

The Winnebago

The Winnebago had lived in the Green Bay area for many years before the coming of Jean Nicolet. Although their exact identity was unknown to the eastern Woodland Indians they were well-known to their neighbors. The word Winnebago, in the Sauk and Fox language, for example, signified "people of the filthy water." The French likewise associated them with the scummy water of Green Bay and called them Puants. The English referred to them as Stinkards. The Winnebago called themselves *Hock-un-ga-ra*, said to mean Trout Nation. Sometimes they called themselves *Horoji*, or Fish Eaters.

Because of their long association with Green Bay the material culture of the Winnebago was distinctly Woodland, or Algonquian, their houses and dress being practically identical with the Sauk, Fox, Menominee, and others. They were in the early agricultural stage of development when Jean Nicolet visited them in 1634. They were particularly fond of beaver as a food but they ate both fish and fresh-water mussels. From their Menominee neighbors they had learned how to gather, store, and cook wild rice. They used chipped stone implements and a few crude bits of

copper and lead. They made pottery although many of their vessels were fashioned up from gourds, bark, and shells. Apparently the Winnebago did no weaving although they were skillful in plaiting mats out of rushes. They wore skin garments, and very little of these during the hot summer months. Their lodges were built of poles, covered with skin or bark.

Although their material culture was Woodland, the Winnebago tribe was of Siouan or Dakota linguistic stock, their language being related to the Iowa, the Oto, and the Missouri, more distantly to the Omaha, and still more distantly to the Ponca. Their earliest known habitat extended from the south side of Green Bay as far inland as Lake Winnebago. They are known to have had villages in widely scattered sections of present-day Wisconsin, and as far south as what is now LaFayette, Indiana. During the course of a century they seem to have ranged up the Fox River and over to the Wisconsin and Rock rivers.

The Winnebago were frequently at war with their neighbors. They were fierce warriors, as the English and later the Americans learned to their sorrow. They practiced cannibalism only on prisoners taken in war. They fought with the English against the Americans during the Revolutionary War. They played a leading role in the siege of Fort Madison during the War of 1812 and their war whoop echoed up and down the Missis-

sippi during that epic struggle. Their name will forever be associated with the fall of Fort Dearborn.

The Winnebago social organization was based on two phratries — the Upper or Air and the Lower or Earth divisions. The Upper division contained four clans — Thunderbird, War People, Eagle, and Pigeon — and the Lower division eight clans — the Bear, Wolf, Water-spirit, Deer, Elk, Buffalo, Fish, and Snake. An Upper individual had to marry a Lower individual, and vice versa. While there was no law restricting marriage between the clans of the two phratries, there was a tendency for certain clans to intermarry.

The Thunderbird and Bear clans were regarded as the leading clans of their respective phratries. Both had definite functions. The lodge of the Thunderbird was the peace lodge, over which the chief of the tribe presided, and in which disputes between Indians were settled. No person could be killed in the lodge, and an offender or a prisoner escaping to it was protected as long as he was within its precincts.

The lodge of the Bear clan was the war or disciplinary lodge: prisoners were killed and offenders punished in its precincts. The Bear clan also possessed the right of "soldier killing," and was in charge of both ends of the camping circle during the hunt. Each clan had a large number of

individual customs relating to birth, the naming feast, death, and the funeral wake. A member of one clan, for example, could not be buried by members of another clan of the same phratries.

The Winnebago possessed two important tribal ceremonies, the *Mankani*, or Medicine Dance, and the *Wagigo*, or Winter Feast. The Medicine Dance was a secret society, ungraded, into which men and women could be initiated on payment of a certain amount of money. A new member generally succeeded some deceased relative. The general ceremony was open to the public but there were several ceremonies, including a vapor-bath, which were held in secret.

The purpose of the Medicine Dance society was to prolong life and instill certain virtues, none of which were related to war. Their objective was accomplished by a simulated "shooting" of a shell, contained in an otter-skin bag, into the body of the one to be initiated. Although other tribes had similar ceremonies a large part of the Winnebago ritual was fundamentally different.

According to Frederick W. Hodge, the Winter Feast is the only distinctly clan ceremonial among the Winnebago.

Each clan has a sacred clan bundle, which is in the hands of some male individual, who hands it down from one generation to another, always taking care, of course, to keep it in the same clan. The Winter Feast is distinctly a war feast, and the purpose in giving it seems to be

a desire to increase their war powers by a propitiation of all the supernatural deities known to them. To these they offer food and deerskin. There may be as many as twelve (?) powers propitiated, namely, Earth-maker, Disease-giver, Sun, Moon, Morning Star, the spirits of the Night, Thunderbird, One-horn, the Earth, the Water, the Turtle, and the Rabbit.

In addition to the above, there are a number of other ceremonies the best known of which being the Buffalo Dance and the *Herucka*. The Buffalo Dance has for its purpose the magical calling of the Buffalo herds. All who have had supernatural communication with the Buffalo spirit, may become members, irrespective of clan. The *Herucka* is the same as the Omaha Grass Dance.

The religious beliefs of the Winnebago are practically identical with those of the Dakota, Ponca, and Central Algonquian tribes. The Earthmaker, or *Man'una*, corresponds to the *Gitchi Manito* of the Central Algonquians. Although there are evidences of Central Algonquian influence, the Winnebago mythology shows a much more intimate relation with that of the other Siouan tribes. The following account of the creation was related to Agent Fletcher by Little Hill, a Winnebago chief:

The Great Spirit at first waked up as from a dream, and found himself sitting on a chair. On finding himself alone, he took a piece of his body, near his heart, and a piece of earth, and from them made a man. He then made three other men. After talking with the men the Great

Spirit made a woman, who was this earth, which is the grandmother of the Indians. The four men first created were the four winds — east, west, north and south. The earth, after it was created, rocked about, and the Great Spirit made four beasts and four snakes, and put them under the earth to support it. But when the winds blew the beasts and snakes could not keep the earth steady, and the Great Spirit made a great buffalo and put him under the earth. This buffalo is the land which keeps the earth steady. After the earth became steady, the Great Spirit took a piece of his heart and made a man, and then took a piece of his flesh and made a woman. The man knew a great deal, but the woman knew very little. The Great Spirit then took some tobacco and tobacco-seed and gave them to the man, and gave to the woman one seed of every kind of grain, and showed her every herb and root that was good for food.

The roots and herbs were made when the earth was made. When the Great Spirit gave tobacco to the man he told him that when he wanted to speak to the winds or the beasts to put tobacco in the fire and they would hear him. After the Great Spirit gave these things to the man and woman, he told them to look down; and they looked down, and saw a little child standing between them. The Great Spirit told them that they must take care of the children. The Great Spirit then created one man and one woman of every tribe and tongue on the earth, and told them in the Winnebago language that they would live on the center of the earth. The Great Spirit then made the beasts and birds for the use of man. He then looked down upon his children and saw that they were happy. The Great Spirit made the fire and tobacco for the Winnebagoes, and all the other Indians obtained their fire and tobacco from them; and this is the reason why all the other tribes call the Winnebago their *dear* elder brothers.

After the Great Spirit made all these things he did not look down upon the earth again for one hundred and eighteen years. He then looked down and saw the old men and women coming out of their wigwams, grey-headed and stooping, and that they fell to pieces. The Great Spirit then thought that he had made the Indians to live too long, and that they increased too fast. He then changed his plan, and sent four thunders down to tell the Indians that they must fight; and they did go to war and kill each other. After that they did not increase so fast. The Good Spirit took the good Indians who were killed in battle to himself, but the bad Indians who were killed went to the west. After a while the Bad Spirit waked up, and saw what the Good Spirit had done, and thought he could do as much; so he set to work to make an Indian, and he made a black man. He then tried to make a black bear, and made a grizzly bear. He then made some snakes, but they were all venomous. The Bad Spirit made all the worthless trees, the thistles, and useless weeds that grow on the earth. He also made a fire, but it was not so good as the fire the Good Spirit made and gave to the Indians. The Bad Spirit tempted the Indians to steal and lie, and when the Indians who committed these crimes died they went to the Bad Spirit. The Good Spirit commanded the Indians to be good, and they were so until the Bad Spirit tempted them to do wrong.

The movement of the Winnebago into Iowa in accordance with the Treaty of 1832 proved a difficult task. The Winnebago themselves feared they might fall victims of Sioux and Sauk and Fox scalping knives. Unscrupulous traders made every effort to dissuade them because they would be unable to sell the Winnebagoes whisky. After

five years of stalemate a deputation of Winnebago chiefs and braves journeyed to Washington in the fall of 1837 to make another treaty with their Great White Father. The Winnebago agreed to remove to the Neutral Ground within eight months of the ratification of the treaty. They also surrendered their right to hunt upon a twenty-mile strip at the east end of the Neutral Ground.

Time passed, and the Winnebago continued to occupy their old haunts in Wisconsin, meanwhile annoying the pioneer settlers by their theft of livestock and other property. By the spring of 1839, however, a few tribes had crossed into Iowa. Winneshiek's band had located on the Upper Iowa River some fifty miles from Fort Crawford. Two Shillings' band was encamped near the Winnebago School on Yellow River while Little Priest's and Whirling Thunder's bands were living on a farm some fifteen miles west of the school. All the other Winnebago bands — those of Big Canoe, Waukon, Yellow Thunder, Caramane, Dandy, Little Soldier, Decorah, and Big Head — still lingered east of the Mississippi in Wisconsin.

Finally, all patience being lost, Congress demanded that General Henry Atkinson remove the Winnebago from Wisconsin "at all hazards." Eastern papers were filled with reports concerning a possible war to the death. The departure

from Buffalo, New York, of Colonel William J. Worth with 600 men of the Eighth Infantry to remove the recalcitrant Winnebago was chronicled with considerable apprehension. About the same time a letter from Wisconsin quoted a Winnebago chief as declaring that they would not go to Iowa "as it made but little difference whether they [the Winnebago] were killed by the whites or the Sauk and Sioux" if they settled in the Neutral Ground. Colonel Worth's troops, aided by the Fifth Infantry under Brigadier General Brooke and United States Dragoons under Captain Edwin V. Sumner, finally removed the whole body of Winnebago numbering about seventeen hundred to the Neutral Ground. It was felt, *Niles' National Register* reported, that "the presence of one thousand regulars contributed to this desirable result."

The Winnebago were not the only ones who were concerned about their presence in the Neutral Ground. In his third Annual Message delivered to the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa on November 3, 1840, Governor Lucas declared:

The situation of this nation, in connection with the Winnebagoes who have recently been removed to the tract of country within this Territory, known as the neutral ground, bordering in part on our northern settlements, and partly on the Sac and Fox country, should admonish us to be on our guard and to depend upon ourselves

for defence in case hostilities should be commenced by them. In consideration of this state of things, I would respectfully suggest to the legislative assembly the expediency of authorizing by law, the organization of a number of mounted volunteer riflemen, say one company at least to every regiment of militia within the Territory, with authority for the commandant of any brigade to increase the number to a battalion within his brigade, and to provide for calling them into service in case of Indian depredations or threatened invasion. This precautionary measure can do no harm, and may ultimately secure our frontier from an Indian war.

Although rumors of war and frontier depredations persisted no serious outbreak occurred during the brief sojourn of the Winnebago in Iowa.

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