Kenekuk the Kickapoo Prophet

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2. The Vermillion Band Kickapoos

From the time when Europeans first invaded their lands, American Indians have had to adapt and adjust to constantly changing social circumstances. The culturally diverse tribes held their own against the intruders at first, but as the years went by, increasing numbers of the technologically advanced Europeans arrived and the number of Indians declined. By the early nineteenth century, Euro-Americans were dominant from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River. After the War of 1812, land-hungry frontiersmen and politicians steadily pressured the hapless eastern Indians into surrendering their lands and moving west of the Mississippi. Settlers, businessmen, missionaries, and governmental officials agreed that for the United States to prosper, the Indians must go. White Americans thought that it was God’s will that the Indians should move: Manifest Destiny must never be held in check! At the same time they rationalized that moving was in the best interest of the Indians.

The Vermillion Kickapoos, who lived along the Indiana-Illinois border, were among those who faced intense pressure to give up their lands. The Kickapoos were one of the many Algonquin tribes that lived in the Old Northwest region of North America. Algonquins, such as Kickapoos, Delawares, Potawatomis, Miamis, Shawnees, and Sacs and Foxes, shared common cultural and religious traits as well as similar languages. During the spring and summer, these hunters, gatherers, and horticulturists lived in villages, planted crops, and carried out tribal activities. During the rest of the year, the bands split into smaller units to hunt deer and other game—sometimes ranging hundreds of miles from their semipermanent villages.
By the late eighteenth century the Kickapoos and other Algonquin tribes were reacting in various ways to the influx of whites into their territories. Some bands endeavored to appease the invaders by abandoning their traditional ways, adopting white manners and customs, and trying to blend into mainstream American life. When that failed, they eventually surrendered their homes and reluctantly moved beyond the Mississippi. Other bands resorted to violence to drive the whites from their lands. The Great Spirit, they believed, would come to their aid and help to restore them to their former power. The Shawnee prophet Tenskwatawa, his brother Tecumseh, and Black Hawk, of the Sacs and Foxes, led futile uprisings against the powerful Americans. Such resistance may have endeared these warriors to modern scholars.
and history buffs, but the results proved disastrous for their followers.

Beginning sometime around 1795, various bands of Vermillion Kickapoos adopted a different strategy in dealing with the problems they were facing. These Indians sought to accommodate themselves to the white society while at the same time maintaining a separate cultural identity. They began a conscious effort to revitalize their culture and to build a social structure that would better satisfy their needs in a changing world.\(^1\)

To make themselves more acceptable to their white neighbors, these Kickapoos began to assume the trappings of American society. At the same time, they restructured certain important aspects of their traditional culture. They discarded practices that were no longer appropriate to their changed environment, such as warfare and a reliance on hunting; and they heeded the government’s advice to settle down, build homes, and farm the land. Their effort was a practical way of coping with a difficult situation; it was a peaceful quest to keep their lands. Their new syncretic society combined, modified, altered, and discarded certain aspects of both the Kickapoo and the Euro-American ways. This cultural blend provided the Indians with a strong defense against white assaults on their tribal integrity as well as their lands.\(^2\)

Like other Algonquins, the Vermillion Kickapoos had experienced years of cultural interaction with white society. By the mid-1700s, the introduction of European trade goods had greatly altered their traditional social and economic structures, and disease had decimated their populations. Christian missionaries, moreover, had attempted to make over Kickapoo habits and customs in accordance with the missionaries’ own notions of civilized behavior. But unlike many of the other tribes that willingly made some accommodation with the intruders, the Kickapoos traditionally showed open hostility to whites who meddled in their affairs. Traders and missionaries were especially cautious in dealing with the Kickapoos, who frequently resorted to violence to expel intruders from their territory. While willing to modify their ways, the Kickapoos were determined to be the final arbiters of the form that those modifications would take.

Described by modern scholars as the most culturally conservative of North American Indians, Kickapoos often gathered in groups around influential leaders. Bands numbered between fifty and four hundred individuals, while the population of the entire tribe during the nineteenth century has been estimated at fifteen hundred. Usually preferring to live as far as possible from white settlements, the Kickapoos were particularly hostile to Anglo-Americans, and on many occasions the various bands chose to move instead of risking a confrontation with invading white settlers.\(^3\) By the late eighteenth century, however, a few Kickapoo bands had begun to see the need to make some accommodation. These Indians decided to adapt to changing conditions in their country, rather than moving to a place far distant from white interference.

Within the tribe, two major groups emerged that responded in markedly different ways to white incursions. Since the early 1700s, the Vermillion people had lived in the Wabash country along both sides of the present Indiana-Illinois border; other Kickapoo bands had moved from their native Wisconsin and settled in the prairies of central and western Illinois.
Because of the physical separation, the cultures of the Vermillion bands and the Prairie Kickapoos evolved somewhat differently. The Prairie bands were, by tradition, hostile to whites and preferred to live as far as possible from their settlements. Many times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they chose to move rather than deal with wave after wave of American settlers. In contrast, by 1795 many Vermillion Indians had developed a binding love for their lands and refused to move. So strong did this attachment to the land grow that one chief directed that he be buried on the banks of the Wabash River when he died; if his followers sold their lands, he told them, they would also be selling “his body, and their flesh.”

Stung by defeats during the Revolutionary War and by various later conflicts with the Americans, the Wabash-Vermillion bands realized that in order to survive they had to live peacefully, so they began a movement to revitalize their way of life. For years after 1795 they remained in “quiet possession of the country,” avoiding conflict with incoming settlers as much as possible. As a continuous stream of Americans poured into the Ohio Valley and settlements sprang up in Indiana and Illinois, however, encroachments on these Indians’ lands increased. Whites beseeched local politicians and federal officials to coerce even peaceful Indians, such as the Vermillion people, to abandon their homes. Negotiations with the tribes eventually began, and by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Kickapoos and others had ceded large tracts of land. Under increasingly difficult circumstances, retaining the rest of their holdings became the foremost concern of the tribes of the Old Northwest.

Like many other Indians in the Ohio Valley, the Shawnee Prophet and his brother Tecumseh were angered by white encroachments on their territory. They were especially irate after the Treaty of Fort Wayne of September 30, 1809. In that agreement, Indiana’s Governor William Henry Harrison persuaded various Miami, Potawatomi, and Delaware “chiefs” to part with three million acres of Indian lands in exchange for increased governmental annuities and trade goods.

Harrison mistakenly believed that the power that the Shawnee brothers possessed to rally Indians against such spurious land cessions had diminished. But the governor had greatly underestimated the Shawnee Prophet and Tecumseh. What set them apart from other Indians was the scope and power of their plans for dealing with the invasion of their lands. Preaching the need for an intertribal defense against the white Americans, the brothers urged all tribes to join together to protect their mutual interests. If the Indians would reject white customs and return to their traditional ways, the brothers preached, the Great Spirit would aid them in their quest. As spiritual leader of the Indians, the Shawnee Prophet urged his followers to remain strong by abstaining from alcohol, wearing Indian clothing, practicing traditional ceremonies, and worshiping the Great Spirit. His message of intertribal unity met receptive ears. When Tecumseh, an astute military strategist, toured Indian country seeking cooperation, Shawnees, Winnebagos, Potawatomis, Sacs, Foxes, Kickapoos, and other bands joined the crusade. By 1810 hundreds of warriors had united with the brothers, causing alarm among white settlements, and war seemed to be inevitable.
The conflict came in November 1811, when Governor Harrison’s troops attacked Prophetstown on the Tippecanoe River. Because Harrison’s troops had stormed through their villages on their way to attack the Shawnees, many Kickapoos joined with Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet in the subsequent War of 1812. But while many bands of Shawnee, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and other Indians rallied to the intertribal cause, Vermillion Kickapoo leaders took steps to keep their followers peaceful. One Kickapoo chief sought to avert conflict by warning Harrison about Tecumseh’s warlike intentions. After that effort had failed, another Vermillion leader traveled to Vincennes in December 1811 to seek peace. Although he, too, was unsuccessful, many Kickapoos still tried to remain neutral, and in the following spring one hundred and fifty Vermillion Indians visited Vincennes in order to express friendship toward the Americans.

The war dragged on, however, and the Indians paid a heavy price. In October 1812, for example, three hundred militia volunteers ambushed a Prairie Kickapoo village near the Sangamon River in central Illinois. The troops destroyed four thousand bushels of corn, as well as a large quantity of meat, beans, pumpkins, and animal skins. As the frightened Indians fled into a nearby swamp, the attackers burnt the village to the ground.  

Fortunately for the Indians, the hostilities had waned by December 1814, when a Vermillion chief and his followers appeared at Fort Harrison, near present-day Terre Haute, to express their continued “amity and good will” toward the Americans. Tired of war, the Kickapoos were determined to make a lasting peace, and they left on friendly terms, even though a white man had murdered a Kickapoo woman at the fort. For the next several months these Indians struggled to maintain their territorial boundaries, which the war had rendered unclear. Retaining their lands had become the foremost concern of the Vermillion Kickapoos.

Protecting their holdings became increasingly difficult as more whites invaded the Old Northwest after the War of 1812. Conflicts between such culturally different peoples who were competing for the same land were inevitable. Both Indians and whites used roughly the same amount of land for farming, but settlers relied on domesticated animals for meat, whereas most Kickapoos and other Indians depended on hunting. Because hunters required a large territory to satisfy their needs, whites insisted that their own methods of land use were superior. They farmed intensively and “improved” the soil, whereas the “lazy” Indian hunters merely “roamed” over the land. To whites who were influenced by the Protestant work ethic, hunting was a sport, not honest labor. They justified Indian removal on the grounds that the tribes had failed to use the land as God had intended. Each white farmer, moreover, held legal title to his own land. Policy makers were convinced that only when the tribemen would accept deeds to individual farms could they be considered truly civilized. Until then, the Indians constituted an impediment to “progress” and to the proper utilization of land.

Time and again the vastly different methods of using available lands brought forth hard feelings. During the 1810s, for example, citizens demanded that the federal government use force to prevent the loss of “fertile tracts of earth to perpetual sterility as the hunting ground” for Indians. Most citizens were in agreement with Governor Harrison, when he demanded to
know if “one of the finest portions of the globe [Indiana] is to remain in the state of nature, the haunt of a few wretched savages.”

After the War of 1812, American political leaders acted to ensure that this would not happen. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had more than doubled the territory of the United States, and the vast lands beyond the Mississippi seemed an ideal place to move the Indians who were still living in the East. Frustrated that most tribes resisted assimilation into American society, Presidents Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe had each reasoned that removal to the West was in the best interests of the Indians as well as the whites. Removal would open eastern lands to industrious white farmers and would give the Indians more time to learn the ways of civilization without interference from politicians and settlers.

During 1815 and 1816, federal officials, hoping to put their removal plans into motion, sought peace agreements with Potawatomis, Sacs and Foxes, Kickapoos, and other former belligerents. Once the prospects for permanent peace were enhanced, Indian agents in Indiana and Illinois could begin the delicate land-cession negotiations with the tribes. Although the government hoped to move the tribes beyond the Mississippi within a few years, removal efforts proceeded slowly. The Kickapoos and other Indians were still a powerful factor in sparsely settled Illinois, and agents could ill afford to antagonize them. Unable to use force, the Indian agents tried to strike the best bargains possible by relying on friendly persuasion and deception in their dealings with the tribes.

Illinois Territory’s Governor Ninian Edwards recommended that a judicious approach be taken, especially with the Prairie Kickapoos, with whom he had concluded a peace agreement in September 1815. He said later that these Indians were “much the bravest and most warlike of all neighboring savages.” Better to keep them friendly, Edwards advised, because they could act as “a barrier against the inroads of all plunderers.” With this in mind, federal officials, who could barely distinguish between the many different tribes, much less the various bands, began peace negotiations with the Vermillion Kickapoos early in the following year.

In late May 1816, nearly five hundred Vermillion Kickapoos and Weas gathered at Fort Harrison to conclude a treaty. The Indians had reason to be especially joyous, for they would finally receive the long-overdue annuities promised in earlier treaties; they were also gratified that the new agreement included no further land cessions. On May 26 the Indians held a dance to celebrate the occasion. One white visitor reported that throughout the night, Indians as old as seventy and as young as four danced around a campfire to the sounds of drums and singing.

On June 4, pledging to maintain the territorial boundaries that had been established before the war, the Kickapoo chiefs and headmen signed the treaty. Prominent among the signers, after the leading chief Little Duck, was Kenekuk—the “Drunkard’s Son.” Because his father was an alcoholic, Kenekuk knew well the danger of intemperance, which was unfortunately dramatized after the treaty ceremonies. An observer noted that when “whiskey was liberally dealt out,” a “frenzy of intoxication” ensued, and one Indian murdered another. To prevent further trouble, fellow tribesmen acted quickly to put the offender to death. Because whites
believed that such behavior was typical of “red savages,” men such as Kenekuk realized that the Indians must change their ways if they were to survive peacefully among the whites.

Because officials in Indiana and Illinois knew that they had to extend a “liberal” policy toward Indians “for two or three years at least,” they also wanted the Indians to change their ways. Indiana’s Governor Thomas Posey believed that white settlement of his state would proceed more rapidly if the Indians could somehow be absorbed into the mainstream of American society. On November 22, 1816, Posey addressed 760 Weas, Potawatomis, and Vermillion Kickapoos who were assembled at Fort Harrison. In a speech that outwardly was religious in tone, the governor commanded the Indians to “set about immediately to alter your mode of life.” His talk amounted to a wholesale denunciation of traditional Indian ways. Ignoring the fact that most of them were already farmers, he advised them to follow the example of the successful Cherokees and other southern tribesmen who had abandoned hunting to till the soil.

Posey stressed the necessity of adopting Christian values and Euro-American forms of social organization. Telling the assembled Indians that their old ways were sinful, he preached that they should “love the Great Spirit and keep his laws.” for an angry God would punish wrongdoers “in this world or in the world where our spirits go.” In fine paternalistic fashion, Posey informed his Indian “children” that they would serve God and achieve success only by building permanent villages, raising crops and livestock, learning the “useful arts,” and providing their offspring with a formal education. The Indians, most of whom were undoubtedly offended by the governor’s sanctimonious attitude, listened more attentively when he promised financial assistance to all who accepted his proposals. Those assembled, including the Vermillion Kickapoo leader Little Duck, would not refuse governmental help in improving their living conditions and in securing permanent title to their lands. 

The Vermillion Kickapoos realized that their hold on the lands was becoming increasingly tenuous. Whites, who were grasping at any excuse to take control of Indian holdings, asserted that some tribes that had sided with Great Britain during the War 1812 should be banished. Even those who had been neutral or loyal to the United States would have to go. Settlers and politicians in the Old Northwest and the southern states beseeched the federal government to force the Indians, regardless of their allegiance during the war, to make way for the axe and the plow of “civilization.” Federal officials sympathized and began to seek ways in which to solve the Indian “problem” to the satisfaction of the frontiersmen. Citizens had political clout and were a force to be reckoned with, so the needs of Indians were of secondary importance.

Settlers who were flooding into Illinois Territory in 1817 clamored for control of the fertile Indian lands. One traveler called Illinois the finest location in North America: “The timber, the herbage, [and] the animals themselves that feed upon it are evidence of this.” So marvelous were its “woods and prairies, gently rising hills and widely extended vallies, that one may choose a paradise for a residence in almost any part of it.” Federal officials also recognized the value of the territory, and on February 28, 1817, the acting secretary of war, George Graham, authorized Governor Edwards to investigate whether the Indians of central and western Illinois would be willing to sell their lands.
The Prairie Kickapoos were among the principal tribes affected by Graham’s order, because they controlled lands from the Sangamon valley west to the Illinois River. Anxious to open the area to white settlement, Governor Edwards asserted that the federal government was authorized to remove the Kickapoos from the land, for they had “no right whatever to it, except mere occupancy.” Although the band had lived there since the 1730s and their legal right to the land was sound, Edwards alleged that they had been in the area for only a short time. He admitted that they had hunted in central Illinois for years, but he maintained that the tribe’s real home lay to the east, along the Wabash and its tributaries.¹⁹

Meanwhile, half-hearted governmental efforts to “civilize” and assimilate the eastern tribes fell afoul of land-hungry settlers. Frontiersmen and local politicians argued that absorbing the Indians into “civilized society without unpleasant collisions [was] about as probable as to expect a union between fire and water for mutual existence.” Washington bureaucrats took heed, and the old Jeffersonian Enlightenment ideas that allowed for the gradual assimilation of Indians faded quickly from the minds of most officials. While the explorer William Clark and a few others still believed that the Indians were capable of advancing to a level of civilization comparable to that of whites, the frontiersmen were not willing to wait for that to occur. Most frontiersmen thought of Indians as savages who were not capable of advancement, and politicians were quick to agree. Officials increasingly argued that protecting the interests of westward-moving settlers would better serve the nation than would upholding the rights of Indians.²⁰

Economy-minded officials at the Indian Department in Washington concluded that governmental expenditures were far too high for tribesmen who were about to be moved west; therefore they ordered stringent reductions. Annuity payments, which were guaranteed to the tribes under previous treaties, were withheld, and promised farm implements, food, and clothing arrived either late or not at all. Only when governmental indifference and inefficiency began to hinder removal efforts did the Indian agents urge officials in Washington to be less frugal. The special treaty commissioner Auguste Chouteau, a St. Louis businessman, stated in July 1818 that unless the tribes received their annuity payments promptly, all land-cession negotiations were doomed to failure.²¹

Pressure from Illinois whites exacerbated the tensions surrounding removal. By 1819, citizens of the new state were pressing harder for a rapid settlement of the Indian question. Most believed that if their state was to attract more settlers, they would have to change the eastern perception that they were “venturesome daredevils” living among “savage red men.”²² In January 1819 the Illinois Intelligencer (Kaskasdia) reported on the long-tried governmental plan “to draw the attention of these wild men of the chase to the culture of the earth; and so far as practicable, to incorporate them with the American citizens.” But even as the paper’s editors were wondering just how long it would take the Indians to advance “from the savage to the civilized state,”²³ efforts to remove the tribes from the Old Northwest began to bear fruit.

In the summer of 1819, federal commissioners managed to persuade the Prairie Kickapoos to surrender all of their claims to Illinois lands. That July, leaders of the Prairie bands arrived
at Edwardsville, Illinois, to consider a move to central Missouri. To white townspeople, the Kickapoos were a “most remarkable curiosity.” One astonished onlooker noted that “their color is reddish brown; their face irregular, often horribly colored with bright red paint; their hair is cut to a tuft upon the crown of the head and painted various colors.” They wore scant clothing, but they hung silver rings about their necks and arms and carried shields. On July 30 the Indians met with commissioners Chouteau and Benjamin Stephenson, and in exchange for yearly annuities and promises of governmental assistance on new lands near the Osage River in Missouri, the chiefs relinquished approximately fourteen million acres of prime Illinois land.

After successfully negotiating the treaty with the Prairie Kickapoos, officials began to negotiate with the Vermillion bands in the hope of achieving a similar coup. On August 10, Indian Agent Benjamin Parke informed Secretary of War John C. Calhoun that an agreement appeared imminent. Indeed, just two days later Agent William Prince reported that “the Vermillion Kickapoos [had] determined to cede to the United States their country west of the Wabash River without reserve.” Prince wrote that he needed only a few days to prepare for the treaty council, because “an understanding” had already been reached with these Indians—that understanding included a promise to pay a total of $3,000 to “chiefs” who were willing to sign the treaty.

Prince had shrewdly avoided discussions with such Vermillion leaders as Little Duck, who represented the great majority of Indians and strongly disagreed with selling their homes and lands. Typically, agents such as Prince dealt with those who were willing to accept bribes and who would sign anything in exchange for money, trade goods, or whiskey. Unfortunately, such devious methods were almost always successful. Ignorant of the white man’s law and unable to take legal recourse, incorruptible Indians usually lacked the means to combat such schemes. Prince was so confident that he would win an “advantageous” agreement from the Vermillion bands that he asked the secretary of war for only enough provisions to carry out short-term negotiations.

At Fort Harrison on August 30, 1819, the Vermillion “chiefs” agreed to surrender their Indiana-Illinois homeland. Because the Vermillion people had shown signs of accommodation to American society and because they were generally on friendly terms with their white neighbors, the treaty failed to specify immediate removal to the West. Eventually, however, federal officials hoped to rid the East of all Indians, regardless of circumstances. Secretary of War Calhoun made the government’s intentions and rationalizations clear that September. It was desirable, he stated, to remove the Kickapoos and other Indians beyond the Mississippi, “where a more extensive scope is afforded for the indulgence of their barbarous propensities and habits.”

Calhoun and other bureaucrats wanted the Indians to make room for the supposedly more industrious white farmers, and these officials were confident that their plans would be implemented with relative speed. The removal process, however, met with many obstacles; it would take more than thirty years to complete. Most Vermillion Kickapoos had no intention of ever abandoning their sacred homelands, and prying them from their tenacious hold
proved far more difficult than was anticipated.

During the years after the land-cession treaties, several Prairie and Vermillion Kickapoos moved to Missouri, but most of them clung to their lands and refused to leave. Mecina, or Elk Horn, a leader of one of the Prairie bands living along the Sangamon River, argued that the Treaty of Edwardsville was not binding on him because he had never signed it. Mecina demanded to know what right the government had “to purchase lands from the Red Skins, because it was very injurious to the Indians to sell, swap, or buy lands.” He threatened to burn down any houses that whites might build in the territory.28
Along the Wabash River and its tributaries, several Vermillion bands also remained. During the questionable negotiations that preceded the signing of the treaty at Fort Harrison, a new leader had risen among them. This charismatic man believed that selling land violated the Great Spirit’s commands, and he strenuously resisted all attempts to evict his followers. Like Mecina, this Indian had not signed any treaty surrendering Kickapoo lands. During the 1820s and afterwards, employing the tactics of white society to the Indians’ advantage, he
proved to be a thorn in the side of governmental officials, missionaries, and other whites who attempted to meddle in Kickapoo affairs. Not surprisingly, he followed the prescription for success that Indiana’s Governor Posey had laid down in 1816—but with a new and different emphasis. He was Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet.