

Wahkonsa

Widely as the name Wahkonsa is now used in Webster County, only scattered facts are known about the Indian boy himself. Son of a Sioux chieftain called Umpashota, Wahkonsa must have been a strong and active papoose because his name meant "One Who Will Go a Long Way" or "One Who Will Be Heard From". Perhaps his parents entertained vague hopes that he would become a more important Indian than his father was. Yet when Wahkonsa was born, about 1838, the coming of the settlers foredoomed to obstruction the normal channels for an Indian brave to win distinction.

Idle as it may be, one does wonder what Umpashota would think if he could return these hundred years later to learn that Wahkonsa, in name at least, has, indeed, gone a long way. So far as can be discovered, Wahkonsa is the only local Indian name in use in Webster County, but it has done unlimited service. The name has been given to two hotels, two schools, the township containing the city of Fort Dodge, many literary, social, and fraternal organizations, a fire company, a baseball club during the infancy of the

game, numerous small local businesses, and a packing plant which has made the name literally true by sending Wahkonsa Brand pork products far and wide.

The story of Wahkonsa really begins before Iowa was opened for settlement and long before he was born. Many years earlier, a Sisseton Sioux murdered an aged chief. For this he was outlawed from his own tribe and expelled with his family and associates in the crime. Attracted to the group were other renegades, including a fugitive slave, until there was a sizable band. In time these roving tribesmen lost some of their outlaw character, but they never became a particularly reputable division of the Dakotas. Some of them were more savage than others. Inkpaduta was the worst and Umpashota among the best.

These Indians, usually referred to as the Red Top band, came to consider the upper Des Moines Valley as their territory, although they were true nomads and ranged west into Dakota and north into Minnesota as they followed the game for food and furs. To the south were the hostile Potawatomi; beyond the Neutral Ground were the equally hostile Sauk and Fox. When the Sioux went south or east, they wore their war paint.

The organization of the band was loose, with several headmen or subchiefs, one of whom was

Umpashota, or Smoky Day. His group consisted of only a few families, perhaps five or six lodges. Sidominadota was probably the band's leader, although his brother Inkpaduta shared in the control and assumed full leadership after the murder of Sidominadota in 1854. The various groups usually lived apart and hunted by themselves, but against a common foe or for a foray into enemy territory the whole band united.

The Sioux were not pleased to see the settlers moving steadily up the Des Moines Valley during the forties. To be sure the Sioux territory was still far beyond the land ceded by other tribes, but the Indians knew well that no existing treaty was a permanent dike against this flood of white people who grubbed in the prairie and drove off the game because there was more than they could eat. The Indians went as far as they dared to discourage the settlers: they begged, they made general nuisances of themselves, by the pioneers' standards they stole, and they drove off the surveyors whose strange instruments left invisible fences across the prairies.

When the cessions of 1846 opened the Des Moines Valley to settlement twenty miles above the mouth of the west fork, the Sioux resented this further curtailment of their hunting grounds. One of their favorite camp sites at the mouth of Lizard

Creek was in the southern half of the Neutral Ground. In December, 1846, Sidominadota's band raided the cabin of Henry Lott at the mouth of the Boone River and caused the death of his wife and son. As more pioneers pushed farther up the valley, conflicts with these Indians became more frequent and alarming. The settlers asked for military protection and on August 23, 1850, troops arrived at the mouth of Lizard Creek to establish Fort Clarke. A few months later the name of the post was changed to Fort Dodge.

"When we first arrived at the site selected for building the fort," wrote William Williams, "no Indians were to be seen. We found all around the site of Fort Dodge their deserted encampments and their trodden paths. They had no doubt been watching our movements from the time we reached the Boone river country. The first tattoo in the evening and the reveille next morning . . . no doubt alarmed them very much. The shrill notes of the fife and the rattle of the drums, followed by the discharge of musketry by the guards caused the whole body of Indians, living on the east side of the Des Moines, to fly to the west side". It was nearly a year before any Indians returned to Fort Dodge or, for that matter, were approachable within speaking distance anywhere within the region.

With the troops, in the capacity of sutler, came William Williams, and his son James, a boy of thirteen. Williams had left his wife and younger children in Muscatine with his brother, Judge Joseph Williams. For four long years and seven months this boy was to see none of his family except his father. But there was plenty to keep young Williams occupied: he was his father's housekeeper and assistant in the sutler's store. Three or four times a year the elder Williams went to Muscatine to see his family and perhaps to get supplies, spending two to three weeks on the trip. At such times James was in complete and lonely charge of the store. At all times there were fish in the river and animals in the woods or on the prairie to be hunted for food or caught for pets. The two cows had to be tended and milked or there would be no cream for the quantities of wild strawberries.

In June, 1851, a party of sixty or seventy Indians was persuaded to visit the fort. Fifteen of their principal men were entertained by the soldiers in a manner designed to show that the white men meant to be friendly but also that they were powerful. The names of the guests are not known, but the group probably included Umpashota. If so the sutler's son may have met his future friend, Wahkonsa, for the first time. After this formal

affair, the Indians returned often in small groups to beg provisions or to trade furs. The acquaintance of the two boys may have begun that summer.

But Umpashota had official business to transact. At the bottom of the treaty between the United States government and the Sioux, signed at Mendota, Minnesota, on August 5, 1851, an X indicated the consent of "Ampayshota (Smoky Day)". This must have been a sad occasion because the Indians agreed to give up all their land in Iowa and find new hunting grounds within a year after the ratification of the treaty. During those years of grace Umpashota and his followers apparently occupied their favorite haunts on the upper Des Moines, trying to make the most of the privilege. During the fall of 1851 he was near Fort Dodge because he and Inkpaduta were held as hostages pending the return of certain property taken from settlers on the Boyer River. There is no evidence that the two men were involved, but they were influential enough to have the stolen goods returned.

Some of the soldiers eventually brought their families to the fort, but among them James Williams found no boyhood companions. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the young frontiersman found a friend of his own age

among the Indians. Though Wahkonsa was a little younger, James was small for his age, so the two boys were nearly the same size. After the first shyness subsided James and Wahkonsa must have found many opportunities to hunt and fish and play games together. Umpashota and his family were friendly to the whites. While the father's feelings may have vacillated, there is no record of a single unfriendly act on the part of the son.

Wahkonsa was an attractive lad. Well-built and handsome even by the white man's standards, he was carefully, if not magnificently, dressed. As the son of a chief he conducted himself with dignity. In the opinion of the soldiers, who did not rate savages highly, he was judged to be intelligent. Wahkonsa must have taught the white boy from Pennsylvania a great deal about hunting and fishing. To the soldiers and settlers he was a ready source of useful geographical information, and "would map out the whole country northwest of this in sand, or dirt, with a stick."

It was not uncommon for the children in this schoolless land to be playfellows. "The small white boys of early-day Lehigh played with the young Indians of the Sioux tribes", wrote a pioneer. "We picked up the tribe dialects easily, and the young whites and reds carried on their conver-

sations in a queer mixture of English and the Sioux. Contests of one kind and another were always the pastime when we played with the Indians. We threw stones at marks, ran footraces, and shot their bows and arrows. The Sioux were a good natured but thieving lot."

Though James Williams spent most of his life in Fort Dodge, he left no written record and few oral reminiscences of the early days. The notes and historical writings of his father were reticent about family affairs. It is known, however, that James and Wahkonsa were almost inseparable when the Indians were camping near. Wahkonsa would spend several days or a week at the Williams cabin; James would then repay the visit by spending an equal period in the tepee of Umpashota. Of all his many friendships in later life, Williams often said none was equal to those with his early Sioux neighbors.

When the Indian title to the land west of the river was officially extinguished, it was taken for granted that the settlers no longer needed military protection, so the troops were ordered to abandon the post at Fort Dodge. The last contingent departed on October 3, 1853, leaving the future city with a population of three — William and James Williams, and one soldier, who was supposed to look after the army property.

To complicate matters, the Indians, whose friendship on the whole was questionable, returned in numbers to their old camping spots. According to the terms of the treaty they were not required to vacate until February 24, 1854. "After the troops left the fort," noted the elder Williams, "the Indians again gathered in around us, and encamped & erected their tepees on their former sites, especially along the Des Moines above and along the branches of the Lizard. Their appearance in the neighborhood kept our citizens in a constant state of alarm." Settlers were slow to arrive. "We had a long and lonely time of it," declared the former sutler. "We lived on slap jacks, molasses and boiled rice. James was the cook. He amused himself in feeding and working with his pets. He had at one time three buffalo calves, three elk, three or four raccoon, a badger and several cats, feeding and working with them. Fishing and hunting was our employment and amusement when we were not engaged in watching the Indians."

In January, 1854, Henry Lott murdered Sidominadota and his family. Only two foster children escaped — Joshpaduta, aged about twelve, and his younger sister. They probably found shelter, at least temporarily, in the tepee of Umpashota. In spite of his shocking experience Joshpaduta did

not nurse his hatred for the white people. Perhaps the attitude of Wahkonsa toward his white friends had a salutary influence. About three years later, according to A. B. Carter, then living in Palo Alto County, "One of the Indians came back and stayed with us all summer. He was a young boy, the only one among them who would do any work. He came to help do the chores and took quite a fancy to me. He tried to learn the language and learned very fast. We called him Josh."

The murder of Sidominadota caused a crisis in the relations with the Indians. None too friendly at best, the Sioux became definitely hostile when Lott was not caught and punished. "We were always on our guard and well armed", recalled Williams. "James and myself had a Sharps rifle and two other guns, two horseman's pistols, a Colt revolver and any number of knives, hatchets, &c and a good supply of ammunition." As the summer wore on, the Indian scare subsided; a few more settlers came, so that by July the population at Fort Dodge numbered nineteen.

By winter there were enough children in the community to justify the maintenance of a school. C. C. Carpenter, later to become Governor of Iowa, was the first teacher. He remembered that hunting and trapping parties of Indians frequently

visited the settlement that winter. Carpenter lodged at the tavern which was presently to be named the Wahkonsa House after "a young Sioux Chief who was a great favorite with us, a very intelligent young Indian."

One morning when the teacher came downstairs, he found Wahkonsa, his sister, and other Indians had "camped" the night before in the common room of the hotel. "The Indian belle broke out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Those present tried to ascertain the cause of her mirth. For answer, she pointed to the head of the honorable gentleman, and exclaimed: 'Hedgehog! hedgehog!' The Governor, who was then a young man and a teacher, wore his hair quite short, and it had assumed a position at right angles with his pericranium, hence the hilarity of the Indian princess, and her rather inelegant comparison. Mr. Carpenter enjoyed her amusement as well as anyone present."

By the following spring, 1855, the Indians had withdrawn to the upper Des Moines where William H. Ingham, who was exploring that region, encountered them. He explained that he was making a map of northwest Iowa and Umpashota drew a sketch of the country with a stick on the ground. Wahkonsa was not mentioned but Ingham said that several of the brightest Indians

"became very much interested in the map making", which might imply his presence, for the youth was known for his ability and willingness to make such maps for the settlers. The lakes and streams were found to be accurately located by the Indians. When Ingham continued on his way, Umpashota overtook him and for three days they traveled together, neither fully trusting the other.

During the following year, Umpashota and his little band were frequently in the vicinity of Algona. Ingham and the chief became good friends. He probably knew Wahkonsa also, a handsome youth sixteen or seventeen years old who usually wore beaded deerskin and took pride in his good appearance. Ingham saw Umpashota for the last time in April, 1856, as the chief rode off over the prairie, eating the lunch he had begged for his squaw.

During the winter of 1856-57 Inkpaduta and his band, including Umpashota, were on the Little Sioux River. Times were hard for the Indians and Inkpaduta still harbored a grudge against the settlers who had protected the murderer of Sidominadota. The climax of bad feeling came in the spring at Spirit Lake. While there is reason to believe that Umpashota did not have any bloody part in the massacre, he knew it was planned and, with Joshpaduta, served as a messenger between

bands. Wahkonsa, apparently, had no part in it. On March 19, 1857, ten days after the massacre at the lakes, Umpashota was encamped near Springfield, Minnesota, where he learned from visiting Indians of the tragedy at Spirit Lake. This news he reported to the whites and warned them that the hostile band might come that way. "At any rate," he said, "I am going to remain close to my camp for a while."

It must have been at this time or soon afterward that Wahkonsa went to Fort Ridgely and gave himself up in order to establish his innocence in connection with the uprising. On April 13th a party from Algona, seeking evidence of further raids, found five tepees near Fairmont, Minnesota. There was no trace of plunder in these, but the Indians present were told to move on for their own protection. The fifth tepee, they said, was Umpashota's, who was away looking at his traps. The rest of the Indians struck their lodges and decamped, but Umpashota's tepee was still there the next morning. He may have been alarmed by the searching party and left the region without returning to get his property.

Many of the Indians involved in the massacre sought oblivion beyond the Big Sioux River, but not all moved to Dakota or stayed away. In February, 1859, the settlers in Dickinson County

heard of a party of Indians encamped at the head of Spirit Lake. Henry Martin, captain of an informal company of frontier guards, who was sent to investigate, found Umpashota, his family, and a few followers. Martin arrested the Indians on the pretext that they were out of their territory, which was a common occurrence. Not knowing what else to do, Martin then ordered Lieutenant Church to escort the prisoners to Fort Dodge. Church, grasping the situation, took them as far as Gillett's Grove and turned them loose, after obtaining their promises to stay away from the lakes in the future.

That is the last definitely dated reference to Wahkonsa and his family, but the descriptions of Umpashota and his son in the notes of William Williams are in the present tense and were evidently written sometime later. "Wahkonsa his son, aged now about 23 or 24 years, is about 6 feet high, exceedingly well made, light copper color, a well formed face, aquiline nose, prominent chin, very fond of dress, generally dresses in tanned deer skin with a great many extra trappings about his leggings, very particular in dressing his hair, paints uniformly in one way, that is a star in his forehead, one on each cheek and one on his chin, a very cheerful pleasant looking fellow."

There is no account of the parting of Wah-

honsa and James Williams. It may have occurred before the massacre when they were boys playing together at Fort Dodge. The evidence of that friendship is preserved in the parting gifts of the Indian youth to his white friend. These were treasured throughout the lifetime of James Williams and are now kept in the Webster County Museum in Fort Dodge: three skillfully made beaded buckskin bags, containing traces of red, yellow, and green paint; one beaded headband; an elaborate "money" bag; and a bow with five arrows — all personal treasures of the Indian brave.

What finally became of Wahkonsa and his family is not known. Westward into the Dakotas the Indians went. After the Spirit Lake Massacre it was not safe to be known as a member of Inkpaduta's band. Following the general uprising in Minnesota in 1862 it was still more difficult for any Sioux in that region to establish innocence, so the bands broke up and were assimilated by other western groups until they completely lost their original identity. Thus it was that Wahkonsa, One Who Will Go a Long Way, passed out of Iowa history toward the setting sun.

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