THE PALIMPSEST

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Poweshiek

Large and clear among the flickering shadows of those other days when the Iowa country was the home of the red man, looms the figure of Poweshiek. A chief of the Foxes at the period of the Black Hawk War in 1832, he afterward became head chief of that tribe, superior in rank to Wapello but subordinate to Keokuk who was the recognized leader of both the Sacs and the Foxes. Although well known, Poweshiek was often overshadowed by the superior position and showmanship of the colorful Keokuk, while Wapello, also a man of address and a friend of Keokuk, not infrequently occupied a more prominent place than Poweshiek in the public life of the combined Sac and Fox nation.

Not distinguished by brilliant talents as were some of his brothers, he was nevertheless highly respected and held rank among the first men of his tribe around the council fires, and when treaties

were negotiated his name was appended in a prominent fashion. Thus, in making the treaty of 1832 at Fort Armstrong, by which the Sacs and Foxes surrendered six million acres of eastern Iowa — the famous Black Hawk Purchase — Poweshiek had an important rôle. The treaty was signed by Keokuk and eight other leading Sacs, and by twenty-four Foxes of whom Poweshiek was third. Again in 1842, the treaty negotiated at Agency City which opened central Iowa to white settlement bears the signature of Governor Chambers, and the marks of Keokuk and twenty-one Sac leaders, and Poweshiek together with twenty-one head men of the Foxes.

In the council at Agency City, the government proposed to buy all the land of the Sacs and Foxes in Iowa. Keokuk, speaking for the tribes, agreed to sell all the land except one square mile, which they had promised to Mrs. Street and her children. Governor Chambers insisted on all the land. Thereupon the children of General Street withdrew their claim and Keokuk was ready to yield to the wish of the Governor, but Poweshiek remained adamant. As a result Keokuk stiffened and the Indians retained the square mile of land where their beloved white brother, Joseph M. Street, lay buried close by the grave of their own chief Wapello.

Here was Poweshiek, standing against Keokuk and the insistent demand of the Governor and having his will. It was characteristic of the man. Born at one of the Fox villages on Iowa soil about the

year 1797, Poweshiek's entire life was woven into the drama enacted on the Iowa prairies during the period when this section of the trans-Mississippi West was preëmpted by the whites. His biography is the story of friendly contacts with traders and government agents, treaty negotiations for the cession of tribal hunting grounds, and frequent removals of his village westward before the press of insatiable settlers. To-day a county that was once a part of his domain bears the name of Poweshiek.

His name has been interpreted to mean "Roused Bear", which seems to be in harmony with his character. This version may have some significance also from the fact that he was a member of the bear clan which was the ruling clan of the Foxes. At a treaty council in Washington he was called the "Shedding Bear". Other commentators have asserted that his name means "to dash the water off". But the most authoritative translation is to the effect that Poweshiek should more properly be spelled "Pawishik", a masculine proper name of the bear clan signifying "he who shakes [something] off [himself]."

In all accounts, Poweshiek figures in the guise of a man — a hulking, mountainous man; a giant, tall and cumbersome, weighing two hundred and fifty pounds in the prime of his manhood. Described by a missionary in 1834 as savage and debased in appearance, his portrait painted in Washington in 1837 does not depict him so. There he is shown as

a warrior — stalwart, fine visaged, clear of eye, alert, a man of will and determination. When all is told, he stands as a "rather noble specimen of the American savage."

Although not particularly belligerent, Poweshiek was preëminently a man of war. "We do not want to learn," he declared to an Indian agent, "we want to kill Sioux. The Great Spirit made us to fight and kill one another when we are a mind to." According to one of his white contemporaries "he was characterized by a disposition full of exactness and arrogance", which did not endear him to his associates. Less reticent than other chiefs, he was extremely blunt and outspoken. To an early settler who knew him well he appeared "fat, heavy, lazy and a drunkard, whenever he could get whisky, and that was frequently". Though laboring under those handicaps he was nevertheless generally recognized to be "honest, brave, and just". Slow to arouse, he was full of energy and hard to control when once stirred to action.

All sources contribute to the impression that he was a man with a strange passion for justice. "His word was regarded as sacred", and a gift was remembered with gratitude. The principal qualities of his mind were truthfulness and fair dealing.

A well-known anecdote illustrates his sense of honesty and the power he wielded over his people. One summer a horse, strayed or stolen from a remote settlement, was traced to the neighborhood of

Poweshiek's village. The owner suspected that the horse was in the possession of one of the Indians and reported his suspicions to Poweshiek. The chief knew nothing of the matter, but promised to investigate immediately.

Issuing an order that no one was to leave the village until further orders, Poweshiek sent the owner of the horse through the village with an escort in search of his property. Having found the animal and identified it to the satisfaction of Poweshiek, the Indian in whose possession it was found being unable to give a satisfactory explanation, the horse was straightway returned to the owner. Moreover, the Indian was made to pay liberally from his annuity for the trouble and expense he had caused. Besides this he was punished rather vigorously by Poweshiek himself for his dishonesty. "Had the encampment or village been walled in, or sentinels posted, it would not have been more secure in retaining every denizen at home until the search was over, than was the imperious word of Poweshiek to his people."

It is said by some authorities that Poweshiek rather than Keokuk was primarily responsible for weakening Black Hawk's fighting power when that powerful chieftain went on the warpath in 1832, in a last futile effort against the inpour of whites. For some time previous, the alliance between the Sacs and Foxes had been growing weak. After a few subordinate Sac chiefs ceded away the Rock River

country in Illinois without the knowledge or consent of the people, Poweshiek with most of the Foxes withdrew from the others and crossed the Mississippi. Thereafter, for a few years, his village was in the neighborhood of the present city of Davenport. When the fighting began east of the Mississippi, Poweshiek was joined by Keokuk and his fleeing band of Sacs. Later the defeated tribesmen came limping in from their defeats and Poweshiek gave them protection.

If the history of the Sacs and Foxes were followed through its full course to the bitter end, it would furnish "a study in the different stages of progress and decay of a once powerful nation." What is true of the nation is true of its members. The downward trend of Keokuk, Poweshiek, and others is a reflection of the decline of the tribe. Dissipation, disease, and despair were their lot. Standing in the pathway of an irresistible force they inevitably went down before it, some in one way, some in another.

According to traders' accounts and statements of early settlers, Poweshiek, like Keokuk and Wapello, was very fond of whisky, too fond of it, and in times of unexpected good fortune or in days of gloom and misfortune he was accustomed to become deeply intoxicated. This, with the constant pressure of white settlement and the necessity of moving again and again to a new locality farther west, made a deep impression upon him. His life was not happy.

In 1837, Poweshiek, in company with thirty-five other prominent Sacs and Foxes, including eight women and children belonging to some of the chiefs, escorted by Indian Agent Street, visited Washington and other cities in the East. The trip was to make peace with the Sioux and to demonstrate to the Indians the love borne for them by their white brothers. But before another year had passed the old, old story of white aggression was repeated.

Iowa became a Territory on July 4, 1838. In honor of that occasion the settlers in Johnson County met at John Gilbert's trading place to celebrate the day. Poweshiek, whose village was a few miles up the river at that time, was called upon to address the gathering. After an interpreter explained to him the reason for the celebration that day, the chief rose to his full height, slipped his blanket from his shoulder, raised his hand aloft, and, pointing westward, spoke of the white men's victory over their red brothers which by the irony of fate he was helping to commemorate. With all the dramatic instinct and simple eloquence of Indian oratory he accepted the inevitable. His words were charged with the pathos of the Indians' plight.

"Soon", he said, "I shall go to a new home and you will plant corn where my dead sleep. Our towns, the paths we have made, and the flowers we love will soon be yours. I have moved many times and have seen the white man put his feet in the tracks of the Indian and make the earth into fields and gardens.

I know that I must go away and you will be so glad when I am gone that you will soon forget that the meat and the lodge-fire of the Indian have been forever free to the stranger and at all times he has asked for what he has fought for, the right to be free.''

It was ever thus. From the Rock River to the west bank of the Mississippi, then to the Cedar River, thence westward into Johnson County on the Iowa, then on to Poweshiek County, next to Jasper County along the Skunk, across the Des Moines, and finally, tarrying tentatively on the banks of the Grand River in southwestern Iowa, Poweshiek and his village of Foxes moved reluctantly from stream to stream across the prairies of Iowa. Continually the Indians retreated before the host of white invaders.

In accordance with the treaty of 1842, Poweshiek withdrew from central Iowa and began the long migration to Kansas. During the winter of 1845 and 1846 his village, which consisted of forty lodges, was located on Grand River near the settlements of northern Missouri. But he was reluctant to leave Iowa. As he brooded over the fate of his people he determined to resist any further attempt to drive him from his native land. He did not want to go to the plains across the Missouri.

Rumors spread that the Indians were going on the war-path. When the report of the threatened trouble came to Fort Des Moines, Dr. James Camp-

bell, J. B. Scott, and Hamilton Thrift, who were intimately acquainted with Poweshiek, mounted horses and rode with great speed to the Indian encampment in the hope of averting bloodshed. Calling attention to their long ride through the snow as evidence of their friendship, they urged Poweshiek to give up his war-like intentions. "If you persist in your purpose of making war on the whites, many of your squaws and papooses, as well as your braves will be butchered, and the remainder will be driven out into the cold and the snow to perish on the prairies", they argued. "It would be better now for you to break up your lodges and go in peace to your reservation in Kansas, which the government has provided for you."

Poweshiek was not inclined to accept this advice, fearing that it would be construed as an exhibition of cowardice. But at last he realized that the odds against him were too great, and that in a fight between himself and the government he would surely be defeated. He was confident his braves could whip the dragoons at Fort Des Moines and maybe drive the settlers away, but he knew that sooner or later the "Great Father" at Washington would come and conquer the Indians.

Eventually this remnant of the Foxes was conducted to their reservation by United States troops. Somewhere in Kansas, Poweshiek lies buried in an unknown grave.

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