

The Indian at Home

The American Indian is associated with the war-path, the chase, and the council rather than with the home, yet he probably spent more time in or near his home than most civilized men do. To get an idea of Indian home life, let us visit in fancy the village of Chief Keokuk which in 1840 stood on a terrace on the west bank of the Des Moines River not far from the present site of Ottumwa.

Between six hundred and a thousand Indians live in this village. Scattered higgledy-piggledy about the terrace are probably a hundred wigwams or wickiups — the dwellings of the primitive Sacs. There are no streets, no factories, no school buildings, no taxes, no business section, no traffic regulations, no lighting system except the camp fires. Below the village along the river are the gardens in which the squaws raise corn, beans, and pumpkins.

Keokuk's wigwam stands in a commanding position overlooking the village and the river. It is built like the others, but is larger — two hundred feet long, it is said. Perhaps even this is not too large for his seven wives. The houses in this village are made by bending light poles over to form a framework and then covering this with sheets of bark or mats of woven grass. The bark makes the

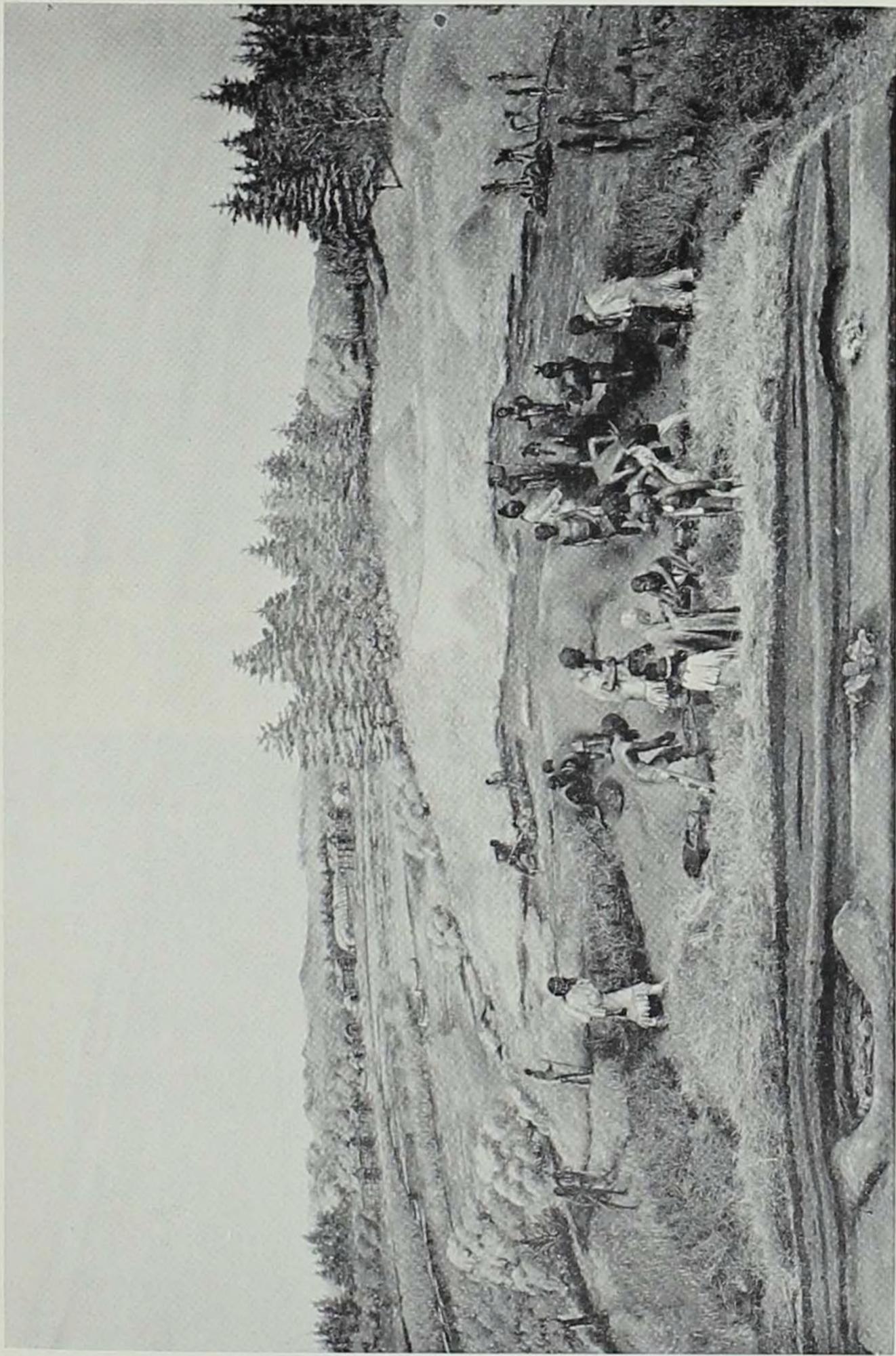
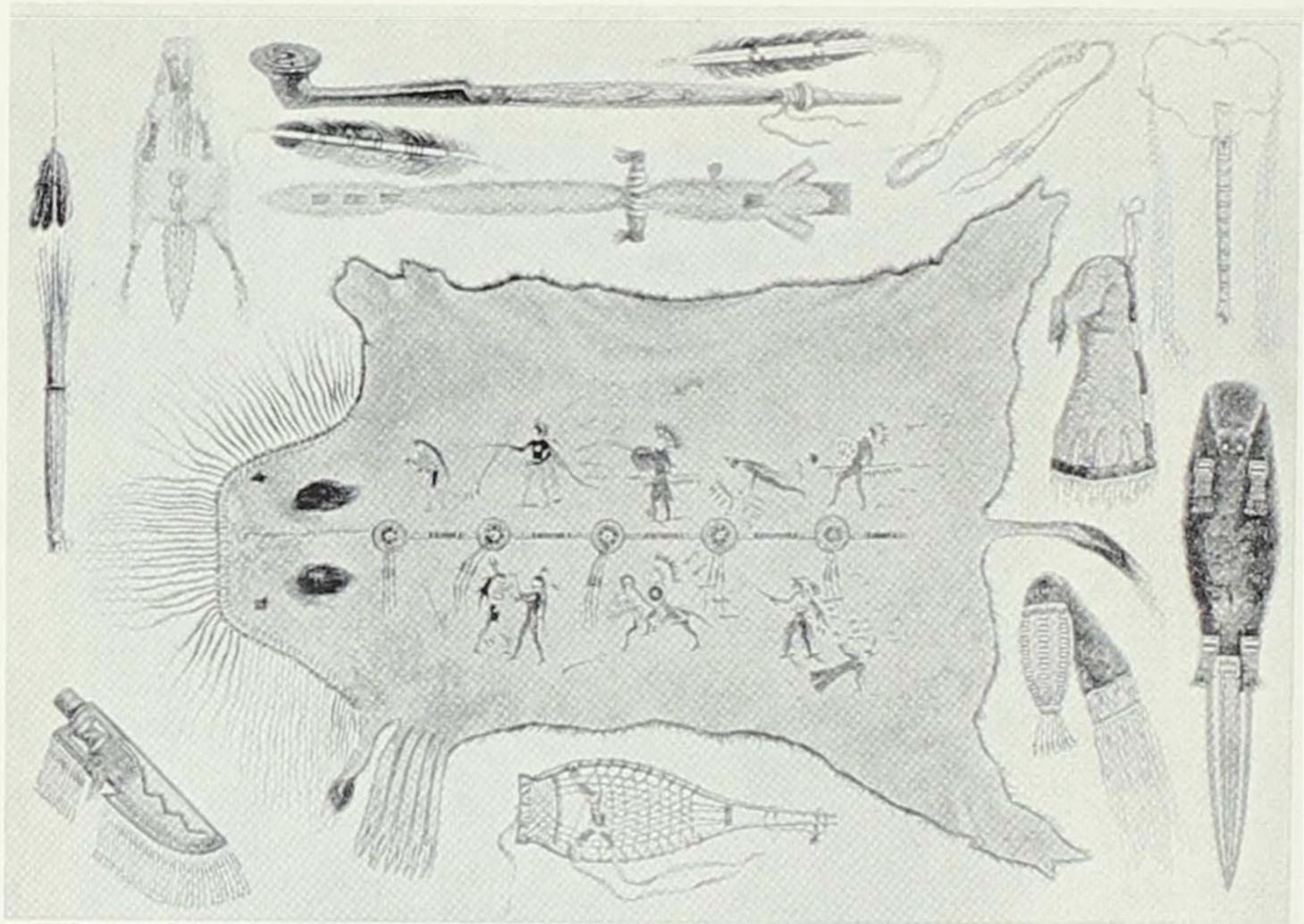


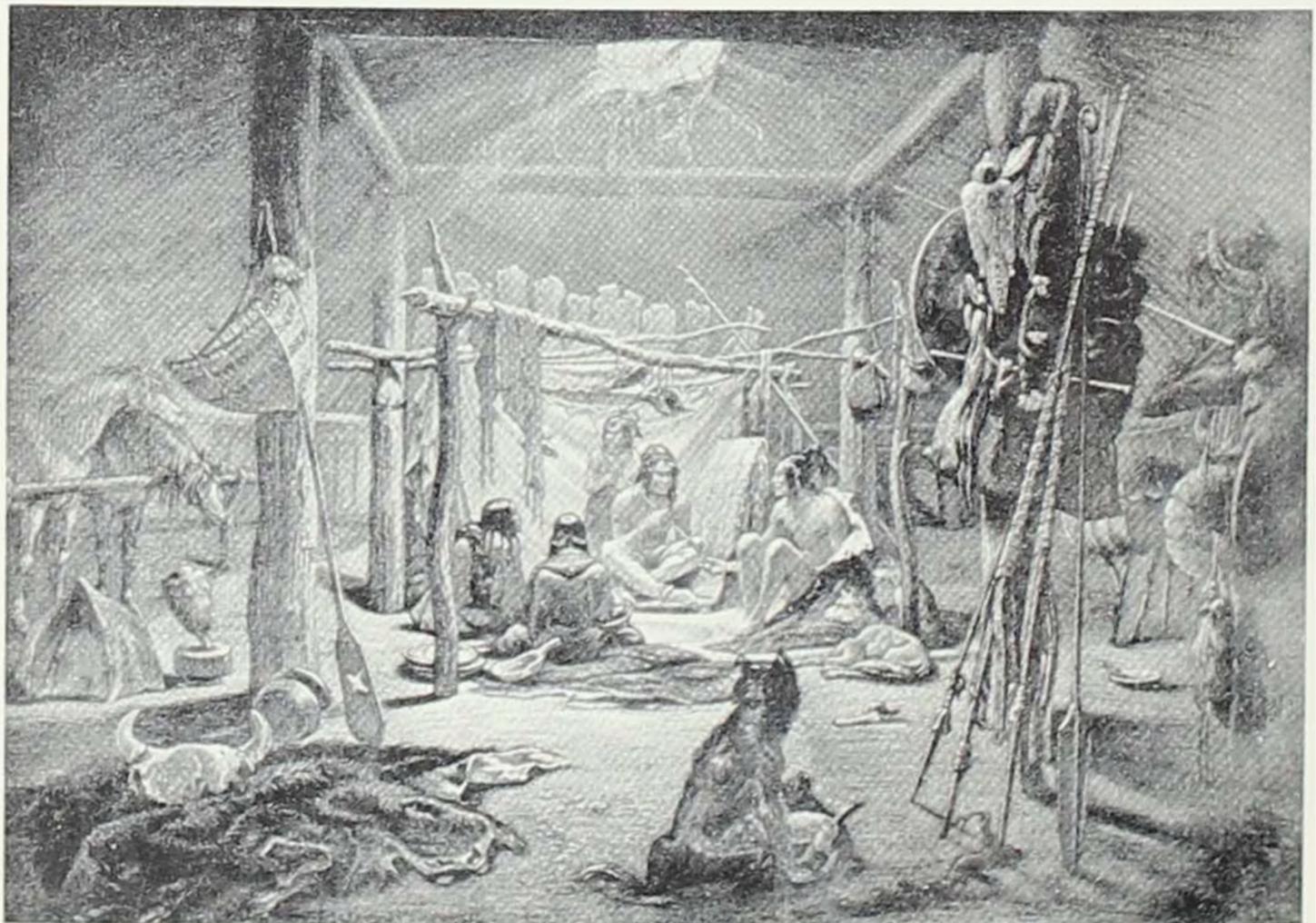
Photo Courtesy Milwaukee Public Museum

Diorama Showing Indians Constructing Effigy Mound



From Maximilian's *Travels*

Buffalo Robe and other Articles of the Mandans.



From Maximilian's *Travels*

Inside of a Mandan Hut.



Diorama — Prehistoric Indian Village on Island near Site of Prairie du Chien

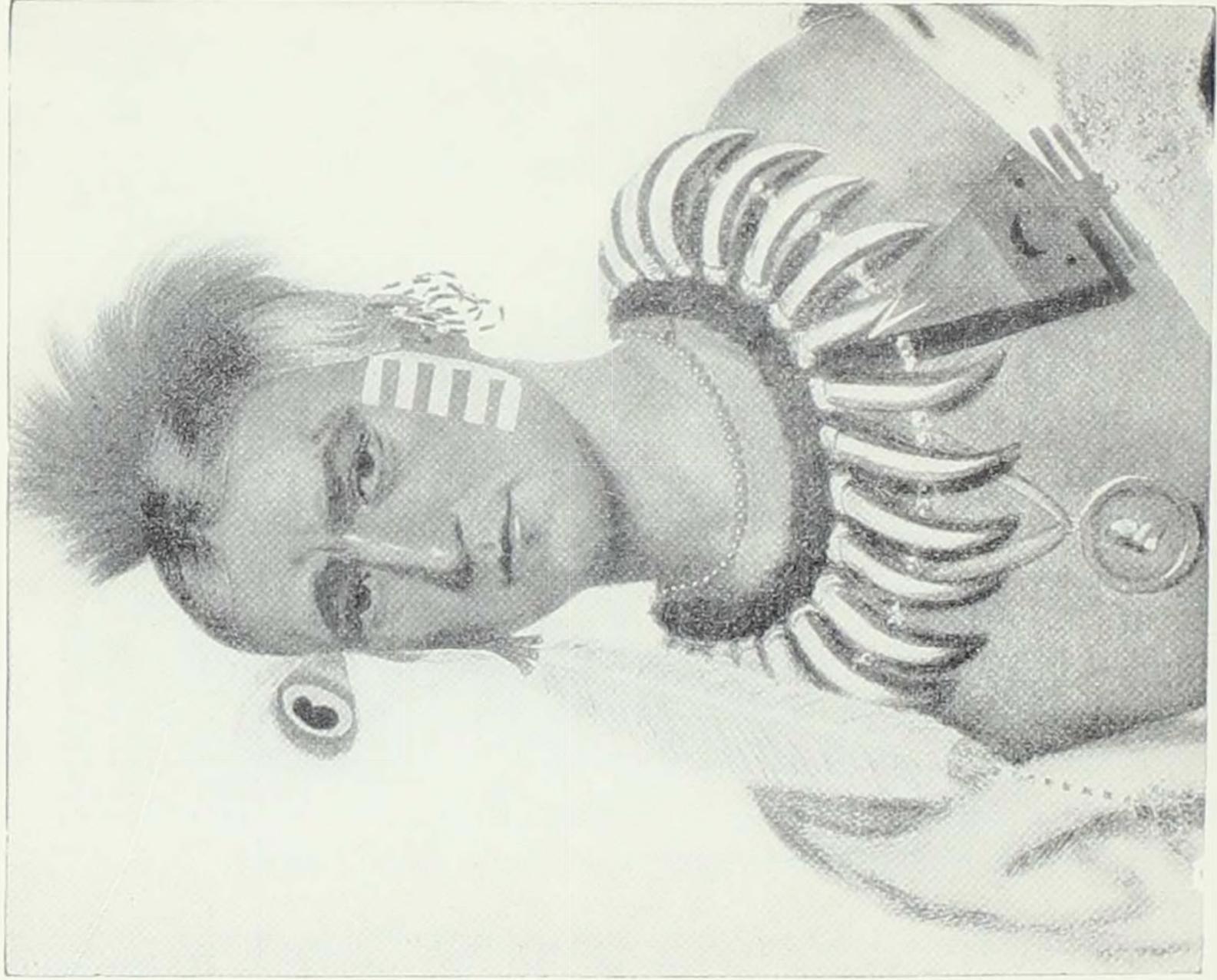


From Catlin's North American Indians

The Discovery Dance



(From a lithographic copy of a painting by C. B. King)
Wapello

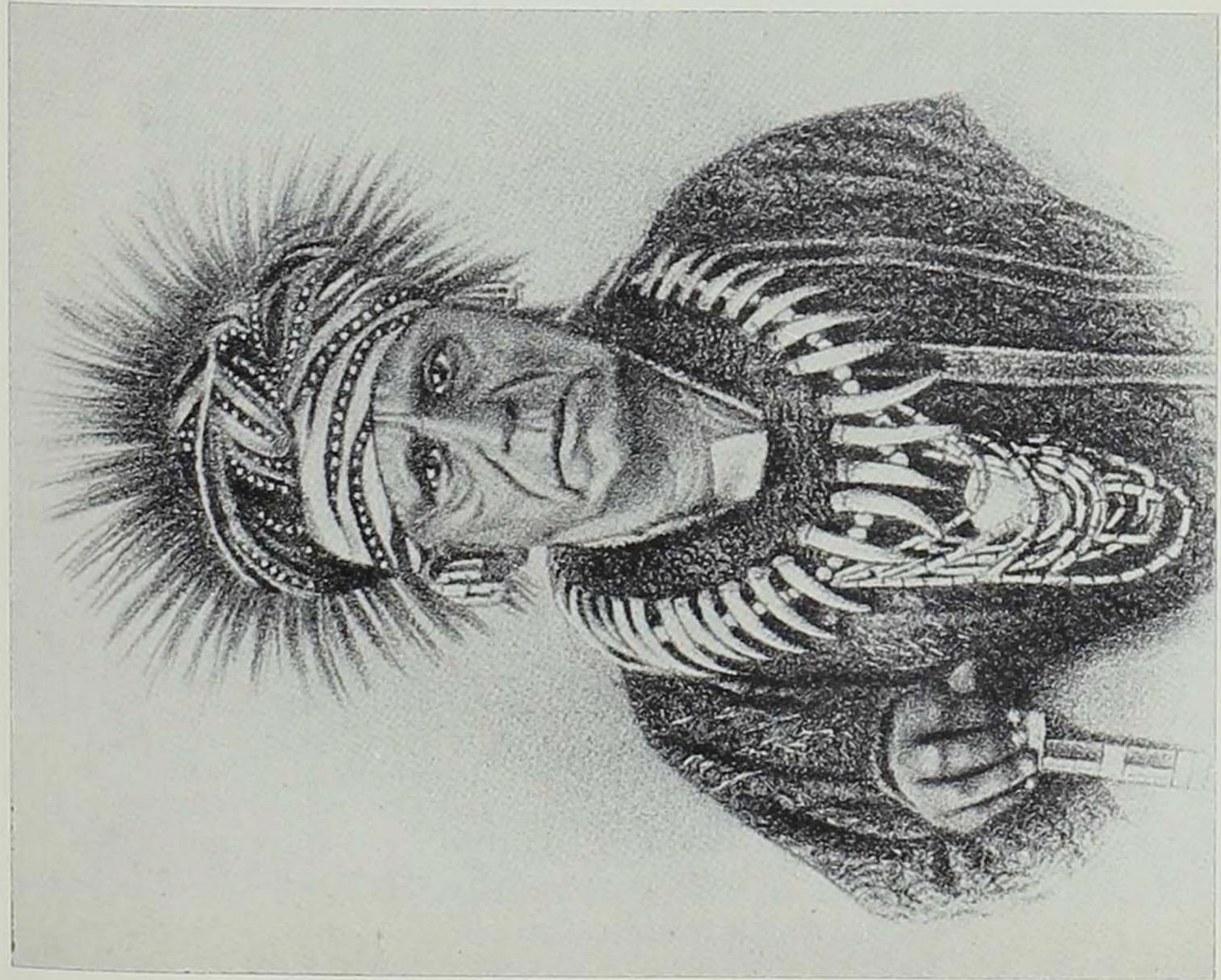


(From a lithographic copy of a painting by C. B. King)
Mahaska I



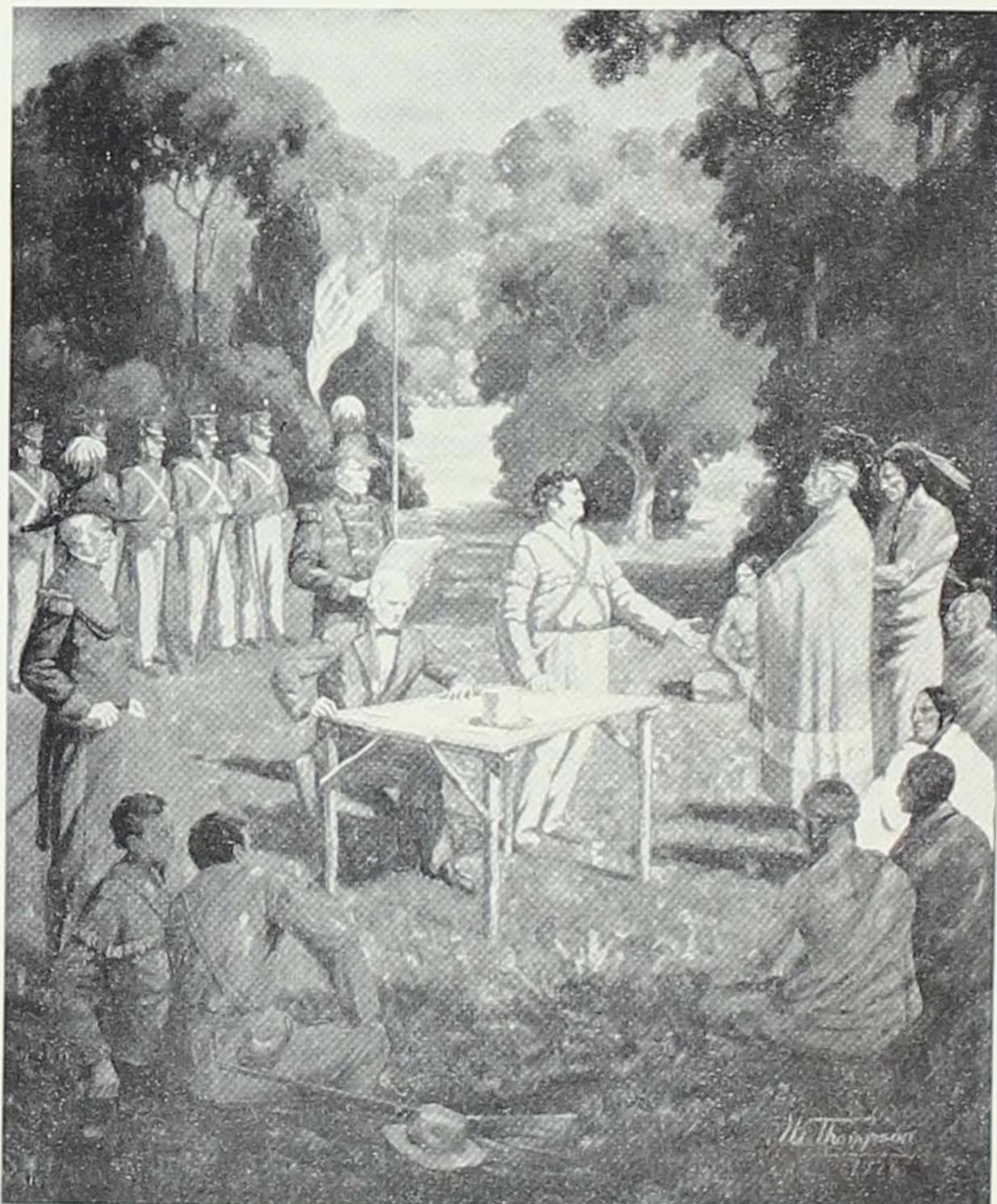
(From a lithographic copy of a painting by C. B. King)

Poweshiek



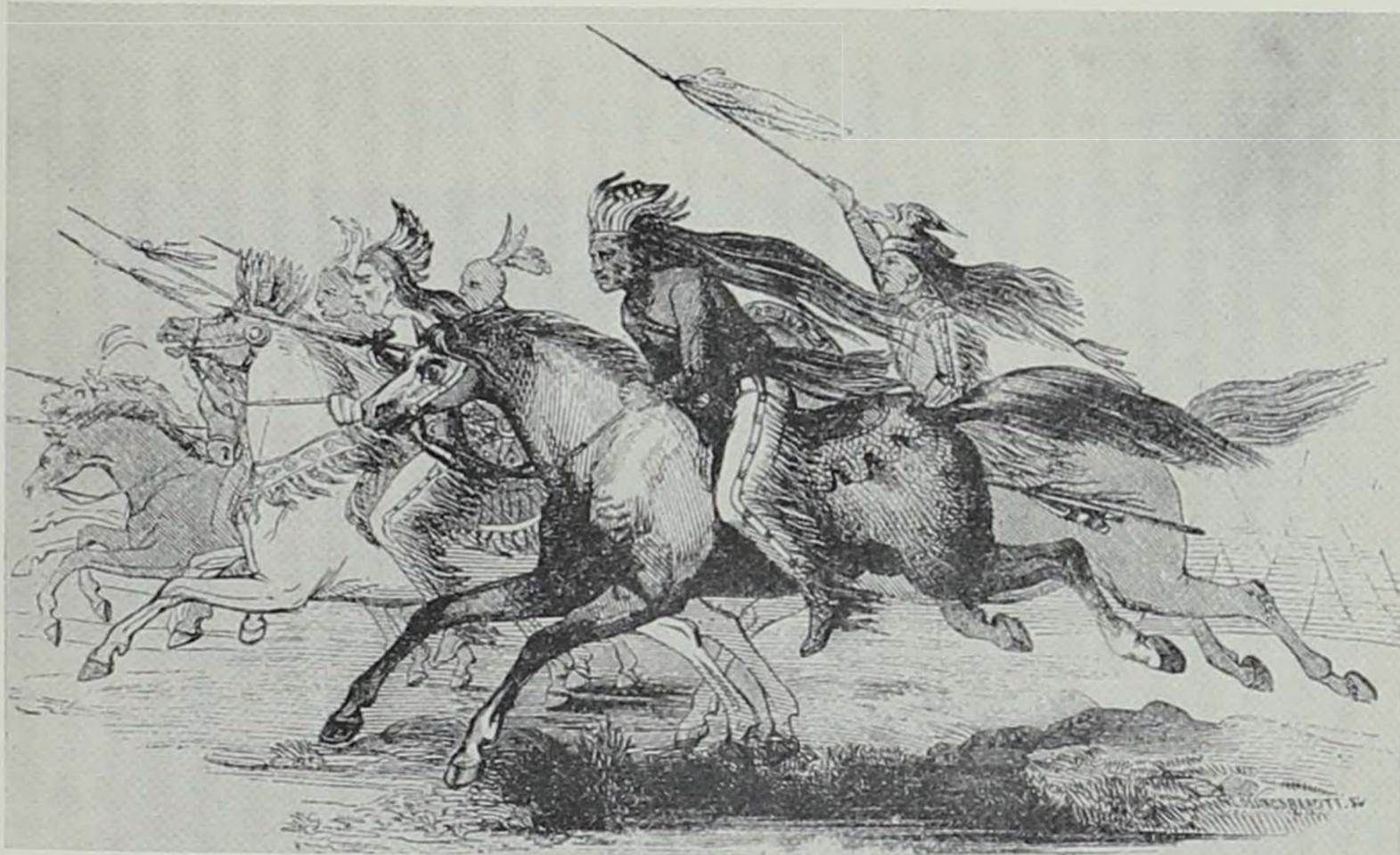
(From a daguerreotype taken in St. Louis in 1847)

Keokuk



(From a photograph by Bawden Bros. of a mural painting by H. Thompson)

Blackhawk Purchase Treaty

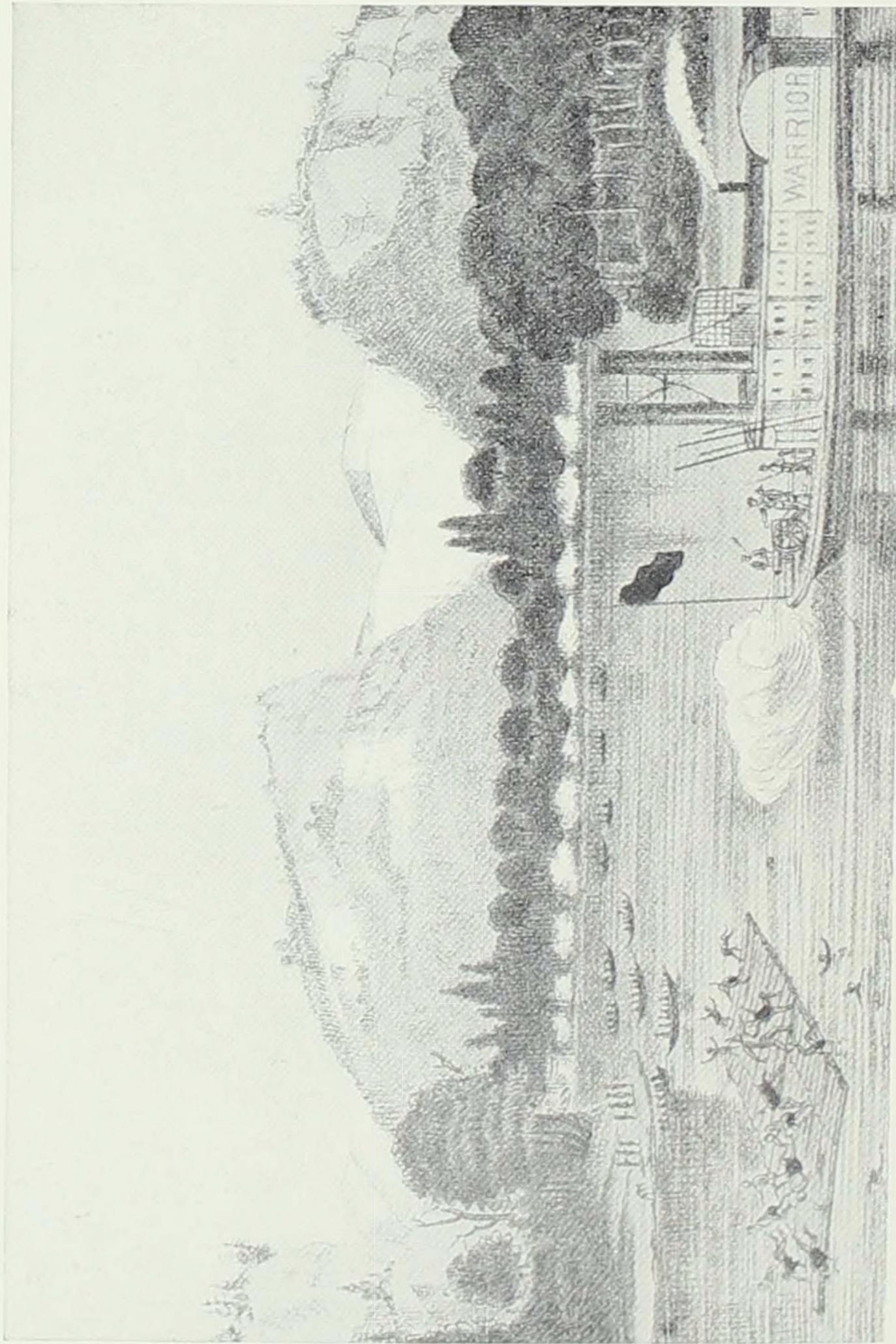


From E. D. Mansfield, Life and Services of General Winfield Scott

Scott describes the Indian conduct at the treaty ending the Black Hawk War. "When a council was to meet, they came at a furious charge; suddenly dismounted, arranged themselves in order, and then, between lines of soldiers, entered the pavilion with the firmness of victors, but with all the deep solemnity of a funeral."



Indians on Horseback Killing Buffalo



From a Painting by Henry Lewis in *Das Illustrierte Mississippthal*
Steamboat Warrior Repulses Indians at Battle of Bad Axe, August 1, 2, 1832.

summer home; the mats are used for the winter when more warmth is required. In shape, a wickiup resembles a haystack.

There is a door at one end (in summer there may be one at the opposite end also). We must stoop to enter, for the opening is not high enough to admit an adult standing upright. It is smoky inside and dark, for there are no windows; but as we get used to the gloom we see that we are in a good-sized room. A fire is burning in a shallow pit scooped out in the center and the smoke rises lazily to escape from a hole in the roof. Around the room are the sleeping places of the various members of the family — not beds like ours, to be sure, but piles of skins or blankets, raised above the earth floor on mats of woven twigs.

At the side opposite the door is the place of the warrior and master of the lodge. It is the place of honor and guests are conducted there if they are respected and welcome. Both master and guests sit on mats or on a blanket or deerskin spread out on the ground. There, too, are the belongings of the Indian — his war club, bow and arrows, scalping knife, pipe, blanket, gun, jars of paints, and anything else he may claim as his personal property.

In a separate place are the belongings of the wife — or the wives, if this is a plural family. Here she has stowed her household utensils, such as the mortar in which she grinds the corn, the loom on

which she can weave coarse cloth or the mats which cover the wigwam, earthen jars for water and food, a bowl or two in which food may be served, some knives, a hoe, and any other objects she may be fortunate enough to possess. Food supplies are packed away in jars or baskets or in sacks made of some part of an animal.

The children likewise have particular places allotted to them where each is expected to keep its belongings, to sit, and to sleep. At one side a cradle is fastened to one of the poles. In it a fat, dark-eyed, stolid baby is securely fastened, safe from the fire and from the dogs which swarm in and out of the wickiup. A litter of puppies occupies another corner in the room, unconscious of the possibility that at any time they may be knocked on the head and cooked in the pot.

A squaw comes to the door, throws in a bundle of wood, crawls in after it, drags it over to the fire, and proceeds to stir the contents of an earthen pot set in the midst of the coals. What she is cooking gives forth a pleasant odor and if we are invited to dinner we will be glad to know that today the pot contains venison with corn and beans from the garden. Another day it might be fish, dog, pork, or almost any kind of meat, for the Indians were not particular when they were hungry. Sometimes the squaw rolled a fish or a piece of meat in clay or in leaves and baked it in the coals. Potatoes, green corn, and some other vegetables were cooked the

same way. It is difficult to say whether the meal now being prepared is breakfast, dinner, or supper. An Indian had no regular time for eating; he ate when he was hungry and when he had food to eat. Usually the Indians had only one cooked meal a day.

When the food is ready the man and his guests are served first, each receiving a bowl of the meat and vegetables. Spoons of horn or of some other material are the only articles used in eating. After the men are served the women and children eat what is left. There are no chairs and no table. The children take pieces of the meat in their hands and run outdoors where they dispute possession of the food with the hordes of hungry dogs. The only dessert of the Indian menu was honey, maple sugar, and wild fruits, such as plums, strawberries, and grapes.

When the meal is over the master of the wigwam takes his pipe and joins some friends under the trees where they play games of chance or recount their heroic deeds. The boys set out on some expedition to shoot squirrels with their bows and arrows or go down to the river to play. The young men gamble or race horses just outside the village. Many of the horses are small and unkempt, for though the Indian liked a good horse he paid no attention either to breeding, food, or care.

The smaller children, fat, naked, and greasy, tumble about the wigwam with the puppies or roll

about in the dust outside, for the constant tramping of the dry prairie sod has worn it thin. The mother and older girls gather up the remnants of the meal, leaving the food in the pot by the fire where it will be ready whenever someone is hungry. It is not clear that the bowls and spoons were washed, but perhaps they were.

Then the squaw goes out under a tree where she has a deerskin in the process of being tanned. Her family will soon need moccasins and leggings for the winter. All morning she had worked in the cornfield with her dull hoe, struggling with the prolific prairie grass and weeds. It did not occur to her that the men might help with the hoeing. The distribution of labor is definite and inexorable: the men go to war, hunt, and fish; the women raise the crops, take care of the meat, look after the wigwam, and do all the hard work.

In warm weather the men wear little clothing — perhaps a breech clout and moccasins suffice. In cooler weather or on occasions when they want to be dressed up they don leggings of deerskin, ornamented by fringe, beads, and quills. Over this may be a sort of blouse of deerskin also ornamented according to the artistic skill and industry of the squaw. A blanket draped over his shoulders completes the costume. No primitive Indian ever wore a hat. His hair was cut short except for the scalp lock in which he wore various feathers and decorations. A warrior might wear an ornate war bonnet.

The women wear moccasins, leggings, a two-piece costume made up of a slip or dress coming below the knees and a short blouse, both usually of deerskin. The woman's blanket might be looped across her shoulders in such a way as to provide a snug nest for a baby old enough to be out of the cradle but not old enough to walk far.

The Indians never whipped their children; they thought it was a cruel custom. Indeed, the love of their own children was a marked characteristic of most Indians. The baby's cradle was padded with the softest materials which the Indian mother could procure and elaborately ornamented. An Indian mother usually nursed her child longer than is customary among white people, for the Indians had no cow's milk and small children had to eat soup, meat, corn meal mush, or whatever there was. It does not appear, however, that the infant mortality among the primitive Indians was exceptionally high. Neither was the birth rate high.

The children did not, of course, go to school. They were taught what they needed to know by their fathers, mothers, and others of the tribe. In addition to this vocational training the children were taught the legends of the tribe and trained in the social regulations. Old men and women related to the boys and girls the stories of long ago. "And then I came home" was a formal ending of a story just as "Once upon a time" is considered the proper beginning of a fairy tale.

All Indians were extremely sensitive to the opinion of their own group. So powerful was this force of public opinion that usually no other form of coercion or restraint was provided. Murder, however, was punishable by death, unless the family of the murdered man agreed to accept presents, which they usually did. Disputes were taken to the old men who acted both as judges and jury.

Before the white man came with his fire water and his guns, existence in the Indian villages was not extremely hard, although with no assured supply of food, there were frequent periods of famine, especially during the long winters. Much as the Indian father loved his children he would not raise corn for them, or give up his wandering life. Hardest of all was the life of the Indian women, who had first place in the work and second in the distribution of food.

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