of orations the Winnebago finally agreed to go. Several trips were required to remove the whole tribe and its equipment.

But some of the Indians were obdurate and steadfastly refused to leave their homes and migrate with the rest of the tribe. An old Winnebago settled on the bank of the Wisconsin River,

denied any relationship to his tribe, and presented three land office certificates for forty acres of land. Despite every effort on his part to remain behind, the *Dr. Franklin* carried him northward.

During the exodus the newspapers in the mining district were filled with reports of the progress of the *Dr. Franklin*. Charges were made that the Winnebago were carried back and forth several times and the government assessed the cost. The Indians, it appears, enjoyed the novelty of the steamboat trip: it was said they rode up the river, disembarked, sprang into their canoes, and paddled back to Wabasha, a distance of over one hundred miles, in order to enjoy the excellent food and accommodations of the steamboat.

Fifteen years after their removal into Minnesota a portion of the Winnebago were transported to Fort Randall in Nebraska. It was a scant two hundred miles overland in a southwesterly direction to the new home, or no farther than the Winnebago might go on a summer's hunt. It was well nigh ten times as far by steamboat down the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers and up the Missouri. But the Winnebago enjoyed the easy motion and good food of the steamboat, and so the government agreed to transport them in this way. Proceeding down the Minnesota River from Mankato, the Winnebago boarded the steamboat *Canada* at St. Paul. A local editor has left this impression of the Winnebago:

Their looks indicate anything but the "good Indians" that we read about in missionary works, and it is probable that Satan would not have great difficulty in selecting and officering at *least* a full company, who would be admirably adapted for his body-guard. It is very charming, indeed, to read in Hiawatha verse of the "noble Indian," but we acquit Longfellow of any intention to personify the Winnebagoes. He must have alluded to some tribe now extinct, as that class of Indians don't roam in this region at present. — The only nobility we could discover consisted of half-dressed bodies with ugly, devilish faces, hideously daubed with paint.

As usual, the squaws were occupied with housework, washing, cooking, &c., while the men and boys participated in various kinds of amusements, a large number being industriously engaged in doing nothing. The "moccasin game," as it is called, was their favorite sport, though occasionally a deck of cards would be called into requisition to while away the hours. We saw none of the devotional exercises for which the Sioux are so celebrated, and fear that they were not able to bring their religion away from the reservation.

Near the centre of the encampment they had placed a young sapling and fastened to this the keep-sakes that had been captured from the Sioux who were murdered by them last week. They consisted of two scalps stretched upon hoops and attached to long poles, the skins of fingers with nails pendent, tufts of hair, pieces of flesh, &c., fastened upon bushes, all ornamented with fancy colored bits of cloth. Some of the half breeds and "good Sioux" who are at the Fort examined them and gave it as their opinion that the scalps were taken from Sioux who were living with the Winnebagoes, as those upon the plains never wear such short hair. They looked savage when viewing the relics of their brethren and vow vengeance.

During the forenoon they participated in one of their grand scalp dances, forming a circle about the sapling, the men beating upon drums and sticks, while the squaws carried the scalps and other relics, and all shouted and sung their wild war cadence as they moved in the "misty maze of the dance."

There were 756 Winnebago aboard the *Canada* when she arrived at Davenport. An editor who visited the boat while in port described them as a "squalid, wretched looking set" of "Injins." Unfortunately history has not left a record of the Winnebago opinion of the citizens of that thriving Iowa community.

The Winnebago Indians are well known to the people of northwest Iowa since their home in Winnebago, Nebraska, is only a short distance from Sioux City. The burial customs of the ancient Winnebago should be especially interesting because of the John Rice episode in Sioux City in 1951.

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