

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Great Council of 1825

On the afternoon of August 19, 1925, men and women dressed in the colorful garb of Indian chiefs, braves, and squaws reënacted on the Heights above McGregor, Iowa, scenes from the great council between white men and red men held at Prairie du Chien one hundred years ago. Because their forefathers had signed the celebrated treaty of 1825, Chief Kahquados and Sub-chief Mitchell of the Pottawattamies, and Wampum, a Chippewa chief, travelled many miles to take part in the centenary pageant. Dressed in all their finery, these chiefs and a goodly number of Winnebago braves and maidens took dignified part in the ceremonials of the afternoon. A huge crowd witnessed the unfolding of the drama where Sauks, Foxes, and Chippewas scowled at their enemy, the Sioux, and the proud Sioux flung back the hostile challenge. The visitors listened while "General Clark" and "Governor

Cass" explained anew the desires and good intentions of the Great Father at Washington and the make-believe chiefs made glowing replies. The pageant closed as the treaty of peace was signed, and the calumet was smoked to seal the agreement.

The Heights where the pageant was staged "overlooks the Wisconsin prairie" where thousands of Sioux, Chippewa, Menominee, Winnebago, Ottawa, Pottawattamie, Ioway, Sauk, and Fox Indians "assembled in that long ago day to establish boundaries which would stop the warring of the tribes among themselves." With the scenes of the afternoon pageant fresh in mind it was not difficult for the visitor on the Heights that evening to picture in imagination the panorama of a century ago. As the sun dipped from a limpid sky into a gold-washed world to the west, shadows half obscured the houses in the town of Prairie du Chien. There was the isle-strewn expanse of the Mississippi River below, and in the distance towered scalloped bluffs that hemmed in the long narrow prairie. In the gathering darkness clumps of trees on the islands in the river and the roofs of houses in the distant town were readily transformed into high-pointed tepees of the red men of long ago.

The council of 1825 was an earnest effort to induce the Indians of the Upper Mississippi Valley to bury the tomahawk and to agree to confine their excursions in search of game within specified boundaries. The government desired especially to put an end to

the bitter Sioux-Chippewa feuds and to the bloody clashes between the Sioux and the allied tribes of Sauks and Foxes in the Iowa country.

In many respects this treaty council was one of the most imposing ever held with the red men. To this meeting there came not only the chiefs, principal men, and warriors of the tribes but their families as well. And many a town or county in Iowa, as well as in other States of the Upper Mississippi Valley, bears the name of some Indian who affixed his mark to the treaty of 1825 — Decorah, Tama, Keokuk, and Mahaska for example.

From the region near the Falls of St. Anthony came Indian Agent Lawrence Taliaferro with almost four hundred Sioux and Chippewas. From the distant Sault Ste. Marie, by way of Lake Michigan and the Fox-Wisconsin waterway, the scholarly Henry Schoolcraft brought one hundred and fifty Chippewas, "the brothers of Hiawatha". Nicolas Boilvin of Prairie du Chien was there with hundreds of Winnebagoes from the Wisconsin country roundabout. And from Rock Island came Thomas Forsyth, the capable agent of the Sauks and Foxes. Sub-agents Robert Forsyth and W. B. Alexander, the Scotchman, completed the roster of white ambassadors of the Indian tribes. Major Thomas Biddle, the secretary, from whose journal much of the material for this sketch was obtained, added distinction to the assemblage. Then there were the two United States commissioners, General William

Clark of St. Louis, the "Red Head Chief" whom the Indians admired, and Governor Lewis Cass of Detroit who had asked permission of the government to participate in the council.

It was first proposed to hold the council near Fort Armstrong on Rock Island but the Indians preferred Prairie du Chien. This village and prairie had long been known as a neutral spot where tribesmen might assemble under a temporary truce. The date of the meeting was placed later in the season, too, than was originally planned, for the Indians wished to wait until their summer hunt was ended.

A keelboat containing provisions and presents for the Indians left St. Louis on June 30, 1825, bound up-stream for the conference. It contained rations valued at \$6,750 for an estimated crowd of two thousand Indians, and presents of tobacco, salt, sugar, guns, powder, lead, and liquor to the amount of \$2000. Clark had further estimated that the pay of extra interpreters, expresses, and hired men would require \$750, and that the cost of transporting supplies, presents, and these men to Prairie du Chien would take \$400 more. An additional \$500 was allowed for subsistence and contingent expenses of Indian agents, interpreters, and other men employed during the time of the council—a total cost of \$10,400. Even this amount Clark deemed inadequate, as the association of Governor Cass as commissioner would probably increase the number of tribesmen for whom provision must be made. He assured

the Secretary of War, however, that all possible economy would be used in the conduct of the council.

Clark and Biddle left St. Louis on July 6th and caught up with the keelboat at Clarksville three days later. Not for ten years had Clark visited the Upper Mississippi region, but few changes were encountered along the river. Eight days passed before the boat reached Fort Edwards on the Illinois shore. There Clark found White Cloud and several other principal men of the Ioways who claimed that their sub-agent had told them to meet the "Red Head Chief" at this place. Much provoked at this unauthorized advice of their agent the General gave the Ioways a barrel of pork and another of biscuits, and borrowed a canoe from the American Fur Company for their transportation to Prairie du Chien. White Cloud asked him also to pay for a beef which had been killed for the Ioways while they were awaiting the arrival of the White Chief.

The next day Clark stopped at the tent of the fur trader, Maurice Blondeau, on the Iowa side of the "Rapides des Moines". There he found another party of Ioways en route overland for the council. Before departing Clark gave White Cloud a rifle and some powder, together with a note to Agent Forsyth at Rock Island to furnish the Ioways some provisions. The "Red Head Chief" also, probably reluctantly, paid twenty-five dollars to the owner of the beef killed for the Ioways at Fort Edwards.

On to Rock Island, from which Colonel George

Davenport shipped his furs to St. Louis and to which he brought twice a year a hundred thousand dollars worth of goods for his trading post, Clark and his party proceeded. The Sauks and Foxes, the General learned, were to leave for the Prairie in two days, and Agent Forsyth a day later. Farther up the river the party passed the place where Julien Du-buque "lay in perpetual state on his hills".

Toward sundown on the evening of July 30th, the General and his men drew near Prairie du Chien. "The Great Chief, the Red Head is coming", whispered the Indians, as Clark's barge hove in sight.

"Prairie du Chien was alive with excitement". Governor Cass who had come by the Great Lakes and Fox-Wisconsin route had been there for ten days. Schoolcraft with his delegation from Sault Ste. Marie was there, and Taliaferro with his interpreters and assistants had already arrived with the Sioux and Chippewas from the north. The united tribesmen, Clark learned, had stopped at the Painted Rock above the Prairie and had "dressed for a solemn entry with as much care as an ambassador and his suite would have taken at the court of the Grand Monarque. When all was ready, the boats, arranged in columns, swept down with flags flying, drums beating, and guns firing, and rounded up at the levee at Fort Crawford in imposing array." Not only the village, but the entire banks of the river for miles above and below were covered with high-pointed buffalo tents. "Tall and warlike, Chippewas and

Winnebagoes from Superior and the valley of St. Croix jostled Menomonees, Pottawattamies, and Ottawas" from Lake Michigan and Green Bay.

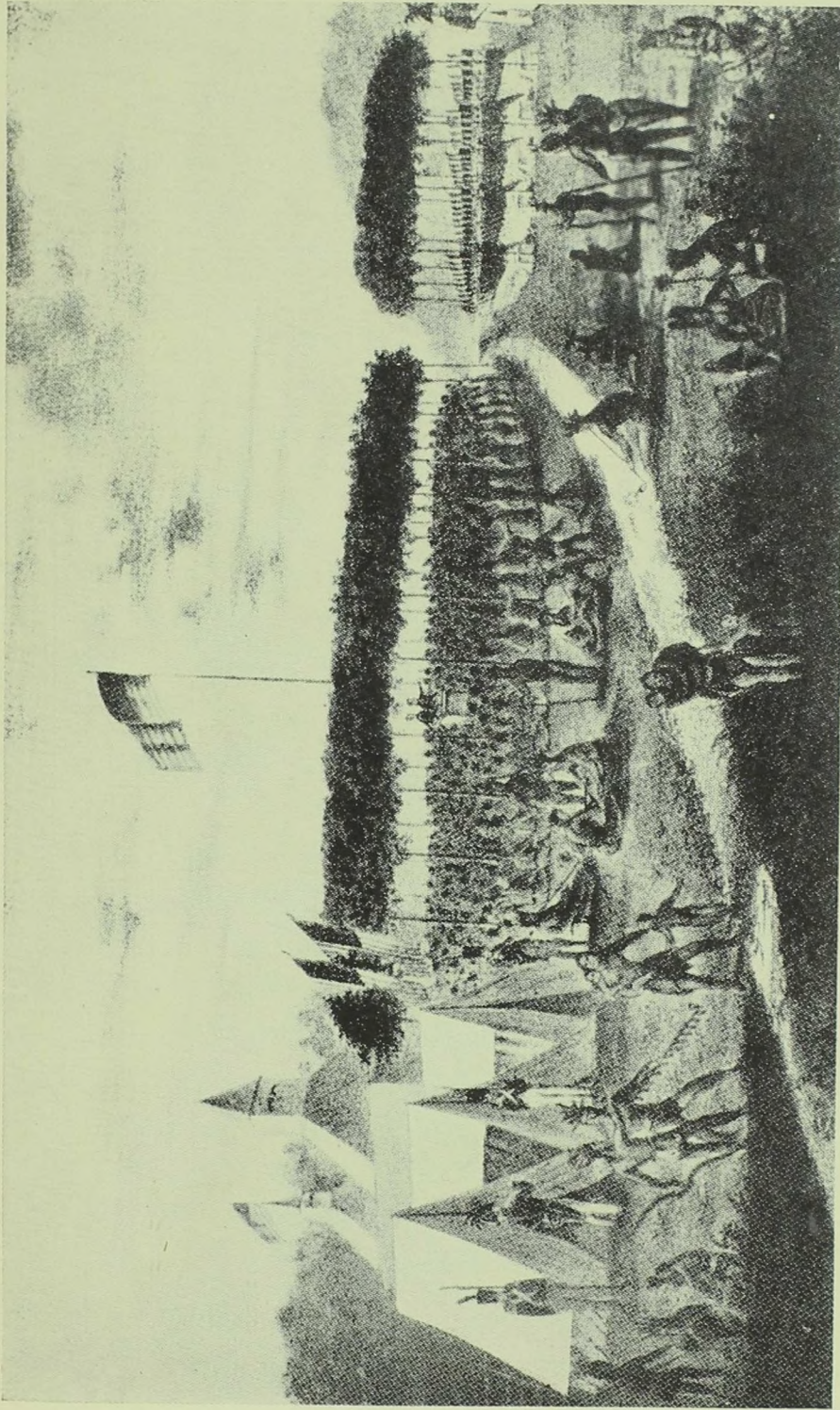
The Sioux Indians were a picturesque group. They carried war clubs and lances decorated with almost every imaginable device of paint. "Wanita, the Yankton chief, had a most magnificent robe of the buffalo, curiously worked with dyed porcupines' quills and sweet grass." Their calumets of red pipestone from the famous Minnesota quarries were very elaborate. These pipes, curiously carved and fitted with flat wooden handles four feet long, were "ornamented with the scalps of red-headed woodpecker and male duck, and tail feathers of birds artificially attached by strings and quill work, so as to hang in the figure of a quadrant." Dyed porcupine quills arranged as a kind of mosaic added a colorful touch to the personal embellishment of the braves.

The opening of the council was delayed until the Sauks, Foxes, and Ioways should arrive. On the fourth of August they were sighted approaching in a flotilla of some seventy canoes. They had stopped on an island down-stream to array themselves in their finery, and in compact formation, singing their war songs, they swept up the river past the village and back again. At the landing they were greeted as brothers by the Chippewas, but the Sioux stood apart scowling.

As the prairie was already well filled with the tepees of the earlier arrivals, these tribes encamped

on the large island in midstream and on the opposite shore — the present site of McGregor. “They came to the treaty ground”, says Schoolcraft, “armed and dressed as a war party.” Many of the warriors had a long tuft of red horse hair tied at their elbows, and wore a necklace of grizzly bear claws. “Their head-dress consisted of red dyed horse-hair, tied in such manner to the scalp lock as to present the shape of the decoration of a Roman helmet.” Except for the scalp lock their heads were shaved and painted. They were practically naked. The print of a hand, in white clay, commonly marked the back or shoulders. A long iron-shod lance was carried in the hand by some; others were armed with clubs, guns, and knives. Keokuk, their leader, stood as a prince “majestic and frowning.”

At last all was ready for the council. A bower of trees with a raised platform for the commissioners had been erected near Fort Crawford for the assemblage. At ten o'clock on the morning of August 5th the firing of a gun at the fort summoned the braves to the council. The members of the commission took their place on the raised platform. In a semi-circle in front of them sat the gay-clad chiefs and principal men of the tribes, back of them the braves, and on the fringe of the great concourse were the squaws and children. On long benches at one side of the circle of Indians sat the soldiers from the fort, resplendent in their high bell-crowned “tarbucket” hats with white pompons, tight-fitting blue jacket



FROM A PAINTING BY J. O. LEWIS AS REPRODUCED IN QUAlFE'S WISCONSIN: ITS HISTORY AND ITS PEOPLE
THE GREAT COUNCIL OF 1825

coats with white crossed breast belts, and white trousers. Behind them sat the wives of officers and other ladies of Prairie du Chien. Back of the assemblage was old Fort Crawford whose loop-holed walls and two turret-crowned blockhouses reminded the savages of the long arm of the Great Father. It was a picture for an artist, and fortunately an artist, James O. Lewis, was present to catch and preserve the details of the scene.

“Friends and children”, said General Clark to the assembled Indians, “we have been directed by your Great Father, *your* President of the United States, to meet you here in council at this time, and we are rejoiced that the Great Spirit has enabled you all to arrive here in peace and safety. He has given us a clear day and we hope he has opened your ears and will prepare your heart for the good work before us.”

Grunts of approval and shouts from the Indians greeted this statement. Clark had apparently made a favorable beginning.

“Children”, he continued, “your Great Father has not sent us here to ask anything from you. We want nothing, not the smallest piece of your land. Not a single article of your property. We have come a great way to meet you for your own good and not for our benefit. Your Great Father has been informed that war is carried on among his red children, the Sauks, Foxes, and Chippewas on the one side and the Sioux on the other; and that the wars

of some of you began before any of you now living were born.”

Again the Indians interrupted with shouts and yells.

“Your Great Father thinks there is no cause for a continuation of war between you. There is land enough for you to live and hunt on and animals enough for your support. Why, instead of peaceably following the game and providing for your families, do you send out war parties to destroy one another? The Great Spirit has made you all of one colour and placed you all upon this land. You ought to live in peace together as brothers of one great family. Your Great Father has heard of your war songs and war parties — they do not please him. He desires that his red children should bury the tomahawk.”

General Clark then explained that hostilities among the Indians had resulted mainly from the lack of definite boundaries for the hunting grounds. Intent upon the chase, braves had often followed game into the lands claimed by other tribes, and trouble had always followed. Shouts and nods met this assertion.

In conclusion the General reminded the Indians that they had assembled under the protection of their Great Father, and cautioned them that blood must not be spilt. “Whoever injures either of you injures us”, he said, “and we shall punish him as we would punish one of our own people.” He ended his speech by saying, “Children, you can take time

to consider these subjects and when you are prepared to give an answer we shall be ready to hear you."

The pipe was then smoked and after passing it around to each individual the ashes were thrown into the council fire. The council then adjourned until ten o'clock the next morning. Rations of beef, bread, corn, salt, sugar, tobacco, and a little liquor were distributed, and the Indians ate until not a scrap of food remained.

At ten o'clock the next morning the council re-assembled, and the chiefs gave voice to their thoughts. Said one Fox chief, "My Fathers, I am glad to see all my relations these red skins assembled together. I was glad to hear what you said yesterday; how could it be otherwise when what you said were my own thoughts."

Monga Zid from Fond du Lac spoke. "When I heard the voice of my Father coming up the Mississippi, calling me to this treaty, it seemed as a murmuring wind; I got up from my mat where I sat musing and hastened to obey it. My pathway has been clear and bright. Truly it is a pleasant sky above our heads this day. There is not a cloud to darken it. I hear nothing but pleasant words."

But Shinguaba W'Ossin, first chief of the Chipewas, sounded a discordant note. "My Fathers have taken a great deal of trouble to collect their red children together and to keep them in peace. But I am afraid it will not be good. The young men are

bad and hard to govern." And The Wind, another Chippewa chief, exclaimed, "I wish to live in peace. But in running marks around our country or in giving it to our enemies it may make new disturbances and breed wars."

Proud Keokuk, the Sauk, declared, "My Fathers, I am glad to see you all here; my great wish is accomplished in meeting you all together." And he added that the idea of establishing a boundary line was agreeable to the thoughts and wishes of his people.

Wabasha, the Sioux, spoke in a similar vein. "My Fathers, I am pleased at the prospect of peace, and was glad to smoke the pipe and throw the remains into the fire. When the peace is made I hope it is a lasting one."

In the name of the commissioners, Governor Cass told the chiefs of the pleasure with which they had heard all that had been said except some of the remarks of the Chippewas. "We tell you again", he said, "the Great Father does not want your land. He wants to establish boundaries and peace among you. We have no disposition to hurry you." But he added, "No more whiskey will be issued until the business of this great council is finished — at the conclusion of the business a great feast will be given to you all."

The council then adjourned until Monday when the chiefs began to describe the boundaries of their land. White Cloud, the Ioway chief, declared: "My

Fathers, I claim no lands in particular. The land I live on is enough to furnish my women and children. I go upon the land of our friends the Sauks and Foxes — we alternately go upon each others land. We have but one council fire and eat out of the same dish.” It was for Keokuk, then, to bound the realm of the Sauks and Foxes. “We claim the Fork of the Calumet [Big Sioux] River. It is unnecessary to say by what title we claim it — you know we got it. This is the line for which my mouth has spoken so much.”

The debate grew animated as it was seen that the boundaries between the tribes crossed and re-crossed. Days passed as the Indians wrangled over conflicting claims. “These are the cause of all your troubles”, said Clark. He insisted that it would be better for each to give up some disputed territory than to be fighting forever about it.

For days the Sioux and the Sauks and Foxes argued as to what point on the Missouri River should be the western end of their boundary. According to the treaty that was finally adopted, the line which was supposed to keep these warring tribes apart in the Iowa country was described as “Commencing at the mouth of the Upper Ioway River, on the west bank of the Mississippi, and ascending the said Ioway river, to its left fork; thence up that fork to its source; thence crossing the fork of Red Cedar River, in a direct line to the second or upper fork of the Desmoines River; and thence in a direct line to

the lower fork of the Calumet river; and down that river to its juncture with the Missouri river."

At last the various disputes were adjusted, and on August 19th, 1825, the celebrated treaty embodying these agreements was signed by all, the wampum belt was passed, and the calumet was smoked as a solemn pledge that the war tomahawk was buried "never to be raised again as long as the trees grow or the waters of the River continue to run."

On the next day copies of the treaty of peace were delivered to each band of Indians, again the pipe of peace was passed, presents were exchanged, and a great feast concluded the ceremony. The small amount of liquor that had been doled out during the council led to much grumbling on the part of the Indians and the expression of opinion that the white chiefs were stingy. To disabuse the red men of this idea several kettles were filled with liquor and, after suitable remarks, the contents of each kettle was spilled out on the ground — a loss ill relished by the Indians. One chief is reported to have said that enough liquor was lost to keep him drunk all the rest of his life.

Group by group the Indians departed, Cass and Clark with their assistants took boat for home, and the soldiers of Fort Crawford returned to the dull routine of garrison duty. The great council at Prairie du Chien was over.

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