

A Visit to Keokuk's Village

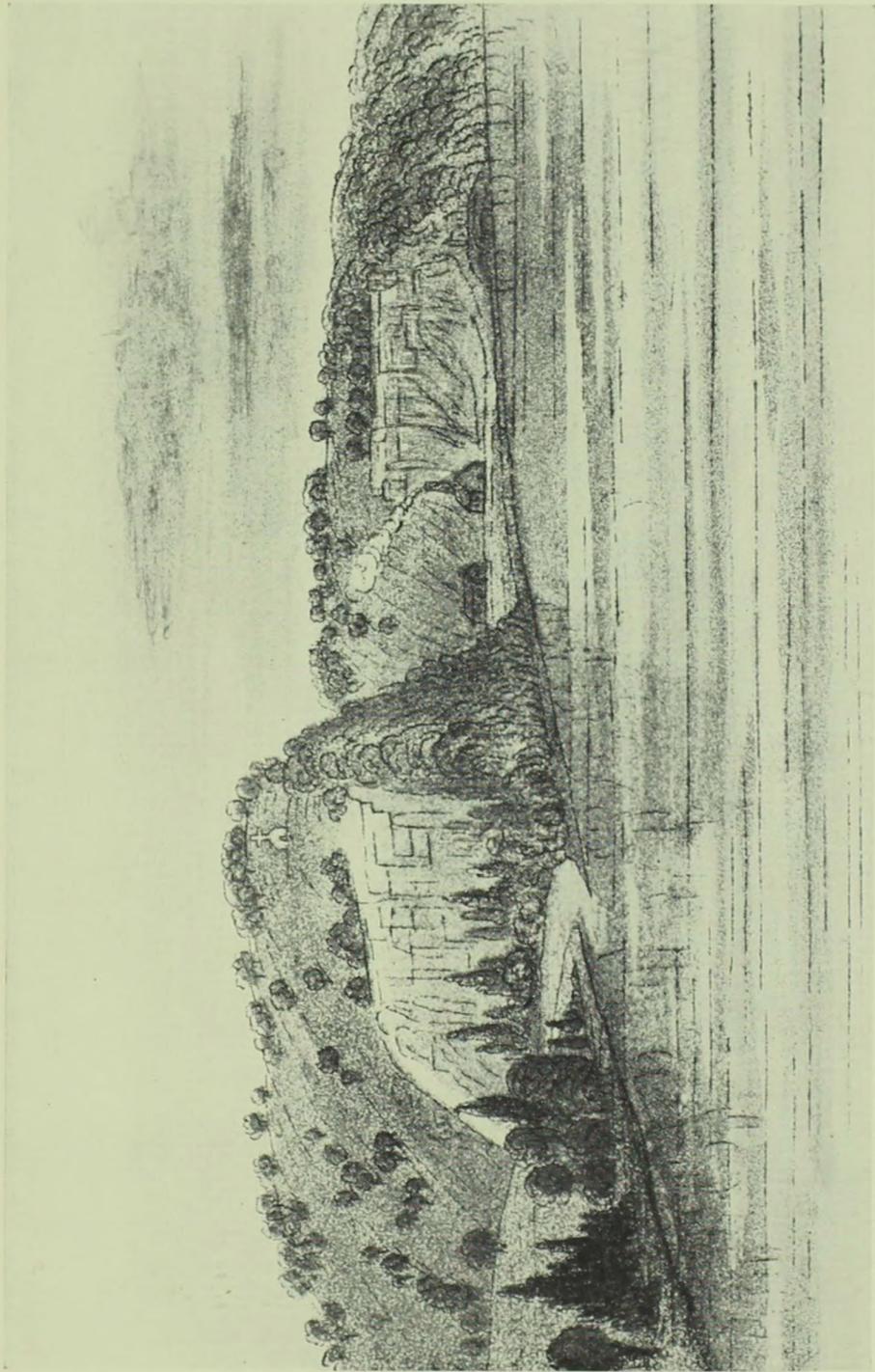
At Camp Des Moines I joined General Street, the Indian Agent, in a Tour to Keokuk's village of Sacs and Foxes. Colonel Kearney gave us a corporal's command of eight men with horses for the journey, and in two days we reached the village about sixty miles up the Des Moines River. The whole country that we passed over was like a garden, wanting only cultivation. Their village was beautifully situated on a large prairie on the bank of the Des Moines River, where they seemed to be well supplied with the necessaries of life and with some of its luxuries.

General Street had some documents from Washington to read, which Keokuk and his chiefs listened to with great patience; after which he placed before us good brandy and good wine and invited us to drink and to lodge with him. He then called up five of his runners, communicated to them in a low but emphatic tone the substance of the talk from the agent and of the letters read to him, and they started at full gallop — one of them proclaiming it through his village, and the others sent express to the other villages comprising the whole nation.

The Sacs and Foxes, who were once two separate tribes but with a language very similar have, at some period not very remote, united into one and are now an inseparable people, going by the amalgam

name of "Sacs and Foxes". These people shave and ornament their heads like the Osages and Pawnees. They have recently relinquished immense tracts of lands and retired west of the Mississippi River. While their numbers at present are not more than five or six thousand, they are yet a warlike and powerful tribe.

Keokuk (the running fox), is the present chief of the tribe, a dignified and proud man, with a good share of talent, and vanity enough to force into action all the wit and judgment he possesses in order to command the attention and respect of the world. At the close of the Black Hawk War in 1833, which had been waged with disastrous effects along the frontier, Keokuk was acknowledged chief of the Sacs and Foxes by General Scott in consequence of the friendly position he had taken during the war, holding two-thirds of the warriors neutral, which was no doubt the cause of the sudden and successful termination of the war and the means of saving much bloodshed. Black Hawk and his two sons, as well as his principal advisers and warriors, were taken to Saint Louis in chains. Keokuk has a fine portly figure, a good countenance, and great dignity and grace in his manners. There is no Indian chief on the frontier better known at this time, or more highly appreciated for his eloquence as a public speaker. He has repeatedly visited Washington and other Atlantic towns, and has spoken before thousands when contending for his people's rights as



FROM CATLIN'S NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

THE GRAVE OF JULIEN DUBUQUE



FROM CATLIN'S NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

CHIEF KEOKUK

stipulated in treaties with the United States Government.

When the official business had been concluded, Keokuk came in bringing all his costly wardrobe that I might select for his portrait such as suited me best; but at once he named of his own accord the costume that was purely Indian. In that he paraded for several days, and in it I painted him at full length precisely as he appeared, with his shield on his arm and his staff, the insignia of office, in his left hand.

After I had painted the portrait of this vain man at full length, he had the temerity to say to me that he made a fine appearance on horseback arrayed in all his gear and trappings, and that he wished me to paint him in that plight. So I prepared my canvass in the door of the hospital which I occupied in the dragoon cantonment, and he flourished about for a considerable part of the day in front of me, until the picture was completed. The dragoons and officers watched his display while I painted. The horse that he rode was a thoroughbred, one of the best on the frontier. He paid three hundred dollars for the animal, which he was quite able to do.

About two years later, while I was lecturing on the customs of the Indians in the Stuyvesant Institute in New York, Keokuk, his wife and son, and twenty more of the chiefs and warriors of his tribe visited New York on their way to Washington City and were present one evening at my lecture. I

placed a succession of portraits on my easel before the audience and they were successively recognized by the Indians as they were shown. At last I set this portrait of Keokuk before them, when they all sprang up and hailed it with a piercing yell. After the noise had subsided, Keokuk arose and addressed the audience in these words: "My friends, I hope you will pardon my men for making so much noise, as they were very much excited by seeing me on my favorite war-horse which they all recognized in a moment."

I had the satisfaction then of saying to the audience that this was very gratifying to me, inasmuch as many persons had questioned the correctness of the picture of the horse. Some had said that it was an imposition, that "no Indian on the frontier rode so good a horse." This was explained to Keokuk by the interpreter, whereupon he arose again, quite indignant at the thought that any one should doubt its correctness, and assured the audience that his men, a number of whom never had heard that the picture was painted, knew the horse the moment it was presented; and further, he wished to know why Keokuk could not ride as good a horse as any white man? He received a round of applause and the interpreter, Mr. Le Clair, arose and stated that he recognized the horse the moment it was shown, that it was a faithful portrait of the horse he had sold to Keokuk, and that it was the finest horse on the frontier belonging either to red or white man.

In a few minutes afterward I was exhibiting several of my paintings of buffalo hunts and describing the modes of slaying them with bows and arrows, when I made the assertion, which I had often been in the habit of making, that there were many instances where the arrow was thrown entirely through the buffalo's body and that I had several times witnessed this astonishing feat. I saw by the motions of my audience that many doubted the correctness of my assertion, so I appealed to Keokuk who rose up when the thing was explained to him and said that it had repeatedly happened amongst his tribe, and he believed that one of his young men by his side had done it. The young man instantly stepped up on the bench and took a bow from under his robe, with which he told the audience he had driven his arrow quite through a buffalo's body. There being forty of the Sioux from the Upper Missouri also present, the same question was put to them, when the chief arose and, addressing himself to the audience, said that it was very often done by the hunters in his tribe.

After finishing the portraits of Keokuk, I painted his favorite wife, the favored one of seven whom he had living, apparently quite comfortably and peaceably, in his wigwam. Although she is the oldest of the lot, she was the only one that could be painted, perhaps because she is the mother of Keokuk's favorite son. Her dress, which was of civilized stuffs, was fashioned and ornamented by herself,

and was truly a most splendid affair, the upper part of it being almost literally covered with silver broaches.

Eight or ten of the principal men of the tribe were also painted. Among them was Nahseuskuk (whirling thunder), the eldest son of Black Hawk and one of the finest looking Indians I ever saw. Another Pashepaho (little stabbing chief), a very old man. He has long been the civil chief of this tribe, but, as is generally the case in very old age, he has resigned the office to those who are younger and better qualified to do the duties of it.

The dances and other amusements amongst this tribe are exceedingly spirited and pleasing, and I have made sketches of a number of them. The slave dance is a picturesque scene, and the custom on which it is founded is very curious. The tribe has a society which they call the "slaves," composed of a number of the young men of the best families in the tribe, who volunteer to be slaves for the term of two years and subject to perform any menial service that the chief may order no matter how humiliating or how degrading it may be. Thereafter they are exempt for the rest of their lives, on war parties or other excursions or wherever they may be, from all labor or degrading occupations such as cooking and making fires. These young men elect one from their number to be their master, and all agree to obey his command which is given to him by one of the chiefs of the tribe. On a certain day or season of the year,

they have to themselves a great feast, and preparatory to it the slave dance.

Smoking horses is another of the peculiar and very curious customs of this tribe. When General Street and I arrived at Keokuk's village, we were just in time to see this amusing scene on the prairie a little back of his village. The Foxes, who were making up a war party to go against the Sioux and had not suitable horses enough by twenty, had sent word to the Sacs the day before (according to an ancient custom) that they were coming on that day at a certain hour to "smoke" that number of horses. At the appointed time the twenty young men who were beggars for horses were on the spot and seated themselves on the ground in a circle, where they went to smoking. The villagers flocked around them in a dense crowd, and soon after appeared on the prairie at half a mile distance an equal number of young men of the Sac tribe who had each agreed to give a horse and who were then galloping about them at full speed. Gradually they went around in a circuit, coming in nearer to the center, until they were at last close around the ring of young fellows seated on the ground. Whilst dashing about thus, each one, with a heavy whip in his hand, as he came within reach of the group on the ground, selected the one to whom he decided to present his horse, and as he passed gave him the most tremendous cut with his lash over his naked shoulders. As he darted around again he plied the whip as before, and again

and again, with a violent "crack!", until the blood could be seen trickling down over the naked shoulders of the Fox brave, whereupon the Sac instantly dismounted and placed the bridle and whip in his hands, saying, "Here, you are a beggar. I present you a horse, but you will carry my mark on your back." In this manner they were all in a little time "whipped up", and each had a good horse to ride home and into battle. Their necessity was such that they could afford to take the stripes and the scars as the price of the horse, and the giver could afford to make the present for the satisfaction of putting his mark upon the other and of boasting of his liberality, which he has always a right to do when going into the dance or on other important occasions.

The begging dance is a frequent amusement, and one that has been practiced with some considerable success at this time, whilst there have been so many distinguished and liberal visitors here. It is got up by a number of desperate and long winded fellows, who will dance and yell their visitors into liberality; or, if necessary, laugh them into it by their strange antics, singing a song of importunity and extending their hands for presents, which they allege are to gladden the hearts of the poor and ensure a blessing to the giver.

The discovery dance was exceedingly droll and picturesque, and acted out with a great deal of pantomimic effect — without music, or any other noise than the patting of their feet, which all came simul-

taneously on the ground in perfect time, whilst they were dancing forward two or four at a time, in a sulking posture, overlooking the country, and professing to announce the approach of animals or enemies which they have discovered, by giving the signals back to the leader of the dance.

At length, when I had finished my painting we took leave of the hospitable village. Keokuk and all of his men shook hands with me. The chief wished me well and gave me, as tokens of regard, the most valued article of his dress and a beautiful string of wampum, which he took from his wife's neck.

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