The Enduring Indians of Kansas

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THE IOWAS AND THE MISSOURI SACS

On September 17, 1836, the Iowas and the Missouri Sacs agreed by treaty to exchange their lands in the triangle-shaped region of northwest Missouri for small reservations in Kansas. The two bands, longtime residents of the Little Platte River region, stood in the way of the advancing farming frontier. The 1836 Platte Purchase had given their lands to the state of Missouri and left the Indians with no alternative but to move, since whites considered them unfit to associate with civilized society. "The villages presented each day a scene of drunkenness [sic] and riot," reported Agent Andrew Hughes just prior to the Indians' removal. White settlers, who barely tolerated quiet Indians such as the Chippewas, Munsees, and Vermillion Kickapoos, were horrified by the customs and behavior of the Iowas and Sacs. Indeed, as the least acculturated of all Indian emigrants to Kansas, they would have to modify their ways greatly in order to survive.

Despite their seeming lack of sophistication and an initial refusal to adopt white ways, the Iowas and Sacs would manage to retain a portion of their new lands. Even though their methods differed from those of the Chippewas and Munsees, who sought assimilation into American society, the Iowas and Sacs were just as successful.

Steadfastly traditional in their own way of life until they were surrounded by white farmers in the late 1850s, the Iowas and Sacs were obliged to adjust to changing conditions. They discarded old customs and adopted new ones when necessary, but usually on their own initiative and terms. They considered and sometimes followed the advice of Indian agents and missionaries, but resisted land allotment and other civilization efforts. Although most were eventually forced to accept individually owned family farms, members of both bands rebuffed all efforts to move them to Indian Territory.

The Iowas and Sacs, unlike many frontier bands, displayed little
animosity toward whites, preferring only to remain isolated from them. When settlers first invaded their original eastern lands following the Revolutionary War, these Indians began moving west. Although Americans considered the Iowas enemies during the War of 1812, the tribe avoided violence and contributed little to the British cause. The Missouri Sacs remained neutral during that conflict, as well as during the Black Hawk War of 1832. They often boasted of their refusal to assist Black Hawk, who had led the Mississippi Sacs in a disastrous attempt to reclaim their Illinois lands. "Towards the whites [the Missouri Sacs] manifest the warmest friendship at all times," Agent William P. Richardson commented, "and I am fully persuaded they are as sincerely the friends of the white man as any Indians living on our borders."3

By the 1820s, the Iowas and the Missouri Sacs had settled in the Little Platte Valley east of the Missouri River. These bands had lived in proximity to each other for many years and, although culturally different, they had formed a loose alliance. The Iowas spoke a Siouan language and were culturally related to the Otoes, Poncas, Kaws, and Osages. Whites found the Iowa social and political structures difficult to decipher.

The tribe was divided into two clan divisions, or phratries; each division consisted of several clans and subclans. The Black Bear clan led the first division, which also included the Wolf, the Eagle and Thunder, the Elk, and the Beaver clans; this division was responsible for planning the winter hunt and other winter and early spring activities. During the winter, the principal chief of the tribe came from the Bear clan. The Buffalo, Pigeon, Snake, and Owl clans made up the second division, which was responsible for agriculture and for planning the spring, summer, and fall events. The Buffalo clan chose the principal summer chief of the tribe. Although leadership positions within the tribe were hereditary, as with most other tribes, important decisions were reached through consensus; a chief's power was not absolute.4

Traditionally, the Iowas had lived in villages and planted corn, beans, pumpkins, and other crops; but they also hunted deer and other game. Excellent craftsmen, they made pottery, utensils, weapons, and religious objects out of local materials. From Algonquian neighbors such as the Sacs, they had learned to weave cloth of basswood or cedar fibers.

The Sacs spoke an Algonquian dialect and were culturally related to the Foxes, Kickapoos, and Potawatomis. They lived in villages, constructing their wickiups of branches and bark and covering them with
rishes that grew along the rivers. The women tended crops while the men hunted and defended against enemies. Historically, the Sac social organization consisted of several patrilineal clans—for example, the Bear, Sturgeon, Swan, Thunder, and Wolf clans. The principal chief traditionally came from the Sturgeon clan, and lesser chiefs from the other clans; the position of chief was hereditary. The political structure was divided between peace and war organizations. In dealings with federal officials, however, the war chief's influence usually exceeded that of the peace chief.5

Many observers considered the Sacs to be less acculturated than the Iowas. Whites familiar with both bands, however, thought that the more aloof Sacs resisted the temptations of frontier society better than the Iowas, who seemed lazy and addicted to whiskey. "The condition of the Iowas is very deplorable," wrote newspaperman Thomas Gladstone. "They lead a life of miserable idleness, wear no dress beyond the blanket, and seem to set no value on efforts made for the amelioration of their condition." Indian Agent David Vanderslice noted that the Sacs were "more provident" than the Iowas and "seldom suffer to the same extent as that tribe." Presbyterian missionary William Hamilton discovered that the Sacs were "a much more independent nation than the Ioways, and I think not so degraded." Hamilton admired the Sacs, even though they practiced their "superstitious rites" and refused "to forsake heathenism."6

Most outsiders believed that the Sacs as well as the Iowas were unwilling to change their customs. But by the 1820s both bands had modified their traditional ways, adopting many characteristics of the Plains Indians. Like the Plains tribes, they hunted buffalo on horseback and made tipis of hides for temporary shelters; hunters were able to move quickly to wherever their scouts found herds. Wearing skins adorned with eagle feathers, they performed the Buffalo Dance and other Plains ceremonies in order to make their hunts successful. The Iowa and Sac warriors, like those of the Potawatomis and other immigrants to Kansas, defended their villages from marauding Plains Indians, and young men won prestige by stealing horses and raiding the camps of the Pawnees and other tribal enemies.

When he visited the Iowas and Sacs in the mid-1840s, Swiss artist Rudolph Friederich Kurz noted that their "stalwart forms, the race color, their tents of skins, their dances and games, their family life, all conform to our traditional conception of the Indian." Iowa men fastened
eagle feathers to their braided hair; women adorned their heads with "varicolored or else richly embroidered" cloth. Most Sac men shaved all but "a tuft or brush" of hair from the back of the head, but others had long hair decorated with various trinkets. Both bands wore breechcloths, blankets, and beaded moccasins as well as jewelry and bear-claw necklaces.7

Many whites called the Indian immigrants "murderous savages" because of their reputation for swift and merciless retaliation against enemies. When Sioux and Pawnee warriors stole their horses or attacked their hunting parties, the Iowas and Sacs joined forces with the Prairie Potawatomis and others to seek revenge. Because they possessed rifles and employed modern military methods, the Iowas, Sacs, Potawatomis, and Kickapoos usually prevailed against the nomadic Plains tribes, who were still armed mainly with bows and arrows. Returning to their villages, the victors performed the traditional scalp dance—a custom that horrified whites. "Since their return [the Iowas] have indulged in the most extravagant [sic] and disgusting manifestation of riot and rejoicing over the scalps of the slain," lamented an observer of one such celebration.8

Although the Indians continued to engage in such practices, they had not returned to these "ancient" customs or lapsed into "cultural regression" because of their removal to Kansas. They had never abandoned the Scalp Dance, the Bear and Otter dances, or many of their other traditional ceremonies. Even though the Sacs, Iowas, Potawatomis, and others had long been acculturated, like virtually every other immigrant group in American history, they clung proudly to many of their native traditions. It was true that their warriors gave no quarter to marauding enemies, but neither did whites in similar situations. Agent William Richardson recognized such measures as frontier justice, inevitable in the absence of formal legal recourse. After the Sacs had killed eight Pawnee horse thieves, Richardson pointed out that "white men would have done no less" under the circumstances.9

When the Iowas and Sacs emigrated to their new reservations west of the Missouri in June 1837, they were joined by kinfolk of both bands who had moved into the region years earlier to hunt game and to plant crops. Agent Andrew Hughes reported in March 1838 that the earlier settlers had "been scattered in small hunting parties for many years, and having seen their brethren permanently settled they have ... claimed that they should be fed."10 Hughes provided for their needs, and
Nesourquoit, a Missouri Sac warrior who worked against Indian agents and missionaries intent on changing the customs of his people. (Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum)
the recently arrived Iowas and Sacs welcomed the reunion with their kinfolk. Among the old settlers was Nesourquoit, a Sac warrior of the Bear clan, who was determined that his people adhere to their customs and religion. Like Eshtonoquot of the Chippewas, Nesourquoit resented white interference in tribal affairs and resisted efforts to usurp Indian lands. His example eventually inspired members of both bands to defy attempts to expel them from Kansas.

Although the Iowa and Sac immigrants warmly accepted their kinfolk back into the fold, they were less enthusiastic in their reception of Christian missionaries. Just prior to the Indians' removal to Kansas, the Reverend Aurey Ballard had urged his fellow Presbyterians to act quickly in building a mission on the new lands. "The Catholics are establishing themselves amongst the Kickapoos," he warned, "and I expect there will be efforts made by the french [sic] to get them to visit our Indians." By the autumn of 1838, Presbyterians William Hamilton and Samuel Irvin, certain that God had commanded them to proselytize among the Iowas and Sacs, had answered their denomination's call to minister to "these poor creatures." Hamilton expressed their feelings most emphatically: "Oh! my dear brother, if God permit me to instruct these poor heathen, and point them to Jesus, I shall be satisfied." 11

But the Indians had little desire to be pointed toward Jesus, for they had practiced their own religions for centuries and had no intention of abandoning them. "Their ceremonies are taught from father to son," the Presbyterians determined, "and they have not been altered in the least, for at least many generations. They neither add nor diminish from these, nor does it appear that they are in the habit of forming new ones." 12

Irvin and Hamilton reported that although the Sacs "utterly refused" to have anything to do with them, the Iowas at least believed that God, or "Grandfather," had created the earth and all things in the world. Convinced that if these Indians were taught English they would understand the Scriptures and become Christians, the white men established a mission and school on Iowa lands. Comforted by the conviction that they were doing God's work, the preachers were little concerned that most Iowas followed the advice of White Cloud and the war chief, Neumonya, traditionalists firmly opposed to missionary activity. The principal adviser to the chiefs was the more amenable No Heart, who tolerated the Presbyterians and on occasion even attended their serv-
ices. The missionaries were thrilled in February 1839 when No Heart encouraged many Iowas to announce: "Our children know enough of Indian already [and] we wish them to learn English and become white men."\textsuperscript{13}

In most respects, the Presbyterian station was typical of Protestant and Catholic missions in Kansas. Irvin and Hamilton held church services for the Indians, often traveling many miles to scattered locations on the Iowa and Sac reservations. Throughout the 1840s they endeavored to teach Indian children to read and write, and in 1844 they built a manual labor school with tribal education funds provided under the removal treaties.\textsuperscript{14}

The missionaries insisted on locating the school on the reservation despite their fears of possible harmful effects on the children, who must continually witness "the degrading and soul sickening conduct of heathen parents and companions." They hoped that if the children became God-fearing, educated citizens, they would serve as models for their pagan elders. "Let religion and education duly balanced and fruitfully cherished be assiduously cultivated among them," Irvin advised, "and soon they will stand up by us and among us [as] the proudest trophies of scientifick [sic] and moral industry."\textsuperscript{15}

The Presbyterians were shocked to discover how difficult their task would be when their prospective converts displayed "an innate independency of spirit, which . . . renders them averse to the direction and control of others." Because the Sacs obstinately rejected every overture, the missionaries directed most of their attention to the more amenable Iowas. But even they resisted conversion efforts. The Iowas were "in almost every respect, destitute of any proper mental, moral, or physical culture, and far sunken in vice and superstition," the preachers lamented. Irvin and Hamilton denigrated Iowa customs and watched disapprovingly when "the old father of ceremonies" tattooed the foreheads of young girls. That these tattoos were marks of distinction for an honored few in the highly structured Iowa caste system failed to impress the missionaries. They were determined to destroy tribal culture and were certain that teaching Indians the basic skills of white education while inculcating the virtues of farming and individual land ownership would induce them to become assimilated citizens.\textsuperscript{16}

Both bands ignored the teachings of the Gospel, however, and few of the Indians ever attended church services. The Iowas consented to send only orphans of mixed Indian and white parentage to the Presbyterian
school; the Sacs refused to allow any of their children to attend. The preachers blamed Nesourquoit for what they regarded as the Sacs' "very great prejudice against the truth." As for the outwardly agreeable Iowas, it seemed to Hamilton "as if the prince of darkness was mustering all his forces to keep this people, not only in their present and degraded condition, but to sink them still lower in vice and filthiness of every kind." 17

Despite their failure to win converts, the ever-optimistic Presbyterians consoled themselves that the "seeds of divine truth may lie as safely under an Indian blanket or in a smoky wigwam as in the splendid mansion." Although both bands insisted on celebrating the Green Corn Dance and living in "heathen licentiousness," the missionaries had undiminished faith that they would eventually succeed in giving their wards a correct "knowledge of themselves and of the savior." 18

Throughout the 1840s, however, the Iowas and Sacs rebuffed all attempts to convert them. Indian boys often stopped by the mission to ask for fish hooks and other useful objects but showed no enthusiasm for schooling or the Bible. Although some children attended classes, they were more often interested in the presents Irvin distributed than in learning to read and write. "They are taking offence because I do not give more clothes or greater rewards for learning," he complained. 19

Irvin found the adults even more difficult. "No regard is paid to the Sabbath day even by those who know better," he informed church officials. While Irvin and Hamilton tried to preach in the villages on Sundays, the inhabitants gambled, drank, and "smoked horses" (traded) with the neighboring Kickapoos and Potawatomis; such activities left little time for church services. On one occasion, some Iowas allowed the missionaries to speak during a feast. "But before [the] meeting was over," wrote Irvin, "not one [Indian] was left of those who were there at the beginning except two who were asleep. This is trying." Their own failure to learn Indian languages, furthermore, forced the missionaries to rely on others to deliver sermons, and the Indians had little respect for those unable to speak their language. "They were disposed to laugh and make sport particularly of Nancy our interpreter," Irvin reported after one service. "They did so bad that she became discouraged and would not or rather could not interpret." 20

The Presbyterians were constantly frustrated because the Indians clung to tribal customs and religious practices that differed radically from Christianity. When the preachers extolled the virtues of the Bible,
the Indians retorted that their medicine bundles, or sacred packs, served them better than the white man's book. "They hold the medicine bag very sacred," Hamilton wrote church officials. "It is always hung up by their lodge." Irvin provided a detailed description of a medicine bundle. "It is a small portable budget [bag or pouch]," he noted, "made up of a number of roots, in which they suppose there is medical virtue, pieces of scalps which have been taken in battle, hieroglyptic [sic] representations of ancestors, [and] their great deeds." These were wrapped together in a "convenient bundle" that leaders of war parties always carried. 21

After one of Hamilton's sermons, an Iowa questioned the need for the Bible and pointed out that his medicine bundle had always protected him in battle. He offered to "read" or interpret it for a fee, but the missionary refused, saying that "God's gifts were free." On another occasion, an elderly Iowa named Caramonya scolded Hamilton for shooting a weasel, an animal the Indians considered sacred. "To make it good medicine, it must be choked to death," Caramonya explained. If that had been done he could have put the skin in his medicine bundle and gone to war fearing nothing. He added that he had often carried his grandfather's old weasel skin into battle, and although six enemies had shot him, the bullets had failed to penetrate his skin. He was certain that the Bible's powers could not be as effective as that. 22

The missionaries felt helpless when the Indians rejected their advice and went to war against enemies, as in the spring of 1841 when the Iowas and Sacs joined forces with the Prairie Potawatomis against Sioux and Pawnee marauders. When news that the warriors had killed nine Pawnees reached the reservations on April 21, Irvin was sickened by the "wonderful effect" it had on the Indians. "Their minds were excited, and all labour except feasting and dancing were suspended for near a week," the missionary noted. He was horrified that many of the boys had been taken to the scene of the battle, where they "distinguished themselves by striking the dead bodies of the Pawnees which still lay on the open prairie." One youth proudly displayed a severed Pawnee thumb he had taken as a trophy; most had eaten the flesh of the fallen victims. A tribal elder solemnly informed Irvin that having performed these rites the boys could thereafter go to war without fear. 23

The Presbyterians were as unsuccessful in teaching Christian ideals as they were in changing tribal attitudes toward war. Concepts such as sin and spiritual retribution were completely alien to tribal thought, but
the inquiries Irvin and Hamilton received about hell revealed the Indians’ belief that all persons would eventually be reunited with their ancestors in the afterlife. Both the Iowas and Sacs scoffed at the threat that God would send sinners “down to the great fire.” One woman informed Irvin that she often fell into fire but had always managed to get out. On another occasion Hamilton, after preaching at length to an attentive audience about fire and brimstone, congratulated himself that the Indians now understood the consequences of sin. But his smile became a frown when an Indian innocently inquired: “Does the devil put the wood on the fire in hell?” His frown deepened when another man wondered whether, if he should climb part of the way to heaven and then fall, “would it not kill him?”

An Iowa named Wawpash informed Irvin that after death Indians made a four-day journey toward the rising sun to reach heaven, which was not far from the headwaters of the Mississippi River. When an incredulous Irvin inquired how infants and the elderly could make such an arduous journey, Wawpash replied that those at the “Big Village” always knew “when persons died and would come and carry them away.” They sent horses to carry large or heavy persons to the Big Village. “They have horses plenty and fine grass for them to live upon,” Wawpash explained. All “infirmities would be healed in that village,” he added. The blind would receive new eyes, for “they had plenty of good eyes there.” The good people who went there never died again, but bad ones died three or four times and then turned into birds. When Irvin asked why he did not go there now, the Iowa answered patiently as if explaining to a child: “None go there until after they die.”

The Presbyterians scoffed at such beliefs as the superstitions of aborigines, referring to the Indian religious practices as “ancient Idolatrous ceremonies, some of which are childlike and ridiculous.” Indians who clung to traditional ways and resisted conversion efforts frustrated the missionaries, who were bewildered at how to counter such stubbornness. “The past is dark, the future often appears gloomy,” Hamilton admitted. Despite the obstacles, the missionaries trudged on, convinced that time and God were on their side. They ignored threats by White Cloud and Nesourquoit to force them off the reservation, and they were encouraged after a few Iowa children began attending school during the late 1840s.

By then, however, the missionaries could no longer pretend that their efforts to bring about a cultural revolution among the Iowas and Sacs
had been anything but a failure. Although No Heart and subsequent chiefs remained on friendly terms with the preachers, the Iowas rejected Christianity. Refusing to live in government-built log cabins, the Iowas, like the Sacs, erected their traditional bark wickiups miles from the mission. When the missionaries ventured out to proselytize, they were often greeted with the refrain, "Our house is empty," and ordered to leave. Only a few orphaned Indian children attended the mission school, and the many years of conversion efforts had reaped a minuscule harvest—one young Iowa girl adopted by Irvin and his wife.  

Agent David Vanderslice felt pity for the missionaries, who "devoted the prime of manhood and labored on until old age or death removed them from the stage of action, to Christianize the remnant of a once numerous and powerful people." Vanderslice suggested that governmental employees take complete charge and transform the Indians into yeoman farmers, for only then would they become God-fearing citizens. A visiting Presbyterian minister, Edward McKinney, concluded that although the Iowas had allowed them to preach, it was obvious that Irvin and Hamilton were wasting their time. "The Gospel has not yet obtained any trophies among these people," McKinney mourned, "and to the eye of man there seems to be no prospect of any important change for the better, especially in the case of the adult Indians."  

Such assessments were indeed accurate. Stolidly clinging to their traditional religions, the Indians took advantage of the preachers, who not only provided food, clothing, and medicines but also served without reward as doctors and legal advisers to the tribes. Irvin and Hamilton were increasingly distressed by their inability to persuade the Indians to accept Christianity and white civilization. Despite the righteousness of their cause, even they doubted that their endeavors were of any value. The reason for their failure should have been apparent. The more traditional factions dominated both bands throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, and Iowa and Sac leaders, much like the prophet Kenekuk, effectively counteracted efforts to Christianize and assimilate their people. The Indians, noted Hamilton, had fallen "under the influence of those who neither fear God nor regard man."  

The war chief, Nesourquoit, was the main spokesman for the approximately six hundred fifty Sacs who refused to have anything to do with the missionaries. Although many Iowas listened to the advice of No Heart and at least tolerated the white men, the traditionalist majority of the six-hundred-member band followed Neumonya, the war chief and
tribal spokesman, and the obstinate White Cloud in avoiding the Presbyterians. Even No Heart preferred the customary ways and frequently denied missionary requests for permission to preach in the villages.

Maintaining their customs throughout the 1840s did not mean that the chiefs were "ignorant savages." They realized that whites would eventually settle and dominate the entire continent, and they prepared for the inevitable. Aware that violence against whites would lead to the loss of their lands and the destruction of their people, they admonished their followers to remain at peace. Upon assuming a position of leadership among the Iowas after his father (the elder White Cloud) was killed by Omaha Indians in 1834, White Cloud had advised his people to become peaceful and industrious. Speaking to the Iowa tribal council, he proclaimed:

My father . . . taught the lessons of peace, and counselled me not to go to war, except in my own defence. I have made up my mind to listen always to that talk. I have never shed blood, have never taken a scalp, and never will, unless compelled by bad men, in my own defence, and for the protection of my people. I believe the Great Spirit is always angry with men who shed innocent blood. I will live in peace.30

In late 1843 White Cloud, Neumonya, and twelve other Iowas traveled to Europe under the auspices of a Presbyterian minister named George H. C. Melody. Arriving in London, the Indians were met by the noted American frontier artist George Catlin, their patron and escort on the European tour. The Iowas performed traditional dances and ceremonies before enthusiastic London audiences at Catlin's Indian Gallery at the Egyptian Hall. In Britain they conferred with the rich and famous, including Benjamin Disraeli. Later they crossed the Channel to France, where they had an audience with King Louis-Philippe at the Tuileries Palace. They strolled the Champs Elysees, visited the Louvre, and greeted such noted Parisians as novelists Victor Hugo and George Sand.31

As tribal spokesman, Neumonya thanked the Great Spirit for carrying them safely across "the Great Salt Lake" and showing them the wonders of London. He told listeners that the Indian "modes of life are different. . . . Our dances are quite different, and we are glad that we do not give any offence when we dance them." He observed that their
Indian garments, "which are made of skins, are not so fine and beautiful . . . , but they keep us warm, and that we think is a great thing." Although impressed by the wealth and splendor of Europe, the Iowas were shocked by the pervasive poverty they encountered in the major cities. 

Despite their awe-inspiring European experience, the Indians were
rarely intimidated and made it clear that they preferred their own ways and customs. "We are told that you have your dancing-masters," Neumonya told a Dublin gathering, "but the Great Spirit taught us, and we think we should not change our mode." When two Episcopal clergymen preached the advantages of Christianity, Neumonya replied that their own religion had served them well and they would never abandon it. Although Neumonya agreed that Indians had to live with whites in this world, it pleased him that the Great Spirit had set aside a special place in heaven for Indians. He was appalled that whites had killed the Son of the Great Spirit; "red men, we think, have not yet got to be so wicked as to require that." If Indians were supposed to read the Bible, he wondered why "it don't make good people of the pale faces living all around us? They can all read the Good Book and understand all that the black-coats say, and still we find that they are not so honest and so good a people as our own."

This unusual journey gave the Iowas a greater understanding of the differences between their customs and those of the whites. They returned to Kansas in the fall of 1845 with renewed confidence and the determination to build a secure future for themselves. As white settlers swarmed onto their former lands just across the Missouri River, the Indians realized they would need to modify their traditional ways in order to survive, and they placed a greater emphasis on peace, abstinence, and agriculture. "There was much interest manifested by both men and squaws in their farming operations," reported government-employed farmer Preston Richardson, "and, from what I know of them, much more industry than formerly."

The chiefs of both bands agreed that the Indians must avoid alcohol and become industrious family farmers. Nesourquoit endeavored to keep whiskey traders off the Sac reservation and set an example by his own abstinence. Even though his people continued their annual buffalo hunts, they also cultivated corn, pumpkins, beans, and squash and raised cattle and hogs. Like the Iowas, Sac men played a greater role in agricultural pursuits than before. "There are many of this nation who work during the cropping season, assisting their wives and children in securing their crops," Agent Richardson noted. Agent Alfred Vaughn reported that the Iowas "continue to show every disposition to prevent whiskey being brought amongst them; they are all sober and peaceable [sic] . . . and show every disposition to stay at home and work."

Their efforts to concentrate on working the land, however, were
hindered by frequent raids by enemy marauders. The Pawnees were the most troublesome, stealing horses and attacking Iowa and Sac hunting parties on the prairie. The Iowas were angry that the missionaries seemed oblivious to the danger even after numerous assaults on the villages. On one occasion, four Iowa women confronted Irvin as he taught school. "What are you doing here teaching the children letters when the [P]awnees are so near," they demanded to know. They scolded Irvin for being foolish—he should be out recruiting whites to pursue the Pawnees.36 Despite the logic of such remarks, the Presbyterians continued to counsel the Iowas to abandon revenge raids and to find peaceful solutions to their problems.

Other whites were less complacent than the missionaries, and travelers in Kansas frequently complained of Pawnee thievery. Newspaperman George W. Kendall's expedition, while camped near the Big Blue River, discovered that "some skulking scoundrel" had stolen a gray gelding during the night. "So far we have seen little of the Pawnees," he informed New Orleans Picayune readers, "but the sneaking, thieving rascals have not allowed us to pass through their country without levying their customary toll." Trader James R. Mead reported that it was "as natural for Pawnee Indians to steal as it was for them to eat." All of the Plains Indians hated the Pawnees, Mead noted, and the Kansas tribes frequently joined together to fight against what they called those "'prowling cowards.' "37

By the late 1840s most Sacs and Iowas, threatened by Indian agents with punishment and loss of annuities for fighting the Pawnees, became resigned to the fact that they must accept yet another change in their way of life. Peace with other tribes, they reasoned, was the only option. Nesourquoit informed Agent Vaughn in May 1848 that the Sacs had agreed to smoke the peace pipe with the Pawnees; within a few years Sacs and Pawnees were hunting buffalo together on the western prairie. The Iowas also decided to make peace with their foes. When White Cloud led a war party that killed nine Pawnees on May 15, Neumonya and No Heart chastised him for failing to heed their advice to desist, and they agreed with Vaughn's decision to dismiss him from the government-recognized council.38

Although White Cloud retained considerable influence over the Iowas, his fighting days were over. By the time of his death in December 1851, the Iowas and Sacs had nearly abandoned their ancient warrior traditions. They still rejected Christianity and formal schooling, but
they realized that white settlers would soon demand their removal again, and they were determined not to give them a plausible justification. Thus Iowa and Sac men and boys, who had traditionally proved their mettle through bravery in battle, began seeking other ways to achieve status in the band. Hunting prowess was a mark of distinction; but as buffalo and other animals became scarce, other ways of earning prestige were needed. Traditional Indian games provided one such avenue for the Iowas and Sacs, as well as for the nearby Kickapoos, Potawatomis, and other immigrant bands.

Entire villages participated in lacrosse games as teams of hundreds fought and clubbed with sticks, or crosses, attempting to hurl a deerskin-covered ball into the opponent's goal. Sometimes chaos reigned as players slashed, kicked, and gouged their adversaries in a mad dash toward the goal. Whites were amazed at the skill and stamina displayed by the players as they struggled for hours, even days, on behalf of their clan, band, or tribe.

Strength and agility were requisites in such a fracas; the weak or injured fell by the wayside. On one occasion, the Prairie Potawatomis challenged the Sacs to prove their skill in lacrosse. A white observer, who failed to record the final result, noted that there were one hundred fifty Indians to a side. "A game of Indian ball is one of the most exciting imaginable," the observer noted, "requiring sometimes five or six hours to determine a game. There is nothing like it among white people. The players strip to the skin, reserving nothing but breechcloths, and each has a scoop, made of twigs, with which a ball is caught and thrown." 39

Indian women played double-ball, a stickball game in which participants tried to swat a piece of buckskin through their opponent's goal. As with lacrosse, timid souls avoided this game. "That's dangerous too, you know," a Potawatomi woman recalled. "Punch your eyes out. They'll hit you . . . I played that game too, but I quit. It's too bad . . . that's what them old ladies play." Although it was a boisterous and rough game, double-ball could have its lighter moments. "One time, I was watchin' 'em down at the dancing ground," an elderly Indian man remembered. "One of them girls missed that ball and grabbed one of them girl's skirts and ripped it off. Oh boy, that woke 'em up, sitting on the sidelines. Oh, that was something then." 40

Other activities were somewhat less strenuous than lacrosse and double-ball. Horse racing proved one's skill at riding and offered the Iowas, Sacs, and others opportunities for gambling, a passion of many of
The Indian stickball game as played by Kickapoo women, ca. 1940. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society)

the Indians of Kansas. John Treat Irving once watched two mounted Indians, "as eager as greyhounds in the leash," waiting for the start of a race. When the signal was given, "there was a hard, quick thumping of heels, against the ribs of the horses," wrote Irving. "The next moment they had vanished from their posts." The riders "whooped and screamed" as their mounts "flew over the ground like lightning. . . both horses seemed to be eaten up by fury, at being driven at such a rate." Crossing the finish line, the winning pony "appeared too angry to enjoy his victory."41 His triumphant rider, however, no doubt happily accepted the accolades of fellow Indians as well as the winnings from his successful wagers.

Some games may have provided little prestige for the participants, but they gave them pleasure and reinforced their identity as Indians. The men and women of most Kansas bands played cards enthusiastically, often betting everything on a single hand. The Potawatomis were fond of John Eight Ten, a game in which players dealt cards they had hidden in a moccasin; they kept score with corn kernels. Women played the Shaking Dish Game, somewhat similar to dice.42

Such pastimes often had more significance than was apparent to the casual observer. Certain ceremonies were required before commencing a game of lacrosse, for example. George Catlin, while visiting the Iowas,
noted that the lacrosse players first “invoke the aid of supernatural influence to their respective sides; and for this purpose they give a very pretty dance, in which, as in the Scalp Dance, the women take a part, giving neat and curious effect to the scene.”

Irvin and Hamilton once found the Sacs “busily engaged” in the “Mockison [sic] game.” This was a serious matter to the Sacs. “They displayed much earnestness and great enthusiasm,” the missionaries noted, “the game agitating their bodies and extending their bodies to the utmost.” The participants were “painted and dressed in a great variety of forms, and made many strange appearances.” The preachers were appalled at the intensity shown by the participants in an activity that “to us appears the height of nonsense.”

Without realizing it, the two men had pinpointed the underlying significance of such behavior: The Indians were satisfied with their own customs, which reinforced tribal solidarity. “The poor Indians seem wonderfully contented with their old way of living,” the missionaries lamented. “Their prejudices [are] strong and hard to overcome.” The ability of the Iowas, Sacs, and other Kansas bands to hold on to those customs, however, was about to face its greatest challenge. By early 1853 it was apparent that the immigrant Indians must sell a portion of their lands to alleviate the growing pressures on them to move. In February, the Iowas asked the Presbyterians for assistance in negotiating a new treaty with Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Manypenny.

Like the Vermillion Kickapoos and several other bands, the Iowas and the Sacs delayed making a final decision on the matter. But by the end of the year, they knew that some action had to be taken. Gold-seekers bound for California were helping themselves to reservation timber and other resources, and squatters had built fences on Indian lands. Political debates over slavery, popular sovereignty, the transcontinental railroad, and the formation of Nebraska Territory raged in Washington. Because of this national agitation, the Indians worried that their welfare was of little concern to federal officials. “The ‘Nebraska Meetings’ and ‘conventions’ now going on will doubtless increase the annoyance,” Agent Vanderslice reported, “and their effect will be to excite the fears of the Indians.”

Commissioner Manypenny attempted to allay the fears of the Iowas and Sacs with assurances that governmental officials would never allow all of their tribal lands to be taken. He warned, however, that the two bands must sell part of their holdings and accept individual family
farms. When he broached the subject with the Sacs in September 1853, their spokesman, Moless ("Sturgeon"), wondered why the government "was in so great a hurry to get their lands"; the Indian informed the commissioner that the chiefs wanted to negotiate directly with President Franklin Pierce in Washington. Nesourquoit, meanwhile, insisted that his people had no intention of selling their reservation. "Where shall we go? We know the whole country . . . and we know not of any fit for us to live upon." Despite these concerns, on October 7 the Sac chiefs agreed to sell half of their lands to the government in order to retain the rest. The money received would pay their extensive debts to local traders.46

In April 1854, five Sac and four Iowa chiefs accompanied Agent VanderSlice and the delegation of Vermillion Kickapoos to Washington for the finalizing of their respective treaties. Moless, Petaokemah ("Hard Fish"), and Nesourquoit led the Sac party, which also included Nokowat and Mokohoko. Leading the Iowas was No Heart, who according to Irvin, was "still the same honest man and friend to the mission and all whites, but he is failing and [they] must now have a leader." The fate of the Iowas, nevertheless, still rested in the hands of this accommodating old man; both White Cloud and Neumonya had died two years earlier. While he agreed that his people must eventually adopt white ways, No Heart was determined that they would remain in Kansas.47

Not surprisingly, greedy whites were equally determined to seize as much Indian land as possible, and they hovered near the reservations like buzzards around a dying cow. Barely a day after the chiefs had departed, Samuel Irvin informed his Presbyterian superiors that the Iowas expected to retain thirty to forty sections of land along the Missouri River. He warned Mission Secretary Walter Lowrie that dishonest traders and agents were plotting to swindle the Indians out of their lands. Seeing the need to act quickly or lose a share of the spoils, Irvin advised Lowrie to go to Washington and acquire title to all the Indian land that he could manage. The government-operated farm of the Sacs would be "the most valuable addition to our farm that could be made," he wrote. The Iowa holdings were also valuable. "The land is well worth ten dollars an acre," he pointed out, "and if you could get the right to enter say half a section at govt. price, when the land comes in market it would be very profitable. See what can be done."48

The Iowa and Sac chiefs, meanwhile, arrived in Washington in early May. On May 17, No Heart and the Iowas agreed to relinquish more than
half their reservation in exchange for annuities and other incentives. The following day the Sac chiefs signed away half of their reservation. 49

When news of the treaty agreements reached Kansas, most members of both bands believed that their leaders had made the best deal possible under the circumstances; but not all were satisfied with the new treaties. Several provisions offended the more traditional Indians, especially the donation of a considerable amount of land to the Presbyterians. Not surprisingly, the missionaries had received 480 acres of prime Kansas land from the Iowas and another 160 acres from the Sacs. 50 Their prospects for acquiring additional acreage also looked good: Both treaties allowed individual Indians to request patents in fee simple to their own farms; “surplus” lands would then be sold to the general public.

Many Iowas and Sacs realized that the sale and allotment of their lands might disrupt tribal cohesiveness and even cause the Indians to move from their homes. Missionaries and agents, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned about the negative consequences of dispossessing the tribes. Samuel Irvin favored the idea of giving each Indian family title to 160 acres and selling what remained of the reservation—a tribe’s “surplus” lands—to whites. The Presbyterian recommended paying Indians cash for the land because they would probably “run through it at once and be brought to rely on their own resources as the best way of inculcating habits of industry and economy.” 51

Agent Vanderslice, who had asserted that the missionaries were wasting their efforts trying to Christianize the Iowas and Sacs, urged that the government be more aggressive in instituting the civilization program, and he saw land allotment as the key. “All attempts to Christianize adult Indians without first [placing] them in homes,” he wrote, “where each one may call it his own, where he labors as an agriculturalist or a mechanic, have hitherto failed.” With this in mind, Vanderslice began a concerted effort to force the Iowas and Sacs as well as the neighboring Kickapoos to allot their reservations.

The agent knew that considerable profits could be made speculating in Indian lands, and over the next several years he took full advantage of his official position among the tribes for this purpose. In June 1854, he became a charter member of the local Whitehead Squatter Association, whose members were anxious to legally verify their individual claims to lands in northeastern Kansas. Vanderslice got his fellow squatters to pass a motion that exempted him and other federal employees from
complying with association bylaws that called for members to stake visible markers to claims on the Iowa, Sac, and Kickapoo reservations; such an action was a violation of federal law. Apparently not overly concerned with legal niceties, association members approved the agent’s various land claims on the reservations.  

Vanderslice’s actions caused the Indians considerable annoyance. In December 1854, the nearby Vermillion Kickapoos complained to the commander at Fort Leavenworth that Vanderslice’s attempts to force allotment upon them were aimed primarily at enriching the agent. Several Sacs were also displeased. Although Nesourquoit had signed the treaty along with the other Sac chiefs, he now refused to abide by its terms and ignored repeated orders to move his band onto the diminished Sac reservation. Nesourquoit’s followers mistrusted Vanderslice and felt betrayed when the agent slighted them in favor of those willing to do his bidding. The dissidents established a village on the Kickapoo reservation and, like Mecina’s small group of Kickapoo followers, temporarily disassociated themselves from those seemingly inclined toward adopting the ways of the whites.

The agent now feared that Nesourquoit would try “to thwart the government in its plans for the welfare of the Indians.” When the chief encouraged the Sacs to live together in one large village and resist assimilation, Vanderslice advocated forcing individual families to settle on separate parts of the reservation. “It will doubtless render [me] anything but popular with them,” he wrote, “but when they see the benefits in the accumulation of property and comforts in their respective homes, their prejudices will give way.” Because Nesourquoit and his followers still refused to move, officials illegally withheld their annuities until the Indians “complied” with the recent treaty.

Although the Iowas conformed and relocated on their diminished reservation, Vanderslice fretted that they also seemed to have made little progress toward civilization. He reported that they had misused their new treaty annuities by purchasing guns and ponies to hunt buffalo. “It is true that they have some fine horses,” he wrote, “but instead of purchasing good & substantial work horses, they paid from 100$ to 150$ for such as they believed would run well. . . . The incompetency of these people is so manifest, it is almost imperative on the government to treat them as wards.”

Although Vanderslice denigrated tribal customs, he grudgingly admired the Sacs for their independent spirit. But he continued to pressure
the intractable Nesourquoi to return to the reservation, ignoring the fact that the chief's people received no annuities and lived by their own resourcefulness. To admit that Indians could care for themselves might undermine the agent's authority and lessen opportunities to exploit them.

After resisting for two years, Nesourquoi's people finally gave in to governmental pressures and moved to the reservation in November 1856. They soon regretted their decision. Nesourquoi resented Vanderslice's favoring of chiefs more willing to accommodate the agent and traders. He was also dissatisfied with the location of his new village and angry that the stipends promised him under provisions of the treaty were not being paid.56

Early the following year, Nesourquoi sent Joseph Tesson to Washington to complain about the government's failure to abide by the 1854 treaty. A rather notorious character of Winnebago and white descent with ties to dishonest traders, Tesson delivered Nesourquoi's grievances to the commissioner of Indian affairs in March 1857, then returned to Kansas. When federal officials failed to respond, Nesourquoi took matters into his own hands. Without consulting Vanderslice or members of the government-sponsored tribal council, Nesourquoi, Mokohoko, and Tacockah accompanied Tesson and trusted interpreter "Mexican George" Gomez on another trip to Washington in December 1857.57

Their unauthorized visit initially caused a minor stir at the Interior Department, but arrangements were made for the Sacs to speak with President James Buchanan on December 31. The meeting in the East Room of the White House proved to be largely ceremonial, for delegates of the Poncas, Pawnees, and Potawatomis, as well as congressmen, foreign ministers, and cabinet officers, were also in attendance. Following a brief speech by the president, the Indians were each permitted only a few words with the chief executive. They later posed for the camera in front of the South Portico, the earliest known photographs of Indians taken at the White House.58

A few weeks later Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles Mix agreed to a more formal conference with the Missouri Sacs. A governmental clerk described their entrance into Mix's office on January 20, 1858: "The chiefs wore red blankets, which in the case of [Nesourquoi] and [Tacockah] were thrown loosely over the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and arms bare, and [exposing] clusters of
"Mexican George" Gomez, the interpreter for the Missouri Sacs. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society)
brass rings which ornamented the same.” Nesourquoit wore a bear-claw necklace and in his hair a carved figure of a fish. Even more impressive was Mokohoko (“Jumping Fish”), “an uncommonly fine-featured young man and very stalwart in figure.” The Indians looked like “children of nature, ‘fresh from the hand of god,’ and their excessive ornamentation showed that they had made little progress in the arts and refinements of civilized life.” 59

The Indians were more sophisticated than the bureaucrats may have thought. Complaining that Sac women and children went hungry while governmental chiefs, traders, and the agent stole their lands and annuities, Nesourquoit refused to be mollified by Mix’s patronizing manner. Grasping the commissioner’s hand and staring intently into his eyes, the chief demanded that the government live up to its treaty commitments. “We have been treated as wards, as children by the Government, in fact too much so,” Nesourquoit fumed. “Not only have we been treated as children and wards, but like negroes.” 60

Mokohoko, whose membership in the Sturgeon clan and leadership abilities would eventually make him a leading chief, reiterated Nesourquoit’s words. Obviously excited and perhaps a bit nervous, Mokohoko spoke his mind:
Father, you have listened to what our chief has said. What he told you in a very few words about the poverty of our women and children is true. I am glad, as has already been spoken, that the Great Spirit hears all we say and sees all we do. As we thought that the government had not fulfilled all its stipulations with us in former treaties, we formerly sent a friend here [Tesson] to make every thing straight. But as he did not get all the satisfaction or information required, we have come here on the business, accompanied by our friend, and hope to be more successful this time. We want you to make every thing in the treaties straight, so that we may get something for our women and children, who are poor and in want of your aid.

Father, we felt aggrieved when we saw money which was ours by treaty stipulations go into other hands; and I again repeat what was said by our chief, that you would yourself, if in our situation, complain if money which belonged to you was taken and given to another. We view precisely in that way the taking from us of a portion of our annuities and giving it to others who are not entitled; but now that we are received here, we hope that the government will do us justice in our present business and make everything straight.

This man [pointing to Nesourquoit] has been our chief for years past, and we consider him the principal chief of the tribe; and, feeling grieved at the manner we have been treated at home, and at the manner in which our treaties have been carried out, he has accompanied us here to lay our complaints before you.61

Mokohoko concluded by pointing out that their agent had been a disruptive influence in tribal affairs and demanded that Mix dismiss Vanderslice from the federal service. “If he must be an Indian agent,” Mokohoko continued, “let him not be for us, but for some other tribe. We do not want him any longer, and he may do for somebody else.” The independently minded Mokohoko, who had signed the 1854 treaty along with Nesourquoit, also had had second thoughts about his decision, and he would dedicate the rest of his life to defending the customs and lands of his people from men like Vanderslice.

A week later the delegation again met with Mix, who scolded them for their unauthorized visit to Washington and implied that their complaints were frivolous. When Nesourquoit refused to be more specific in
his complaints against the government, Mix grew angry. The chief had
fallen under the spell "of bad white men." The commissioner bluntly
informed Nesourquoit that "his actions . . . would seem to indicate that
he is nothing more than a boy, a little child." Abruptly cutting the
conference short, Mix ordered the Sacs to return to their reservation
immediately.62

The visit to Washington proved a humbling experience for Nesour­
quoit, convincing him that he must abide by the treaty. Along with the
Iowas, he and many Sacs agreed to settle and farm the land; several even
began to consider the advantages of holding title to their own farms.
When the chief discovered that Joseph Tesson was in league with un­
scrupulous traders, he severed all ties with him. "My eyes are opened
and my ears are unstop[ped]," Nesourquoit told Vanderslice. "I can now
see and hear. While I was blind and deaf I was foolish, and thought he
[Tesson] meant us good, but now I can see that what he wanted was to
get our property, our money, and our land."63

Nesourquoit's eventual decision to cooperate with the agent's civili­
ization program and to accept the government's five-hundred-dollar
annual salary as a treaty chief angered many of the more traditional
Sacs.64 By 1860 Mokohoko and about a hundred followers had aban­
doned their homes to join the Sacs and Foxes of the Mississippi on their
lands along the Marais des Cygnes River ninety miles to the south.
Their departure left the Missouri Sacs with just over a hundred mem­
bers; over the past two decades nearly four hundred kinfolk had either
succumbed to disease or abandoned the reservation. The Iowa popula­
tion had also declined; in 1860 only about half of the original six
hundred who first settled in Kansas remained.65

On the eve of the Civil War, the Missouri Sacs and Iowas began a
concerted effort to adapt to their radically altered situation. They were
determined to keep their lands and make a living despite all obstacles,
and they began taking on the trappings of white society. There was no
alternative if they were to retain their lands; as Vanderslice pointed out,
their reservations were surrounded by white settlements.66 Because the
Indians owned the finest farmland and timber in the region, whites
were eager to dispossess them.

Recognizing their tenuous position, both bands endeavored to win
the acceptance of their white neighbors. Both had become resigned to
the fact that abandoning their old ways was unavoidable. They could no
longer depend on hunting, so they concentrated on agriculture. Farming
in Kansas was, however, unpredictable, and after a long drought resulted in a poor autumn harvest in 1860, tribal elders were forced to throw themselves upon the mercy of the federal government. "We can no longer resort to the region of game, being cut off by vast districts intervening and populated by the whites," they told officials in December, "and the range of the Deer, Elk and Buffalo now in the far off plains, mountain slopes & valleys is not accessible [sic] to us, because the tribes which inhabit these regions are not only large and powerful, but are hostile to us border tribes." In exchange for larger annuities, the chiefs were willing to surrender more land and even accept individual allotments.

By early 1861, Sac Chiefs Petaokemah, Nesourquoit, and Moless had decided to sell their entire reservation and use the proceeds to buy a portion of the Iowas' holdings. With land prices reportedly as high as twenty-five dollars an acre along the Kansas-Nebraska border, the Indians evidently expected to make substantial profits and pay their debts to local merchants. In March 1861, therefore, the Sacs as well as No Heart, Naggarash, Mahhee, and the other Iowa chiefs assembled at the agency headquarters and signed a new treaty. As an extra incentive for parting with their homes, each Sac chief received legal title to 160 acres of their old lands.

This treaty, more than any other, signaled an end to the old ways for the Sacs and Iowas and, while the country was at war for the next four years, both labored to prove themselves worthy and loyal neighbors to the whites. Although their lands had not yet been officially allotted, families spread out over their 16,000-acre reservation and claimed small plots for their individual farms. In May 1862, Lewis Henry Morgan found that the Iowas had "made great strides in farming, fencing, and raising stock, which if it continues will tend to increase their numbers."

Reports by Indian agents during the war years confirmed Morgan's assessment of the Iowas as well as the Sacs. Both bands supported the Union cause and several young men enlisted in the army. Doing battle with southern secessionists allowed warriors to earn prestige in a way acceptable to their white neighbors. Those who stayed behind remained quiet and avoided antagonizing the local farmers. The Iowas even passed their own laws against alcoholism, and the agent paid Iowa police for flogging violators. Sac Chief Nesourquoit reportedly never drank whiskey and encouraged others to follow his example. After the war, the two bands continued to build their new lives as accepted
members of the community. They plowed their small fields and built log cabins; they dressed and acted like typical rural people struggling to make a living as farmers. Like most immigrants involved in the long process of acculturation, however, their old ways persisted for many years.

A local newspaperman, L. J. White, attended an Indian wedding in 1883 and found the Iowas and Sacs attired in traditional dress. “The most fashionable costume,” he reported, “was moccasins, leggings with fringes . . . , a breech cloth, loose shirt trimmed with silver breast-plates, and bead garters, silver bracelets, armlets, head bands, bear claw collars, and all the beads they could carry, belts, and ribbons tied in their hair.” White was amazed that such a sight was still possible. The Indians lived in a world of their own, he wrote, “every day full of something to occupy your attention, and the rest of the world goes on without even a ripple of interest, and you hardly know where the time goes.”

The newspaperman failed to recognize that despite their ceremonial dress, the two bands had changed dramatically over the past half century. Like the Vermillion Kickapoos, the Chippewas, and the Munsees, the Iowas and Sacs had discovered their own practical formula for keeping their homes. They maintained some of their traditions but abandoned those offensive to whites. Their peaceful and unobtrusive ways proved the key to success. “We split off from our people during the Black Hawk War on account of their taking up the tomahawk against the whites,” the Sacs had pointed out in 1863, “and have always been a friend to the pale faces, and always been loyal to our Flag, and listened to our Great Father in every thing he says to us.”

Although these peaceful Indians eventually surrendered most of their lands, they retained enough to make a living. By the time they accepted individual land allotment in 1887, many of the more traditional tribe members had abandoned the reservations and moved to Oklahoma. But even those who stayed remembered their Sac or Iowa heritage well into the twentieth century. Although some Indians may criticize the Iowa and Sac descendants of those early pioneers for becoming, outwardly at least, imitation white people and abandoning most of their ancient traditions, they maintained their reservations along the Kansas-Nebraska border. Other Indians may have fought to the death in defense of their lands, but most failed and their people suffered as a result. By wisely adapting to conditions beyond their control, the Iowas and the Missouri Sacs avoided a similar fate.