

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLIII

ISSUED IN FEBRUARY 1962

No. 2

Copyright 1962 by the State Historical Society of Iowa



The Man and His Times

An unhappy rout which white men called the Black Hawk War brought a fractious old Indian leader into national prominence in 1832. But the campaign he led in the spring and summer of that year was not Black Hawk's only rebellion against the westward surge of American settlement. A whole generation of white men knew him as a hardheaded, consistent, and effective spokesman for the distraught Indians of the central Mississippi Valley.

He was never a chief, not even a chief of that fragment of the Sauk and Fox tribes which followed him. He was a Sauk warrior, with two of the most effective qualities of a warrior — courage, and a clear goal. And like many another warrior, he could be foolish in his courage and blind in his pursuit of the goal.

Black Hawk was born in 1767, by his own account, at the Indian village of Saukenuk — located in Illinois on the Rock River, just above its confluence with the Mississippi. The date of his

birth and all that we know of his early life comes from his autobiography. It is a curious document, first published in 1833 by John B. Patterson, a young Illinois newspaperman. Patterson said that Black Hawk dictated his life story to interpreter Antoine LeClaire, and that LeClaire translated it into English for publication. It is a flowery piece of prose, filled with the stilted phrases of the day, and Patterson must have done a good deal of ghost-writing on it. But its authenticity has not been successfully challenged, and its level of accuracy is high.

Black Hawk's years as a young brave, as he recalled them, were mainly filled with violence. The white man did not bring war to the Mississippi Valley; the Indian tribes had long practiced war upon one another. Black Hawk's father fell before the Cherokees. Black Hawk himself fought the Osages at every opportunity. It was the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, and some developments immediately after, that brought the loosely confederated Sauks and Foxes into conflict with the white man and started the train of events which lead to the Black Hawk War.

An occurrence in the fall of 1804 was to color Black Hawk's thinking for a quarter-century and turn him into the bitterest of men. Governor William Henry Harrison of Indiana Territory, who had been assigned the task of forming a new territorial government in the Louisiana Purchase area,

received standing orders from President Jefferson to purchase land from the Sauk and Fox tribes. When a delegation from these tribes went to St. Louis to parley about some murders which had been committed by their kinsmen on the frontier, Harrison was there on official business. He quickly turned to the matter of a land cession, and when the delegation (consisting of five chiefs with no authority to sell tribal lands) returned to their homes they had signed a treaty which ceded fifteen million acres of their homeland to the Americans.

The fairness of the treaty, and the conditions under which it was drawn, are of no concern here. Of greater moment is the fact that Black Hawk and other members of the Sauk and Fox tribes claimed to be startled and appalled by the terms of the agreement. Major James Bruff, commandant of the new District of Louisiana, said that the delegation wanted the treaty and eagerly signed away the land in return for protection from the Osages. But a Sauk and Fox group which went to St. Louis the following summer complained vehemently. "We were desirous to oblige the United States," they said, "but we had never before sold land, and we did not know the value of it . . . we have given away a great Country to Governor Harrison for a little thing, we do not say we were cheated, but we made a bad bargain . . ."

The land lay mostly in what is now Illinois,

with smaller portions in Wisconsin and Missouri. That the Sauks and Foxes did not "sell" it in the absolute sense is obvious; they merely surrendered their particular claim to it, and the government would have to "buy" much of it again from other tribes which claimed an interest.

When the treaty was signed, Black Hawk had not yet become a man of power in his tribe. His name appears in none of the documents of the period as a representative at parleys with the Americans. He was not chosen by his people as a delegate to Washington in 1805 when a group of Indians from the various tribes went to visit President Jefferson.

By 1812, when the war with England began, Black Hawk was becoming known as the leader of a dissident band, the "British band" of Sauks and Foxes. Joining with the Winnebagoes, he participated in the attack on Fort Madison in September, 1812, during which the large government trading house or factory was destroyed and the fort itself nearly lost. In the course of the attack, Indians firing from the protection of the river bank shot away the halliard of the flag staff, bringing down the garrison flag. Black Hawk later claimed that his own gunfire had cut the rope. "I took my rifle, and shot in two the cord by which they hoisted their flag," he said in his autobiography.

The allegiance of the Indians was by now confused and uncertain. Not only were the tribes at

odds with one another over the Anglo-American war, but there were factions within tribes. Most of the Sauks and Foxes were mildly inclined to cast their lot with the Americans. So were the Ioways and some of the Sioux bands. But the Winnebagoes were angry and the Potawatomis, wavering between neutrality and enmity toward the Americans, had scalps from the Fort Dearborn massacre hanging from their lodgepoles. To the west, the Osages were now pro-American to such an extent that United States officials talked of establishing them as a buffer between St. Louis and the hostile country to the north.

Through it all, the old intertribal antagonisms remained: the Osages hated the Sauks and Foxes; so did the Ioways, now and then; so did some of the Sioux bands. These differences were sporadic, and, with the distractions provided by the white man's war, became temporarily less important.

The most consistently pro-British force among the Indians of the region was Black Hawk's band. Black Hawk was ever ready to lead a war party, and to accept the wampum collars, gunpowder, and bolts of bright cloth sent down to him by British agents in Canada. Agent Robert Dickson managed to entice him to Green Bay, confer a spurious generalship upon him, and dispatch him and his followers down the western shore of Lake Michigan to fight as British allies. They marched past the site of the Fort Dearborn attack. They

seem to have fought at the battle of Frenchtown on the Raisin River at the western end of Lake Erie, and at Fort Meigs on the Maumee River where, on May 1, 1813, General Harrison was besieged by General Henry Proctor and about 5,000 British troops and Indians.

Then the game began to pall.

I was now tired of being with them — our success being bad, and having got no plunder. I determined on leaving them and returning to Rock river, to see what had become of my wife and children, as I had not heard from them since I started. That night, I took about twenty of my braves, and left the British camp for home.

The harrassment of Fort Madison continued, and in July a party of Winnebagoes and Sauks from the British band (at least a hundred, said the *St. Louis Missouri Gazette*) opened fire on a party of soldiers chopping logs. A week later came another attack. Finally the fort was placed under such constant siege that the men could not go outside the stockade for wood, food, and water. They abandoned the post, apparently in September, burning the fort as they left. Said Black Hawk: "We were pleased to see that the white people had retired from our country."

In a brief river battle the following year, Black Hawk's men defeated a flotilla of eight boats containing a detachment of soldiers commanded by Zachary Taylor. They also routed the boats of Lt. John Campbell, taking a detachment of

troops up to Prairie du Chien. During such occurrences the main body of Sauks and Foxes were peaceful, and United States officials finally persuaded many of them to resettle temporarily closer to St. Louis where they could be more closely supervised. The recalcitrant British band fought on, always a threat but not a major factor in the outcome of the War of 1812.

At the end of the war the Sauks and Foxes were invited to Portage des Sioux, near St. Louis, to sign a treaty of peace. The majority of the two tribes, under the leadership of Keokuk, agreed to the terms of the treaty — including a reaffirmation of the troublesome treaty of 1804 — and signed the new covenant in September, 1815. Black Hawk's band was still hostile, according to the treaty commissioners, and refused to attend the council. Black Hawk's explanation was somewhat different; he said that he and other principal men of his band started for Portage des Sioux, but were discouraged by the death of their chief and abandoned the trip.

Black Hawk and his followers did sign a similar treaty the following year, in which they unconditionally assented to the old 1804 treaty.

Here, for the first time, I touched the goose quill to the treaty — not knowing, however, that, by that act, I consented to give away my village. Had that been explained to me, I should have opposed it, and never would have signed their treaty, as my recent conduct will clearly prove.

Black Hawk may have been sincere in claiming ignorance of what he had signed, despite the effort of government interpreters to make the terms of the treaty clear. Besides the language barrier there were other obstacles to understanding. To the Indians a treaty was a piece of paper which brought approval and cooperation from the white man, a pile of presents and trade goods, and a measure of protection from their Indian enemies. To the Americans an Indian treaty was primarily a purchase of land. In this basic difference lay the cause of much bitterness.

Agent Thomas Forsyth, who worked among the Sauks and Foxes for many years, reported that Black Hawk personally refused to accept any part of the treaty annuity after 1818, when he first learned that it was in payment for land. Earlier, Black Hawk seems to have believed that the annuity (in the form of goods) was a gift from the Americans such as he was accustomed to receiving from the British. And later, when pressure was on him to vacate his lands, he recalled saying that "*we had never sold our country. We never received any annuities from our American father! And we are determined to hold on to our village!*"

When peace had officially come to the Mississippi Valley after the War of 1812, the white population increased rapidly. Under the terms of the treaty with the Sauks and Foxes, the Indians

were not required to vacate their property until it had been sold by the government to private buyers. But what had once been isolated areas of white occupation now grew into substantial pioneer settlements. Illinois became a state in 1818.

The traditional homeland of the Sauks and Foxes was being nibbled away. From 1816 to 1829, however, the tribes successfully resisted dispossession. They fought with their Indian neighbors, kept on planting their fields, and engaged in little skirmishes with the white men. According to Black Hawk:

The whites were now settling the country fast. I was out one day hunting in a bottom, and met three white men. They accused me of killing their hogs; I denied it; but they would not listen to me. One of them took my gun out of my hand and fired it off — then took out the flint, gave back my gun, and commenced beating me with sticks, and ordered me off. I was so much bruised that I could not sleep for several nights.

Some time after this occurrence, one of my camp cut a bee-tree, and carried the honey to his lodge. A party of white men soon followed, and told him that the bee-tree was theirs, and that he had no right to cut it. He pointed to the honey, and told them to take it; they were not satisfied with this, but took all the packs of skins that he collected during the winter, to pay his trader and clothe his family with in the spring, and carried them off!

How could we like such people, who treated us so unjustly?

George Davenport, who later would become the founder of Davenport, Iowa, purchased a tract

of land in 1829 which included the site of Saukenuk, the great Sauk village. According to the treaty terms, this meant that the Indians were legally required to vacate. Keokuk took his band across the river in the spring of 1829, resigned to the inevitable. Black Hawk refused to follow. He was no friend of Keokuk's, and he resented the apparent ease with which the Americans had persuaded Keokuk to yield. He was particularly bothered by the fact that Keokuk was not content merely to lead his own followers across the river, but also tried to induce Black Hawk's people to come, too.

Keokuk, who has a smooth tongue, and is a great speaker, was busy in persuading my band that I was wrong — and thereby making many of them dissatisfied with me. I had one consolation — for all the women were on my side, on account of their corn-fields.

After Keokuk's capitulation the Black Hawk group was doomed. Threats from settlers, as well as actual violence, were combined with official representations from Indian Agents and military officers. Black Hawk paid visits to his Agent at Fort Armstrong — the military post built in 1816 on Rock Island — as if seeking someone who would tell him what he wanted to hear. "The agent ordered me to quit my village. He said that if we did not, troops would be sent to drive us off."

Turning to an old Indian friend, Black Hawk

received the kind of advice he wanted. Thirty-five miles up the Rock River was the village of Wabokieshiek, or White Cloud, whom the Indians called the Prophet. He was half Winnebago and half Sauk, a tall, stolid man with a black mustache, and the Indians believed him to be a person of great wisdom and insight. The Prophet urged Black Hawk to remain in his village, and to see if he could persuade Keokuk to return.

Finally it took the threat of direct military action to dislodge the obstinate Black Hawk. Maj. Gen. Edmund P. Gaines brought a detachment of regular army troops up from Jefferson Barracks at St. Louis and, in a heated parley, demanded that the Indians cross the Mississippi. Although General Gaines at first felt sure that he could handle the matter without help, he soon had an army of Illinois volunteers on call — assembled in June, 1831, by order of Governor John Reynolds of Illinois. When Black Hawk seemed steadfast, General Gaines accepted the services of these militiamen.

To the despondent followers of the old Sauk, there was now no alternative. During the night the Indians moved across the river, leaving the many lodges of Saukenuk — which were promptly burned by the Illinois volunteers. In reporting to the Secretary of War, General Gaines explained the plight of the Indians:

The appearance of the mounted Volunteers on the one

side, & the regular troops with two pieces of Artillery on the other, aided by a Steam Boat armed with a piece of Artillery, & some Musquetry & Riflemen on the River induced the Indians to abandon the Village . . . without firing a Gun.

The unhappy Indians found it hard to settle down into a new routine on the west bank of the river. They were short of food, and when a small party of men went back in the night to "steal" corn from their fields at Saukenuk, they were driven away by gunfire from the white settlers. Black Hawk had learned from his Indian Agent that, under the terms of the treaty, he could obtain help for his people in the form of agricultural instruction "I therefore called upon him, and requested him to have me a small log house built, and a field ploughed that fall, as I wished to live retired." Had his kinsmen let Black Hawk alone at this time, he might never have brought war upon them. But at this critical moment a false hope was held out to him.

One of the principal chiefs in Black Hawk's band was a man named Neapope. When he had heard that General Gaines was on his way to force the Indians across the river, he had gone up to Canada to consult his former allies, the British. What they told him in Canada is not known. What he *said* they told him is recorded by Black Hawk:

He said he had seen the chief of our British father, and

asked him if the Americans could *force* us to leave our village? He said — 'If we had not sold our village and land, the American government could not take them from us . . . and that, as *we* had never given our consent to the sale of our country, it remained our exclusive property — from which the American government could never force us away! and that, in the event of *war*, we should have nothing to *fear!* as they would stand by and *assist* us!'

The longer Neapope talked, the greater his promises grew. He said he had stopped by the Prophet's village on the way home from Canada, and that the Prophet had heard great news. Not only were the British going to send guns, ammunition, food and clothing, but various Indian tribes had given assurance that they would support Black Hawk in his move back across the river.

Black Hawk's faith in the words of the Prophet was strong. He began to recruit braves "to make an attempt to secure my village" over the vigorous protests of Keokuk. Going down to the site of the burned-out Fort Madison, he began to assemble his band for the move to which he was now so firmly committed. He tried to induce some of Keokuk's men to join him, but Keokuk convinced them that his crusade was an act of folly. And so, lacking the support of the main body of Sauks and Foxes, but deluded into believing that he would receive support from the British, he began the march that was to bring hunger, suffering, and death to his band and utter humiliation to himself.

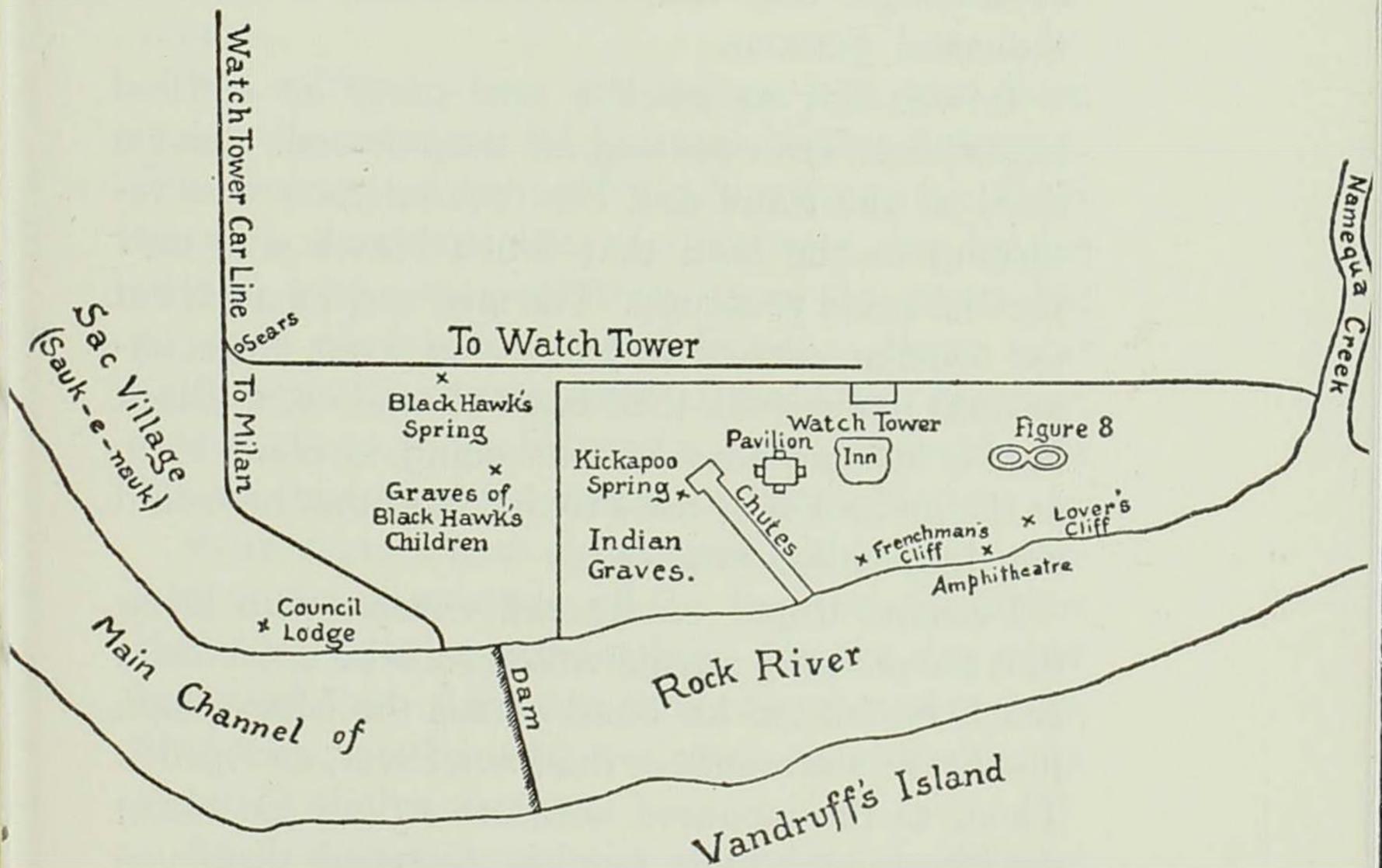
One of the most tragic elements in Black Hawk's career was his personal conflict with Keokuk. It is not likely that the ultimate fate of the Sauks and Foxes would have been much different, had these two strong-willed men been in accord; their days in the Mississippi Valley were numbered. But Keokuk's willingness to face the inevitable was a course which might have saved many an Indian woman and child from slaughter, had Black Hawk followed it. Yet Black Hawk becomes the more appealing figure with the passing of time: he is the heroic old fighter, while Keokuk is the smooth orator, the diplomat, the conciliator.

The rancor which Black Hawk felt toward Keokuk remained with him for the few remaining years of his life. He carried it up the Rock River, as he led his band to destruction. He carried it to prison, after his defeat, first to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, then to Fortress Monroe in Virginia, where he and the other leaders of his rebellion were taken for a brief time after their capture. During his last days, on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, he nursed his old grievance as he became more and more an object of pity.

Painter George Catlin saw the "poor dethroned monarch" at a gathering in 1836, and said: With an old frock coat and a brown hat on, and a cane in his hand, he stood the whole time outside of the group, and in dumb and dismal silence . . ."

Two years later Black Hawk was dead. A few months before his death in October, 1838, when he was honored at an Independence Day celebration at Fort Madison, he was still unfor- giving. "I was once a great warrior," he said. "I am now poor. Keokuk has been the cause of my present situation."

DONALD JACKSON



From James D. Rishell's *Black Hawk's Autobiography*
 INDIAN VILLAGE OF SAUKENUK FOR WHICH BLACK HAWK FOUGHT