



CHIEF WAUBONSIE



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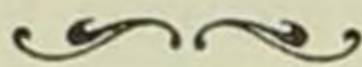
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## Chief Waubonsie

In August of 1812 warring bands of Winnebago and Potawatomi struck at Fort Dearborn. Few of the white men and women who were evacuating the Fort, on orders from Governor William Hull of Michigan Territory, escaped the massacre. Those who were saved owed their lives to a few Indians who befriended them. During the attack, several chiefs stationed themselves on the porch of the John Kinzie house, to protect the family of this popular trader. Among them was Waubonsie — a chief of the Potawatomi.

Incidents surrounding Waubonsie's youth are not clearly recorded, and the activities of his boyhood days still remain something of a conjecture. It is recorded that he was born about 1765 on the northern branch of the Kankakee River, in what is now St. Joseph County, Indiana, near the present site of Terre Coupee. Little is known of his ancestral tree. Even the name which was given him by his parents is not known. He inherited a



bold and aggressive spirit, and this name, whatever it may have been, seems to have been repudiated by the chief himself.

The story is told that as a youth Waubonsie had a very dear friend who was killed by the Osage Indians. The young Potawatomi brave resolved to seek revenge. Going alone into the camp of the Osage at night, very stealthily he killed seven members of the Osage tribe, mounted his pony and returned safely to his own people. Upon his arrival at camp he adopted the name Waubonsie, meaning "Break of Day" or, as he expressed it, "Day a Little" — signifying deeds of valor performed "just as the day began to break."

During his younger years, it is reported that Waubonsie was addicted to the excessive use of intoxicating liquor or "fire water," sometimes furnished to the Indians by unscrupulous and designing white traders. Moreover, Waubonsie had an uncontrollable temper. If he was brave and cunning, he was sometimes equally impetuous, uncompromising, unrelenting, and cruel. As was the custom among the Potawatomi, Waubonsie had two wives. One day one of the wives went to Waubonsie and complained that the other wife was whipping his children unreasonably. He directed that the offending wife and mother be brought before him. When she came she was told



to bow on her knees and the other wife was given a tomahawk and told to scalp her, which was promptly done. He then directed that the bones of the deceased be thrown out "for the crows to devour." Such was the attitude of Waubonsie during his younger years.

Thomas L. McKenney in his work, *Indian Tribes of North America*, describes Waubonsie during his younger years as "a very distinguished man," the "principal war-chief of the Pottawatamies of the Prairie." His tribe took pride "in recounting his numerous feats in war, and the agents of our government who have met him in council speak in high terms of his capacity for business. Though cool and sagacious, he was a bold orator, who maintained the interest of his people with untiring zeal and firmness."

A portrait of Waubonsie is in the Indian Gallery of the War Department in Washington. The picture presents the Chief in the uniform of an American army officer, with a blue coat and gilt epaulets, but with no insignia of rank. A yellow scarf is around his neck, and hanging suspended on his breast is a medallion medal with a raised profile — probably that of a president. His head-dress is trimmed with black and white feathers and bows of red ribbon. A streak of crimson paint crosses his face diagonally.



The date of this painting is not known; neither is it known whether the portrait was done from life or drawn from the artist's imagination. It may have been done about the time of the treaties closing the War of 1812 in which the Potawatomi Indians had been allies of Great Britain. At the close of that war they renounced this alliance and participated in two treaties with the United States: one at Greenville, Ohio, in July, 1814; and a second at Spring Wells, near Detroit, on September 8, 1815. Waubonsie, in his own language, "took the seventeen fires" — meaning the seventeen states — "by the hand and buried the tomahawk." From that time on, he was "an undeviating friend of the American government and people."

During the Blawck Hawk War, Waubonsie was allied with the American forces. He believed that the best interests of the Potawatomi would be attained by treaty, and by moving westward in accordance with the wishes of the white settlers. By the treaty of 1833 about 3,000 Potawatomi were transferred to a reservation in southwestern Iowa. They were separated into small bands and formed villages along the Iowa streams flowing into the Missouri. Chief Billy Caldwell (Sagau-nash), a half-breed leader of one band, was located near the present site of Council Bluffs where he died in 1841. Other leaders among the Pota-



watomi in the Iowa country included Johnny Green, who settled with his band in what is now Union County, and Bigfoot, who lived in present-day Cass County.

Waubonsie chose a location about ten miles south of the present site of Glenwood in Mills County. There he lived in a double log house built for him by the government, overlooking the confluence of Shabonee and Wahaboncey Creeks. The latter stream was named in honor of the Chief himself.

About 300 Indians lived in Waubonsie's village which embraced about 640 acres of land. Dwellings in the village consisted of "wigwams made of buckskin or other hides and of little houses made of bark that they took from neighboring trees." Most of the area was timber land, but there was perhaps a hundred acres of prairie land, a part of which was tilled in crude Indian fashion. Across the creek south from Waubonsie's home, "the Government built a log blockhouse, where a few soldiers were sometimes quartered."

But there was little need for soldiers as a protection against the hostilities of the Potawatomi under the leadership of Old Waubonsie. If he was impetuous and cruel in his younger years, he was friendly and sagacious in his later years. He had come, long since, to believe that treaties were



more advantageous to the Indians than wars.

Moses W. Gaylord, an Iowa pioneer who knew Waubonsie personally in his later years, relates that the portrait in the Indian Gallery does not resemble the old war chief as he looked when he lived in Iowa. "It lacks the square chin and bold features that he then had." Gaylord describes him as being "about 5 feet 10 inches in height, very straight and square built, weighing about 180 pounds and having an unmistakable air of fearlessness in his manner." He further describes Waubonsie as "a big, strong, burly man" who spoke very little English, and whose hair was as white as snow. "I remember Wabaunsie," he said, "as wearing a crown of very beautiful and extra fine feathers of beautiful colors; he also wore leggings of elk hide, and also wore a brilliantly colored blanket." Another characteristic noted by the pioneers was that Waubonsie "smoked a pipe incessantly." When Indians could not get tobacco they smoked bark from red willow trees. This smoking preparation was called "kinne-ke-nick" by the Potawatomi.

In June of 1843, when he was about 78 years old, Waubonsie and several braves attended a great council of Indians held in Kansas. Some 3,000 or 4,000 Indians, representing twenty-two tribes, attended the meeting. In "complete Indian



costume, with the skin of a cow split in the middle through which his head was thrust," Waubonsie was a conspicuous figure at the council. It is reported that the Potawatomi treated him with great respect. Moreover, he "listened with seeming solemnity and occasional approval to the first missionary sermon he had ever heard."

Twice during his lifetime Waubonsie visited "The Great White Father" in Washington — once in 1835, when preparations were being made to move to Iowa, and again in 1845, when plans were being discussed for a removal to Kansas. The following year the Potawatomi and other related tribes agreed, by treaty, to relinquish the lands granted them in 1833. In return, the treaty gave them "possession and title to a tract or parcel of land containing five hundred and seventy-six thousand acres . . . being the eastern part of the lands ceded to the United States by the Kansas tribe of Indians . . . on both sides of the Kansas River." This land was to be "their land and home forever."

One authority states that in returning from Washington, in 1845, a stage in which the chiefs were riding overturned and Waubonsie was killed. This report, however, has been disproved and it now seems clear that Old Chief Waubonsie returned to Iowa to spend his last days.



Reluctant to leave Iowa when members of his tribe moved on to Kansas, it appears that the old chieftain contracted certain debts "after the manner of many white men," which he evinced no disposition to pay. Among the oldest records in Fremont and Mills Counties is evidence that Waubonsie became entangled in the meshes of the law, when in November, 1846, he was sued for the non-payment of a debt of twenty-two dollars.

It is doubtful if Waubonsie ever went to Kansas to live. If he did, like many another Indian, he returned to his favored Iowa, where he died, perhaps in the year 1848, when he was about 83 years old.

An affidavit of A. L. Wolfe, a pioneer of Mills County, states that: "At the time of his death the Indians wrapped the Chief's body in a blanket with peeled bark outside and placed it with his personal effects consisting of a flintlock musket, a tomahawk, beads and other ornaments in a box of thick boards split or hewn from logs. This was placed in the fork of a large oak tree about twelve or fifteen feet above the ground, the box being secured to the limbs of the tree by a chain that passed round them."

For many years an old bur oak tree stood beside the road near the chief's cabin, and passers-by would frequently refer to it as the last resting



place of Old Chief Waubonsie. What eventually became of his bones remains unknown. His name is perpetuated in a variety of spellings in Wahabonney Creek in Mills County, Wahabonney Lake in Mills and Fremont Counties, and Wabaunsee County in Kansas. Waubonsie State Park in Fremont County, Waubonsie Trail extending eastward and westward across the State, and Waubonsie bridge crossing the Missouri River at Nebraska City — all are named in honor of the Old Potawatomi Chieftain, Waubonsie.

J. A. SWISHER