

Implacable Foes

The Sacs and Foxes, like the Sioux, were a brave and warlike people. From their earliest appearance in history until they were placed on a reservation, the story of these allied tribes is a record of savage strife. They invariably resisted the advance of French traders and missionaries. In the War of 1812 a band of them fought with the British against the Americans and twenty years later the same rash chieftain defied the power of the United States in a hopeless contest to maintain the rights of his people. During the early part of the eighteenth century the Sacs and Foxes were active in destroying the great Illinois confederacy. Later, when they crossed the Mississippi, they made war upon their new neighbors. Brooking no interference, they swept aside the Ioways in one heroic battle, so tradition has it. But the Sioux were as numerous as the buffaloes on the prairie and as courageous as the Sacs and Foxes themselves. Almost incessant warfare existed between them.

Below the mouth of Catfish Creek south of Dubuque is an isolated bluff nearly two hundred feet high. It is separated from the neighboring hills by a wide valley and the side next to the river is nearly perpendicular. According to Indian tradition this towering hill was the scene of a great battle between

the Sacs and Foxes and the Sioux in the days before white settlement.

The Sioux, outnumbered and defeated, had fled to this place of safety and fortified their position on the summit. A rude parapet had been built of logs and brush, behind which the harried tribesmen had taken refuge with their women and children.

But the Sacs and Foxes were not to be thwarted in their bloodthirsty designs. Having learned the position of their intended victims, they cautiously awaited nightfall before beginning the attack. Under the cover of darkness, when the Sioux could not watch their movements, they began to ascend the hill. Unobserved, they reached the barricade, swiftly dispatched the sentinels, and with a savage war-whoop they were over the wall into the camp before the Sioux were aware of their approach. Desperate hand to hand fighting ensued for a short time and then, having set fire to the brush fortifications, the Sacs and Foxes retired. While they were protected by darkness, the Sioux were exposed by the light of the burning camp.

At last the Sioux, thinned in numbers, began to yield ground. Quick to observe their advantage, the Sacs and Foxes seized their war clubs and tomahawks and rushed upon their foes. The combat that ensued on the summit of the bluff was short and terrible. The Sioux, completely overpowered and cut off from every avenue of escape, were driven to the brink of the precipice where they were beaten

to death or hurled headlong to the rocks below. Not one escaped.

On other occasions the Sioux were victorious. And so the warfare continued. Sometimes trouble arose over stolen horses, sometimes lone braves were stealthily murdered, but more frequently the fighting occurred between hunting parties whose trails happened to cross. It was war without quarter whenever these traditional enemies met. And their feud accounts were never balanced.

In 1825 the government undertook to establish peace in the Iowa country. A great council was held at Prairie du Chien to which the Sioux and their enemies, the Chippewas, the Sacs and Foxes, and the Ioways, were invited. General William Clark explained that hostilities were caused mainly from the lack of definite boundaries for the hunting grounds of the various tribes. To this the Indians assented, but when they were asked to agree upon the location of the proposed boundaries there was no agreement. For days the Sioux argued with the Sacs and Foxes as to the limits of their respective domains. At last, however, a dividing line was determined, a treaty was signed, and the calumet was smoked as a solemn pledge that the tomahawk was buried forever.

Scarcely two years elapsed before the Sacs and Foxes put on their war paint and resumed more normal relations with their hated neighbors to the north. The trouble grew out of a misunderstanding

over the possession of a horse. A Sioux, who had lived among the Foxes for a number of years and had married a Fox woman, a sister of a chief, desired to return to his own country. Leaving his wife, he departed, taking with him, however, a horse that belonged to her. Some time afterward the Fox chief sent word to the Sioux chief that he hoped his sister's horse would be returned immediately, but if he should be disappointed in that expectation, he would be obliged to enter the Sioux country in search of the horse and if that should be necessary he might take something more than stolen property.

To this ultimatum the Sioux chief replied that he knew nothing about the horse. The Foxes were welcome to come and get their horse if what they claimed was true. As to taking anything besides the horse, however, he would attend to that matter when it became necessary. There negotiations ended. The Foxes soon invaded the Sioux country, killed some of their enemies, and hostilities were resumed.

For three years intermittent raids and murder continued. In the spring of 1830, after a party of Sac and Fox Indians had killed some Sioux rivals near the Cedar River in Iowa, Joseph M. Street decided to arrange a conference at Prairie du Chien to settle the perennial difficulties in a friendly council. Unfortunately, on the day the Sacs and Foxes were due to arrive, a Sioux war party went down the river about fifteen miles and there lay in ambush for their enemies. After sunset the

unsuspecting Sacs and Foxes arrived and prepared to camp for the night. While they were carrying their goods ashore, leaving their guns and war clubs still in the canoes, the hidden warriors bounded to their feet "with a horrible yell, and fired a murderous volley at the surprised party." Only one brave and a boy escaped to carry the news of the massacre to their people, who immediately abandoned their village near Dubuque and fled to Rock Island. The victims of the ambush were horribly mutilated, and the victorious Sioux paraded the streets of Prairie du Chien, dancing the scalp-dance and proudly displaying the scalps of their foes.

Agent Street's friendly conference never materialized, but the incident convinced the authorities at Washington that another general council should be held at once. As a result a new treaty was concluded at Prairie du Chien on July 15, 1830, establishing a neutral zone forty miles wide between the Sioux and the Sacs and Foxes. Surely this neutral ground, it was thought, would be wide enough to prevent trespassing.

But the hope of permanent peace between the tribes was short lived. In 1831 the Sacs and Foxes, still revengeful for the massacre of the previous year, sent a war party up the Mississippi against the Sioux. From the bluffs opposite Prairie du Chien their spies discovered the camp of the enemy almost under the guns of Fort Crawford. Lying in ambush

until night, the Sac and Fox warriors stripped themselves of every encumbrance except the girdle holding the tomahawk and scalping knife and swam across the river. Stealthily they crawled down upon the Sioux encampment. While their enemies lay sleeping they quietly killed seventeen chiefs and braves, besides some women and children. Before the Sioux realized what was happening the murderers had escaped. Crossing the river, they leaped into their waiting canoes, and speedily returned to their village on Catfish Creek.

One of the last encounters between the ancient enemies occurred in the summer of 1837. In a "talk" sent by two braves to Agent Street at Rock Island and printed in the *Galena Gazette and Advertiser* on August 19, 1837, Waucoshaushe, the Fox war chief, who was severely wounded in the fight, vividly described the circumstances that led to the engagement.

"My father: I send two of my young men to tell you the news. When I returned from St. Louis, I found our people starving at the village—I divided all the provisions I had received from our trader among them, and the powder and lead to enable us to make a hunt to supply our families until our corn was ripe, or that our great father had paid our money to enable our traders to furnish us. I divided the upper band of Foxes (of whom I am now speaking) into two parties: one to advance along the dividing country, between the Iowa and Red

Cedar rivers; the other party to proceed up the right bank of Cedar River. Of the latter I took charge, consisting of about forty men, and about one hundred and thirty women and children.

“As we advanced, we found the game very scarce, and had to depend on fish, which were caught from the Cedar, to keep our people from dying of hunger; but I was in hopes that when we reached a strip of wooded country between the Wapsipinecon and Cedar, we should find plenty of game. I sent off a party of hunters in advance to provide a supply for us when the women and children arrived; but the party of hunters soon returned, and reported that some Winnebagoes were hunting on the ground. This was bad news in our starving condition, and we could not return, for we had nothing to return to; and the nearest point that we could find game was about the mouth of Otter River.

“I proceeded with my starving party to that point, and encamped about mid-day, and sent out a party of hunters to hunt. They soon returned and reported that they had fallen upon a large Sioux trail, and no doubt the Sioux had taken possession of our hunting grounds.

“What was now to be done? My number of fighting men was small, but to retreat was impossible, for we must have been discovered by the Sioux and followed, and whenever you turn your back on an enemy you are sure to be defeated. My braves agreed with me that we should immediately start on

the trail that had been discovered, leave our women and children at the camp, ascertain where the Sioux were encamped, and, if not too strong a party, to drive them out of our hunting grounds.

“We started, and soon fell in with the trail, and followed it across Otter River, and then took a direction into the prairie toward where the sun sets. About midnight we discovered something that resembled Sioux lodges. We rushed up to them, making our war cry, but when we came up to them it was nothing but sandhills instead of lodges. The Sioux were encamped in the hollow, and were now on their guard, having discovered us by our bad management. At this time we could have retreated, but reflecting on our situation, that our families were starving and our hunting grounds taken possession of by the Sioux, and the remembrance of our friends and relations that they had killed last winter, determined us to follow them as far as the line.

“We had not proceeded far when the Sioux fired on us. I, with my party, rushed into their camp, and after fighting desperately for some time, we found the Sioux were in too large a force. All that could retreated out of the camp, and took a position back of a small rise, within gunshot of their camp, and kept up the firing as long as our ammunition lasted. We then retreated to our camp where we had left our women and children, bringing thirteen wounded with us, and leaving eleven killed on the field.

“My father, I am one of the wounded, and expect never to see you again. I have followed your advice, and have done the best I could for my nation, and I do not fear to die.

“We have, with the greatest difficulty, reached our village and brought in our wounded, and fear that many of our people will die of hunger.

“My father, I have no more to say.

Waucoshaushe

Principal war chief of the Foxes”

This battle, as the culmination of many similar conflicts, figured largely in the general council at Washington in October of that year. While delegations from the warring tribes were there ostensibly to make new land session treaties, the Secretary of War took advantage of the occasion to exhort the Indians to make peace and avoid future conflicts. It was a dramatic and colorful assemblage, but as a peace conference it was a dismal failure.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS