

The Lake of the Taensa

How often it happens that incidents in history — though they may be recorded in detail and with great authenticity by men of the time — leave no trace upon the scene of their enactment. New generations live upon the spot in utter ignorance of the early happenings, and often the record itself — hidden away in old documents — is almost lost to the knowledge of man.

There was a small, crescent-shaped lake a few miles from the Mississippi River on whose banks two and a half centuries ago lived the Taensa Indians. Their buildings and their mode of life moved Tonty — the Man with the Iron Hand — to deep astonishment when he first visited them in 1682; and Iberville, coming up from the mouth of the river in the spring of 1700, spent several days at the village and records in his journal a series of events on the shores of the lake that are among the most weirdly dramatic in all the annals of Indian life.

With this in mind it is with great interest that one reads in Mr. Parkhurst's article in the preceding pages on Vicksburg these descriptive lines:

On the following day our course lay away from the Mississippi, and we marched for fifteen miles along Lake St. Joseph, the opposite side of which was green with vernal woods that rose from the edge of the waters. The

lake was a lovely sylvan-flood, and around its fertile shores had been one of the garden spots of Louisiana. Even as we gazed the country to the rear was one vast field of sugar cane and Indian corn, which in the distance resembled the green waves of the sea. Only the day before, expensive homes, sugar mills, and cotton plants of great cost looked out upon the placid lake in proud serenity. Now, where we marched, were smouldering ruins, and for miles ahead we could see smoke and flames wrapping roofs and walls that towered high.

Little did Mr. Parkhurst and the men of the Sixteenth Iowa Infantry realize that they were marching over historic ground. But it so happened that Lake St. Joseph was the identical lake on whose banks the Taensa Indians had lived and the smoke and flames that now wrapped the buildings on the shores were only a modern counterpart of the scenes of a wild night of destruction in the days of King Louis the Fourteenth and his colonial ventures. The story of the Lake of the Taensa is preserved in the ancient journals and reports of Tonty and Father Membré, of La Harpe, and Pénicaut, and Montigny, and Iberville; and it seems well worth retelling.

In the latter part of March, 1682, La Salle was descending the Mississippi on his memorable trip to the sea. The banks of the river were drowned by the spring floods and fogs hung often upon the water. They had paddled far south of the farthest explorations of Marquette and Jolliet, and were now

journeying in a strange country, but at the Arkansas villages they had been given guides to show them the way to the villages of the Taensa. Beside a swamp on the west shore of the river they halted and camped while Tonty and two other Frenchmen with the Arkansas guides, pushing through the swamps to the lake, paddled across to a village on the west shore.

Introduced by the Arkansas guides they were given a most friendly reception, and found the village one of absorbing interest. The buildings were like none that Tonty had seen in all his wanderings. The first one into which they were ushered was the lodge of the chief. It was forty feet square, with thick walls made of sun dried mud rising to a height of ten or twelve feet and surmounted by a dome-like roof of matted cane. Inside they found themselves in a single large room in whose center a torch of dried canes was burning. There were no windows but the light of the torch fell upon gleaming shields of burnished copper and Indian paintings which adorned the walls.

The chief sat upon a couch with his three wives beside him, and opposite him were sixty old men dressed in white robes made from the bark of the mulberry tree. To do him honor the old men, standing with their hands upon their heads, burst out in unison with the cry "Ho-ho-ho-ho". He spoke to them and they seated themselves. A man of great dignity was this chief. He was dressed, like the old

men, in a fine white robe, and a dozen pearls as big as peas hung from his ears. Unusual honors were paid to him. He commanded and was obeyed like a royal potentate. Slaves waited upon him, and he ate and drank from individual dishes made of well glazed earthenware.

As Tonty sat upon his cane mat in the lodge, a little Indian child started to pass between the flaring torch and the chief, whereupon his mother seized him hastily and made him walk around the torch. Such was the respect paid to the living chief, and when a chief died it was the custom of the Taensa to kill a number of his followers in order that they might accompany and serve him in the next world.

Across from the lodge of the chief was the sacred temple, a similar structure but with an enclosing wall of mud surrounding it. Into this mud wall were fixed spikes upon which were placed the heads of their enemies, which they sacrificed to the sun. Over the roof of the temple were three carved eagles facing toward the rising sun. The inside of the temple was somewhat bare, but in the midst of the room was an altar at the foot of which were placed on end three logs of wood, and here was kept a sacred and perpetual fire attended by two old men who guarded it day and night. In this holy temple also were preserved the bones of departed chiefs.

When Tonty told the chief of his own white leader encamped beside the Mississippi, the Taensa chief decided to pay him the courtesy of a visit, and the

next day with high pomp he set out in a pirogue to the camp of La Salle, accompanied by many canoes loaded with provisions of which the French were in great need. He drew near the camp to the sound of the tambour and the music of his women. A fine robe of beautiful white cloth adorned his person and he was preceded by six men who swept with their hands the ground over which he was to pass and spread out a cane mat for him to sit upon. Two men with fans of white feathers accompanied him, either to drive away the evil spirits or to prevent the gnats from biting; and a third bore plaques of highly polished copper. Gifts were exchanged by the two chiefs and then the Taensa, grave and dignified to the last, withdrew in state to his village upon the lake.

La Salle and Tonty and their adventurous company continued their journey to the sea and took possession of all the land on behalf of King Louis of France. In the years that followed Tonty made several visits to his new acquaintances on the lake. In 1686, when he went to the mouth of the river to look for La Salle, he stopped to see them and on the shores of the crescent-shaped lake they sang the calumet to him. Again when he made his valiant expedition to the southwest to try and rescue the ill fated survivors of his murdered leader, he turned west from the Mississippi at their village.

Many years rolled by and missionaries from the north began to push down into the lower Mississippi.

Father Montigny came to make his home at the Taensa village. About the same time Iberville and Bienville came in ships to the Gulf of Mexico and — more fortunate than La Salle — succeeded in finding the mouth of the great river. And Tonty, still holding sway in the fur trading posts of the upper valley, came down the river to meet and greet his countrymen on the shores of the Gulf.

They talked over the situation in the valley and Iberville determined to visit the tribes west of the Mississippi, leaving the river at the Taensa village. So in the spring of the year 1700, setting out with several of Tonty's men for guides, he came on the morning of March 14th to the border of the Lake of the Taensa. Signal shots from the guns brought four Indians in whose canoes they embarked to cross the lake. About noon they reached the village where they found Father Montigny and two other Frenchmen happy to greet them.

The village was much the same as when Tonty had first found it. The old men in white robes, and the cane-roofed lodge of the chief, the imposing temple, the sacred fire and the two men who guarded it, were there as of old. But where was that dignified and mighty ruler, the chief himself? Montigny could tell, and the Frenchmen who had been with him in the village. They did not forget the day that the last chief had died.

Among all the customs of the Taensa tribe perhaps none was so firmly established as that which

provided an escort for the chief when he ended his earthly career. He who had received their constant and devoted attention while he was alive should not be allowed to go alone to find his way to the great beyond. So when the last chief had died they began to make preparations to kill a number of his followers that they might accompany him. But they killed no one this time for Father Montigny had come to live in their village and he protested, with horror in his face, against such a sacrifice. In spite of the customs of the tribe and the insistence of the disappointed medicine man the long robed French priest had his way and for once at least in the history of the Taensa village a chief went alone and unaided to the far country of the dead. And to this day of the coming of Iberville, the old medicine man had nursed his resentment over the desertion of the ancient faith.

On the night of the 16th the rain came down in torrents upon the cane domes of the village lodges and ran down the streets toward the lake. With the night it did not stop but thunder deep and terrible roared overhead and lightning played in the dark heavens. Suddenly came a terrific crash that woke every Indian and white visitor in the village. As if in answer a flame leaped up from the roof of the sacred temple. Out from every lodge came frightened Indians to gather before the doomed building of their faith.

The cane roof burned like tinder and on the outer

wall the skulls of their enemies must have seemed weird and taunting in the glare of the flames. Full of terror and tumult the crowd of savages swarmed about the scene, tearing their hair and raising their arms to heaven as they invoked the spirit to extinguish the flame. They cried aloud above the crackling of the fire, then they gathered handfuls of earth and rubbed on their naked bodies and faces.

Presently they saw the wild figure of an old man gesticulating and heard him calling above the tumult:

“Women, bring your children to offer to the Spirit as a sacrifice to appease his wrath.”

It was the old medicine man who had sulked since the last chief had died. Now, he said, was their punishment come for the Spirit was angered that no man or woman of the Taensa had gone the dark and lonely way with the chief when he had passed out of their village. Now they must appease him, and again he cried out to them to bring him their children.

The flames licked the sacred building like a hideous spirit and the carved eagles from their high perch looking out over the lake tumbled down into the fiery ruin. Indian women in a frenzy came running up with their babies and handed them over to the medicine man. Five of them he took and tossed into the glowing fire before the white men rushing up could stop the terrible sacrifice. But the fire still raged

and utterly consumed the temple and the altar and all the sacred possessions.

The tragic night gave way at last to a wet and dreary day, but in the village of the Taensa excitement still reigned. The five mothers who had sacrificed their children were taken in great honor to the lodge of the one who was to be the new chief. There they were showered with praise and clothed in white robes. A huge feather was stuck in the hair of each one and they were seated on mats beside the medicine man at the entrance of the chief's lodge which was now to serve as a temple. All day long they sat in this post of honor and at night they retired into the lodge to sing weird songs, taking up their posts by the door again when morning came.

Each day, toward sunset, a curious ceremony was carried out. Three young Indian men gathered bundles of dry wood and piled them in the open space between the burned temple and the new chief's lodge. Then an old man who guarded the sacred fire came with a torch and lighted the fagots. As he touched the flame to the wood the medicine man who had been waiting observantly in the door of the chief's lodge walked slowly out followed by the five heroic women. In his left hand he held a pillow of feathers covered with leather and he beat upon it with a stick which he held in his right as if to beat time to the chant which they sang as they advanced.

Three times the old man and the women, singing lustily, circled about the fagots, then they threw

themselves upon the burning wood and with great handfuls of wet moss put out the flames. This done the women went to the lake to bathe, returning finally to take up their chants in the lodge of the new chief.

After a few days Iberville and his men departed. Father Montigny, expecting a missionary from Canada to replace him, moved on to the villages of the Natchez. The missionary from Canada, however, did not come, and in 1706, harassed by the Yazoo and the Chickasaw, the Taensa gave up their village home on the lake and moved south to the region of Mobile Bay. The sacred fire died out, the mud walls and cane roofs vanished, and the canoes of the white men no longer slipped past the lazy alligators in the Lake of the Taensa.

A century and a half went by on slow wings. White settlers had come into the region and found its soil fertile. Sugar plantations and fine homes had appeared beside the shore, and the lake had come to be known as Lake St. Joseph. Then came the Civil War. The savage Indian tribes were gone, but warring white men passed here and there and often left a trail of fire. Such a trail had marked the shores of Lake St. Joseph in May of 1863. Following this path of destruction came the Sixteenth Iowa Infantry marching to the river landing to join the armies that were investing Vicksburg.

For fifteen miles they passed along the edge of

the lake amidst smoldering ruins and flame wrapped roofs. But though the feet of Clinton Parkhurst and his comrades may have trod the very site of the ancient temple of the Taensa Indians, there came to them no visions of the dignified chief dressed in a robe of white mulberry bark, nor did the flames of the modern devastation bring to their minds any picture of that wild night when these same shores of the crescent-shaped lake were the scene of a blazing shrine and the fanatical burning of human sacrifices.

JOHN C. PARISH