

Iowa History Project

THE MAKING OF IOWA

CHAPTER VI

WHAT BLACK HAWK DID

A picture of Black Hawk is included with this Chapter

Among the Indians who helped make history in Iowa, two stand out with especial prominence, because of the part they took in the first settlement of the country along the west bank of the Mississippi River. These two are Black Hawk and Keokuk, Sacs.

Black Hawk was the leader of the war party of the Sacs and Foxes; Keokuk was the leader of the peace party. Because of Black Hawk's actions whites were permitted to occupy Iowa land sooner, perhaps, than otherwise they would have been.

Black Hawk's Indian name was a long one. It was Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, meaning a hawk, black hawk or sparrow hawk. He was not born a chief, but became prominent because of his deeds. As a boy in battle with the Osages he killed an enemy, and in other encounters he won so much glory that he was admitted to the circle of the braves, and to the scalp dance.

When Black Hawk was nineteen his father, Py-e-sa, was killed by the Cherokees, in a great engagement in which the Sacs and Foxes finally were victorious. Black Hawk came into possession of the medicine bag of the tribe. The Indians believed this had been given to his grandfather by the Great Spirit, and it was considered the most precious thing the Sacs had.

Black Hawk now blackened his face and retired into the dense woods. He lived apart from his companions five years, seeking solitude, where he might pray and talk with the Great Spirit. When he returned to active life he was looked upon as a very important person.

The Sacs, with a few Foxes, were then living in Saukenuk, the noted Indian village at the angle of the Mississippi and Rock Rivers, not far from Rock Island City. Black Hawk was born here in 1767, and he dearly loved the place. The vicinity is beautiful now, but was ten times more attractive when the Indians possessed it.

On one side of the village flowed the sparkling, singing Rock River; on the other side swept the majestic Mississippi. Maize fields rippled in the breezes. Heavy woods clothed the hills. Islands dotted the rivers. Game and fish were abundant, and when hunting was not occupying the young braves, and war excursions were not called for, the Indians gathered on the prairie to play ball-not base ball, but a game more like la crosse.

The island in the Mississippi now called Rock Island, was the Indians' garden. Here grew their fruits, and along its shores were the finest fish. In a cave under the rocks, at the northwest side of the island, dwelt a good spirit, who protected the people. The Indians who had been fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of it said it had white wings, like an immense swan.

The village, the island, the graves of their ancestors-all this loved country, the Sacs and Foxes were called upon to

surrender to the United States.

In 1804 a delegation of Sacs and Foxes visited St. Louis, and on returning to the village shamefacedly informed the other Indians that a treaty had been signed giving up the territory east of the Mississippi. The signing of this treaty was kept quiet, it is said, for some days, but when the act became known Black Hawk and others in the tribes were very angry. They claimed the delegates had not been authorized to sign such a paper and even asserted that the men had been drunk and then had been tricked into attaching their names to the treaty. A great protest went up, for the Indians did not wish to lose their homes, especially when so little compensation was received from the government.

However, Congress ratified the treaty, and the protest of Black Hawk and his followers went for naught. Had the Indians been given an opportunity to reconsider the treaty they would have refused to support their delegates' action. But while the government always had a chance, through Congress, to decline to accept a treaty, at the council was the only occasion accorded the Indians to act on the matter.

Although in succeeding treaties this treaty of 1804 was referred to by the Indians as legal, Black Hawk never admitted it was right or just.

In the treaty the government said that so long as the lots were not sold to settlers, the Indians could live and hunt in the territory, as they always had.

This would have been some satisfaction to the Indians had the United States kept faith with them. But in 1808 a detachment of soldiers arrived at the place where the city of Fort Madison now is, and prepared to build a fort. This was then Indian land, and the Indians claimed the government was doing wrong in erecting a fort west of the Mississippi, in this region. The presence of the fort and the garraion irritated the indians, and finally they forced the soldiers to flee for their lives.

When the War of 1812, between the United States and Great Britain, broke out, inducements were offered Black Hawk to join the English. The English had proved better friends to the Sacs and Foxes than had the Americans. The Indians had been told they could obtain goods at government stores on credit, paying for them when the hunting season was over, but at the opening of the war a number of Sacs, having visited a trader's establishment, were refused goods for which they asked. When they returned a shrewd British agent sent word that he would give them whatever they desired. This contrast in treatment made the Indians like the English more than ever.

The British sought out Black Hawk, flattered him, called him "general," and told him that if he would aid them the Americans would be driven back to the Atlantic Coast, and the Indians would possess the country, as formerly. So Black Hawk and two hundred braves left to help England. They were termed the "British band." Keokuk and the Indians who favored remaining neutral stayed at home.

During Black Hawk's absence from the village brutal whites murdered his adopted son, a mere boy, and the support of an aged father. This greatly increased Back Hawk's bitterness against the Americans.

He and his band did not stay long with the British armies, but within a year returned to Saukenuk. Here Black Hawk took part in several skirmishes on Iowa's very border. Two furious little battles were fought on the Mississippi, not far from the present cities of Davenport and Moline.

In the summer of 1814 a detachment of United States regulars and volunteers left St. Louis, in three barges, bound for Prairie du Chien, to reinforce the fort there. When they had passed Rock Island (the island) a violent gale forced the boat under the commanding officer, Lieutenant Campbell, onto a small island ever since known as Campbell's Island. The Sacs and Foxes and Winnebagoes attacked it, and only a brave rescue by one of the other boats averted great carnage. As it was, after severe fighting, the whole expedition was sent hurrying back, in disorder, to St. Louis, with a number killed.

Major Zachary Taylor, afterwards President Taylor, then set forth from St. Louis to punish the Indians and establish a fort on Rock Island. By this time the British had reached the point, with cannon. The British and the Indians forced Major Taylor to retreat. The cannon assailed him from the shore, while the Indians swam or paddled out to the little

islands in the channel, and from the willows kept up a deadly fire with rifles and muskets.

In 1816 Fort Armstrong was built at the foot of Rock Island, right over the sacred cave. The Indians complained that the noise frightened away the good spirit, and that they did not want soldiers so near. The fort attracted a number of whites, who quarreled with the Indians, and demanded that the lands be thrown open for settlers.

In 1828 President Adams declared that lots should be sold. The Keokuk faction left quietly, but Black Hawk and his band refused to go. They said the Great Spirit had given them the land, to use. In the spring of 1830 they returned from a winter hunt to find the site of their homes had been sold. This was a blow to them. The hunt of the next winter was unsuccessful, and they were disheartened. Their squaws planted corn, and the settlers at once plowed it up. The militia was called out to expel the Indians. Before the arrival of the soldiers Black Hawk's people crossed the river, and all that the troops could do was to valiantly burn the ancient town.

Black Hawk established headquarters at the site of Fort Madison, the fort having been burned some years before. The season was too far advanced for a new crop of corn or beans, and when one night some young Indians swam the river in order to get ears from the old fields the whites tried to shoot them.

When fall came the Black Hawk faction was destitute. A Winnebago-Sac prophet named Wa-bo-kie-shick had sent word to Black Hawk advising him to resist the whites, and promised the Winnebagoes and British would aid him to regain his lands. The prophet's village was thirty-five miles up the Rock River. Black Hawk decided to visit it. He always insisted that his people started out merely to join with their friends in raising a crop of beans and corn, to prevent starvation. But the government did not trust him, and when in this spring of 1832 he and his braves, on horseback, went up the west bank of the Mississippi, and the squaws and papposes in canoes ascended the channel, and all crossed to the Rock River, they were ordered back. They refused, and the Black Hawk War ensued.

In this war the Indians under Black Hawk were terribly defeated. They were not allowed the privileges of a flag of truce, but in spite of offers to surrender were shot down by cannon and muskets. The war ended in an encounter August 2, 1832, at the mouth of the Bad Axe River, in Wisconsin, where the principal band of fleeing Indians was overtaken and men, women and children were slaughtered. Black Hawk was captured by treacherous Winnebagoes and conveyed to Prairie du Chien. From there he was sent to Jefferson Barracks, at St. Louis. Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, afterward president of the Confederacy, guarded him on the trip. After a long confinement, he was taken on a tour of the East in order to show him how powerful was the United States. In August, 1833, at Fort Armstrong, Black Hawk was released.

He then lived for a time near Keokuk's village on the Iowa River. The government had recognized Keokuk as principal chief, and Black Hawk felt the humiliation. For a short period he had a cabin on Devil Creek, in Lee County. In 1838 he followed the other chiefs to the new quarters on the Des Moines River, near Iowaville. His cabin stood about one hundred feet from the north bank. Nearby were two trees, an elm and an ash, with roots intertwined. From under these roots flowed a spring known as Black Hawk's Spring.

In the fall of 1838 the old warrior became ill; in October he died. During his illness his wife was very devoted, but she said, with resignation:

"He is getting old; he must die; Manitou calls him home."

He was buried about half a mile from the cabin, at a place where the Sacs had fought a great battle with the Iowas. He had selected the spot before he was stricken.

His grave was unusually large. The body was interred in a sitting posture, facing the southeast. In the left hand was a cane given to the chief by Henry Clay. All the best things Black Hawk had, when he died, were buried with him, together with clothing, provisions and tobacco sufficient to last him to the spirit land, supposed to be three days' travel.

A physician dug up the skeleton, but the government regained it and deposited it in a historical collection at Burlington. Here it was burned in a fire that destroyed many other valuable articles connected with Iowa's history.

Black Hawk was a true Indian, and had a remarkable number of good traits,. He never drank liquor, and tried to prevent the whites from supplying it to other Indians. He had only one wife, and dearly loved his family. He was not cruel, and practiced none of the tortures of which savages are fond.

While he was not a chief by birth, he was looked upon as a leader because of his great qualities of mind and person. In appearance he was dignified, but he was not a large man. He was of medium stature, and his frame was spare and wiry. His countenance was kindly, his head was finely shaped, and his eyes were extraordinarily black and piercing.

When he lived on Devil Creek, near Fort Madison, he frequently visited the town. In 1837, and during the time immediately following, Fort Madison was a gay frontier settlement. The social life was brightened by a number of light-hearted young ladies who formed an attraction for the young men, far and near. Dances on the long veranda of the hotel overlooking the Mississippi were frequent occurrences.

The Indians attended these dances. Nes-se-as-kuk, a son of Black Hawk, was a handsome fellow, and received much attention from the belles. Sometimes the young people rode out to Black Hawk's lodge, and took tea with Mrs. Black Hawk. She was proud of her little grandchild strapped on a board. When the visitors praised the baby the grandmother was highly delighted.

At one ball given at the hotel, Black Hawk appeared attired in the uniform of a British general, while Mrs. Black Hawk wore a hat of wonderful construction. Black Hawk at this time had no hair save his scalp lock.

The old warrior had a strong appreciation of the beauties of nature. At his favorite spot, the summit of a lofty promontory overlooking the Rock River, not far from Saukenuk, he used to sit and smoke and gaze out over the landscape. The place is now called Black Hawk's Watch Tower.

A Frenchman, who lived in the village, was playing his violin on this height, one night, for the amusement of the Indians, and fell backward, off the cliff, to his death. According to the Indians, the sounds of the violin can be heard each year, on the anniversary of the fatality.

Black Hawk was honest in his opposition to the whites. He endeavored to preserve his native land. But he only hastened the onward march of civilization, for he afforded opportunity to the government to exact territory as a penalty.

The name of the chief is alive to-day as the title of an Iowa county-Black Hawk County.

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