

Comment by the Editor

SYMBOLISM AND THE CALUMET

Among all people symbolism is the bridge from the concrete to the abstract, from the known to the unknown. Based upon the amazing uniformities in nature, the use of one thing to explain another possessing some common characteristic is the universal method of interpreting human experience. Language is entirely a system of symbols. The trademark of the Wills-St. Claire Motor Company was designed to carry the irresistible implication that the car has the speed, silence, grace, and endurance of the flying geese it emulates. A flag represents in a tangible way the complex condition of nationality. By virtue of a deeper meaning attached to words or objects they become dynamic. The power of any symbol depends, therefore, upon the knowledge of its history.

As the cross is the sign of Christianity, so the calumet is symbolical of Indian religion. Originally a calumet consisted of a shaft of wood from eighteen inches to four feet long, perforated for the spirit or breath to pass through, and adorned in honor of various gods whose aid it was used to invoke. Feathers from the wings of an eagle signified that the supplications might soar to the abode of the

principal deity. The head of an owl was attached that the spirit of destiny might not be troubled at night, while a duck's head performed a similar function on the water. A serpent carved on the shaft was an indication of enmity and was never found upon the calumets of peace. When convenience united the sacrificial tobacco pipe to the highly symbolic calumet stem, the combined instrument became the most sacred object known to the Indians. It represented a veritable council of the gods, and the elaborate ceremonies in which it figured were thought to be essential to every important function in life.

The calumet was employed by travellers as a passport, it was used for social and political purposes, to secure favorable weather, and to ratify agreements which could not be violated without inevitable punishment by the gods. When the first white men visited the Indians in Iowa they smoked the pipe of peace, and the calumet which Marquette carried away as a token of friendship saved the lives of the venturesome Frenchmen more than once on their famous voyage down the Father of Waters. Rarely indeed have the red men broken the word they have plighted in the name of the calumet. Small wonder that white men in formal intercourse with the Indians have willingly engaged in their ceremonies, adopted their beautifully figurative language, and smoked their calumets of peace.

J. E. B.