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Wapello

Among the prominent chiefs of the Sacs and Foxes was one who, though overshadowed by the mighty Keokuk and the still more puissant Black Hawk, nevertheless left the imprint of his character on the course of events just as distinctly as the track of his moccasin once showed in the black soil of Iowa. His memory is perpetuated by the county of Wapello and by the town which also bears his name. He was the head chief of the Foxes.

In the long sweep of history only a short time has passed since the war whoop echoed in the Iowa country and savage war parties moved restlessly back and forth over the green stretch of the prairies. Even so, the presence of the Indians has been almost forgotten, the physical evidence of their habitation has been largely effaced, and the record of their life is vague and fragmentary. The sketchy story of this departed race may be traced through the epic

struggle against the invading white men, with tragedies like the Spirit Lake Massacre as incidents; or their character and manners may be depicted in terms of primitive culture, religion, or diplomacy. Erstwhile proud and mighty chieftains are at best but shadowy figures in the pageant, appearing only occasionally for a fleeting glimpse. Most of them flash into view as the makers of war, though some there were who came not with scalping knives in their belts and ill-will in their hearts, but, like Wapello, with an outstretched hand and friendly greeting. Their trail is dim, however, and often disappears completely. Beyond lies the realm of conjecture.

Wapello was born at Prairie du Chien in 1787. His name, usually construed to mean "prince" or "chief", may be symbolic of his tribal importance, though the records are not consistent or conclusive. "He who is painted white" is the interpretation of his signature on one treaty.

For many years Wapello lived east of the Mississippi near the foot of Rock Island, not far from Black Hawk's band. At the time of the erection of Fort Armstrong on Rock Island in 1816, his was one of the three most important villages in that section of the country. There he remained until 1829 when the pressure of white migration pushed him across the river to a new location at Muscatine Slough. But the treaty of 1832 drove him out of the Black Hawk Purchase to a new home on the Iowa River in

Keokuk's Reserve near the site of the present town of Wapello. Four years later the Sacs and Foxes ceded Keokuk's Reserve to the United States. Again Wapello moved westward and established his village on the Des Moines River not far from where Ottumwa is now located.

When Wapello was a lad of seventeen summers a treaty was made between the white men and his forefathers. By that treaty, concluded at St. Louis in 1804, the Sacs and Foxes ceded their land between the Illinois and Wisconsin rivers, retaining permission to occupy and hunt in that region until the land was sold to settlers. Perhaps that was an evil day for the Indians, but in later years Wapello stood with Keokuk and Pashepaho against Black Hawk who insisted on the right to live east of the Mississippi, treaty or no treaty. Wapello thought treaty obligations ought to be respected however unfavorable they might be. This attitude was indicative of his lifelong policy toward the white men.

Though he was first among the Foxes, Wapello was ever second to the shrewd and conspicuous Keokuk in the councils of the confederated tribes of Sacs and Foxes. A man of peaceful inclinations and conciliatory temperament, he seemed content with his position. Not prepossessing in physical appearance, for he was short and stout, his intelligence and ability were recognized by all who knew him. His quiet dignity and friendly disposition never failed to make a favorable impression.

Wapello was present at Fort Armstrong in 1833 when Black Hawk was released from captivity. As usual, he played second fiddle to the princely Keokuk, who on that occasion was officially recognized by the United States government as the principal chief of the Sacs and Foxes. Black Hawk, as a punishment for his unsuccessful rebellion, was compelled to make a formal surrender of his authority in the Sac nation to his rival, Keokuk.

There was much oratory at that council, Keokuk being especially eloquent. After several chiefs had spoken, Wapello arose and delivered a few remarks that in a subtle fashion delineate his character as few other incidents might. "I am not in the habit of talking", he said. "I think. I have been thinking all day. Keokuk has spoken. I am glad to see my brothers; I will shake hands with them. I am done."

Not a talker, but perhaps a little scornful of those who were mighty with words. Not assertive or self-seeking, but still maintaining his self-respect. Content to say little, but prone to fill his few words with meaning and sincerity. The real problem of the meeting, not the talk, was what interested him. Restoration of broken friendships was the urgent need, and he for one proposed to do what he could.

Several treaties between the United States and the Sacs and Foxes bear the mark of Wapello: the first concluded at Fort Armstrong on September 3, 1822, the next at the Great Council of 1825 at Prairie

du Chien, another made at Prairie du Chien on July 15, 1830, the Black Hawk Purchase treaty negotiated at Fort Armstrong on September 21, 1832, the one surrendering Keokuk's Reserve signed at Dubuque on September 28, 1836, and the last concluded at Washington, D. C., on October 21, 1837.

The negotiation of the Washington treaty, whereby the Indians surrendered a million and a quarter acres lying west of the Black Hawk Purchase, was a gala occasion. Joseph M. Street, Indian Agent, and idol of Chief Wapello, conducted a delegation of Sac and Fox chiefs to the national capital. The Indians were deeply impressed with the power and wealth of their Great Father, while the people of the cities that they visited were much pleased by their behavior.

At the council meeting Keokuk spoke first, as usual. Afterward Wapello arose. "My Father," he said, "you have heard our chief speak. In him consists the strength of our nation. He is our arms, our heart, our soul. When these men [the Sioux] made their charges against us, they must have thought you did not know them as well as I do. What our chief has said, I know to be true. I have always been with him, and I have ever been called a chief by those who knew me. This is all I have to say."

From Washington the party moved on to Boston where they were received at the State House by Governor Edward Everett, members of the legisla-

ture, and other dignitaries. Wapello made a reply to Governor Everett's speech which was received with great applause. It was characteristic of the friendly disposition of the man. "I am very happy", he said, "to meet my friends in the land of our forefathers. I recollect, when a little boy, of hearing my grandfather say that at this place the red man first took the white man by the hand. I am very happy that this land can sustain so many white men as have come to it; I am glad that they can find a living, and happy that they can be contented with living on it. I am always glad to give the white man my hand, and call him brother. It is true that he is the older of the two, but perhaps you have heard that my tribe is respected by all others, and is the oldest of the red men. I have shaken hands with many different tribes of people, and am very much gratified that I have lived to come and talk with the white man in this house, where my fathers talked, which I have heard of so many years ago. I shall go home, and tell my brothers that I have been to this great place, and it shall never be forgotten by me or my children."

Wapello and his band preferred to hunt in the timber that bordered the Skunk River and its tributaries. Game abounded there and wild honey was also plentiful in those parts. Even after their removal to the Des Moines River, parties of Sacs and Foxes frequently returned to their old hunting grounds. On one of these visits, Wapello, then

about fifty-five years old, was taken suddenly ill while encamped with his hunting party on Rock Creek, in what is now Jackson Township in Keokuk County. His malady must have been severe, for in a few days he died, on March 15, 1842.

Some time before his death, Wapello requested that his body be conveyed to the Indian agency for interment near the grave of his white friend, Joseph M. Street. There, amid great ceremony, in the presence of Keokuk, Appanoose, and most of the leading men of the Sacs and Foxes, his body was laid to rest. In death as in life his friendship for the white men was paramount.

A monument has since been erected at Agency City to mark the graves of the two friends. Ever a man of peace, a friend of the white man always, Wapello rests at last beside his white brother — a more enduring memorial to his way of life than the monument above.

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