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## ADOPTION AMONG THE INDIANS OF IOWA

BY EDGAR R. HARLAN

Jonas M. Poweshiek, an employee of our institution, is a full blooded Mesquakie, born on the Tama "reservation" on January 1, 1895. He was near completing the course at Carlisle at the outbreak of the World War when he enlisted. Soon after his service ended he was married to Ruth Moore, whom Jonas had met at Carlisle, a full blooded Sac, born on the Sac lands in Oklahoma. Their first child was a son who died in his second year, and there was "adopted to" them in his place the little son of John Young Bear of the Mesquakies at Tama. On the death of the little daughter of Moses Slick of the Mesquakies, the little daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Poweshiek was "adopted to" Mr. and Mrs. Slick. We asked Jonas to write for us his explanation in our language of this adoption.

Upon the death of Ruth's father there had been "adopted to" her Wa-ba-ska, a grandson of the great Black Hawk, who had likewise been "adopted to" Jim Thorp on the death of Thorp's father. Black Hawk's grandson then is the father of Thorp and Mrs. Poweshiek.

In the following article it will be noticed that "adoption" is used in two senses, first, as the act of adopting, and second, as the ceremony accompanying adoption. Thus when it is said in the last paragraph of the article "the family giving the adoption" etc., the word "adoption" is used in the sense of the ceremony of adoption. Attention is called to the unaltered English of this Indian composition.

It is to be observed that the sadness and stillness the death of an Indian occasions ends in the early phases, and the return of gayety and social activity is in the later phases of the adoption ceremony. "Civilization" has its annual lenten season that ends with Easter. Private bereavement puts on and off its badge of mourning, its somber garb. We have often been seriously asked by our good Mesquakie friends of Tama to explain our "way." Iowa "savage" culture had and retains its grief, its mourning, and its retrieval from bereavement. We have been asked by white friends to explain these Indian rites.

We can only say to both that these practices of either race



*Jonas M. Poweshiek*  
*Ruth M. Poweshiek*

and their children, Richard and Gloria.

may seem to the other curious, ludicrous. They are all mere "superstitious rites" to some in both cultures who are "holier than thou" toward sacred things in all cultures. In Indian bereavements, however, the interment and all attendant practices retain their aboriginal sincerity. They beget respect in anyone of any culture who gives fair thought to death.

As additional information upon the adoption practice of the Indians of Iowa, a letter of General Joseph M. Street is presented herewith. We have been aware of the substantial identity of the custom among the Sac, Fox and Winnebago peoples both in ancient and present times, but as to the Sioux we learn from General Street's letter more than from any other reliable Iowa source.

Des Moines, Iowa, June 1, 1928.

Friday morning June 1, 1928, I received word from my sister Mary that she was requested to notify Ruth and me that Moses Slick and his wife and the rest of their family had chosen our little girl, Gloria Poweshiek, to adopt on Sunday June 3, 1928, to take the place of Mr. and Mrs. Slicks' baby girl that they had lost recently.

There is no history as to when the adoption was first started, however it is an old, old custom that is still being carried on among the Sac and Foxes of the Mississippi now in Tama, Tama County, Iowa.

When any one family loses any relation by death, it has always been a custom to give an adoption. The father and mother have the right to choose whom they wish to adopt as their relation, and on the other hand if they cannot agree on any certain one, then the older Indians are consulted to give their advice as to whom they should adopt and why.

The rules are that the people who are to give an adoption, choose some one with a good, clean record, and also as near the same age as the one that has passed away, and some one that was his or her close friend.

By these adoptions relationships are formed, and they consider each other as such, and by so doing it helps the families to overcome their grief, and in time of need they always have some one to help them which is always cheerfully done.

On the evening before the adoption, usually the father or some one delegated goes to the home of the person who is to be adopted and invites the person over to his home for the evening meal. After the meal the person is requested to appear the following day at a certain hour, then the ceremonies begin for the occasion and it generally lasts from three to four hours, depending on the games played.

The person that is to be adopted is required by custom to take along

a certain number of goods—beads, bracelets, two blankets, and a pair of mocassins. The person should have on Indian style made clothes. The clothing should not necessarily be new, however they do make new clothing altogether now.

The person to be adopted upon arriving at a fixed time is immediately taken care of by attendants selected for this purpose by the party giving the adoption.

The meal is all ready, a special table being set for the person adopted, and two persons especially invited to eat with the person adopted. Upon entering the lodge it is customary for the person adopted to go around the right hand side of the fireplace four times and then sit down for the meal. New dishes are used, in fact everything that is used is new, and upon departing dishes are washed and everything used given to the person.

In case of an infant being adopted, such as our little girl Gloria, the people giving the adoption take a spoon and let the baby taste everything that is set on the table, then the mother does the eating for the child. All the other food for the feast is ready, long mats are spread on the ground outside, table cloth on top and food of every description placed on the table and every one present is invited to take part in the feast.

Just before the feast a member of the family giving the adoption gets a small wooden bowl and puts into it a little of each food that is on the table and takes it back into the lodge and places it near the fire in remembrance of all their relations that are gone, and the name of each person is mentioned as far back as the speaker can remember.

During the feast outside the person adopted has finished eating, then an older member of the tribe begins to talk to the adopted and the family giving the adoptions, telling them the requirements that is expected of both parties in the future.

The person adopted is then being changed of clothing, new clothes put on, hair combed and face painted. Many gifts are given to the adopted.

The person giving the talk said that the young couple had been in grief since they lost their little girl, and among the infants of the Reservation they had chosen Gloria Poweshiek to adopt to take the place of their lost child, thereby taking away all grief and that they should all feel happy again, not to grieve any more, and that they should love one another, visit each other often, consider each other as relations, and the parents of Gloria should tell her what has taken place today when she is old enough to understand.

By the time the feast is over the person adopted is ready to go outside, Indian tobacco is given and the adopted throws some of it out through the east door and then walks around to the right four times and goes out the west door. She is given eight sticks and when the adopted gets outside she goes among the crowd and gives to whom

she or he wishes. It is a sign of an invitation to dance and to take part in whatever games are played.

After the little sticks are given away the person adopted takes a place and stands at attention. In our case Mrs. Poweshiek carried Gloria on her back and performed all duties for her.

Three men who understand the rulings and songs take their place just a few feet back of the adopted, they sit down on the ground, one has the tom-tom, one a gourd and the third has a staff. Then they proceed with four adoption songs and after that they sing dance songs, using four. The ones that got the sticks gather toward the center and dance. The person adopted dances also and takes part in the games.

After they dance four times they each get three or four yards of goods and then women's dice game is played; each time goods are put up or beads and the person making most points the first round wins. They play until all the goods and beads are gone.

When a boy or man is adopted they have dancing, a card game and an Indian lacrosse game.

It is a belief among the Sac and Fox Indians that after a person dies the soul remains until after the adoption, then it departs to the happy hunting ground.

After the adoption is over, members of the family giving the adoption assist the person they have adopted to the vehicle, they carry the goods for the person and other gifts, food is also taken that is already cooked, which is put up in new buckets, and the ceremonies for the day are over.

JONAS M. POWESHIEK.

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<sup>1</sup>On board the S. Boat Warrior in the  
Mississippi below Rock Island 12 June 1833.

Genl. William Clark  
Sup. Intd. Ind. Affs. at  
St. Louis,  
Sir,

I some time since received a letter from the Ind. Agent at Rock-Island, requesting me to obtain some Sauk & Fox prisoners, which it is alledged the Sioux yet retain, and send them to Rock Island. I merely turned over the letter to the Sioux Agent & wrote the Sac Agent that *I was not the Agent of the Sioux*. As I am more intimately acquainted with the subject than either the Sac or Sioux Agents can be, as they have not been with the Indians during the period in which these transactions occurred, on reflection I have considered it a duty to explain all I know to you in relation to these prisoners.

The Sioux in the battle with the Sacs & Foxes last Summer lost several influential men, and others were severely wounded. Whenever this is the case Indians expect to kill the prisoners taken, or to adopt

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<sup>1</sup>The style of spelling, punctuation, etc., used by General Street in his letter is followed herein.—Editor.

them into the families that have experienced the greatest suffering by death in the contest. After the Battle they preemptorily refused to surrender the prisoners to the Demand made in the name of Colo. Taylor. I sent subsequently two *Special Expresses*, (the last a highly influential man) to get the prisoners, and nothing prevented my personally going up for them but the order of Genl. Scott, to be at Rock Island by a particular day. By my last messenger I sent a written talk to their old chief Wabashaw, and he came down with his warriors & principal men, and the greater part of the prisoners and went on to Rock Island. He told me all could not be brought as some were far distant in the Wintering grounds; but that I should have all but 2 or 3 which he hoped his great Father would not *force* them to give up.

These were delivered to Genl. Scott at R. I. and a small Girl who had lost her Father mother and all *near* relations in the War, and had been previously adopted into the family of the Old Sioux Chief Wabashaw, on his petition was given to him by Genl. S. and he took her home. The Chief & his Squaw, believe she greatly resembles a daughter they had recently burried, and she is treated with uncommon attention and unbounded affection, as their daughter returned from the World of Spirits. An other, and one of those *specially required*, was taken in the battle and given to a great Warrior, who being mortally wounded lived several weeks, after his return, and then died in his lodge surrounded by his family, and this young Sauk prisoner. A respectable man, then acting as my Agent was present in the lodge when the prisoner by his voluntary consent was adopted by the Sioux as the head of his family. A council was collected in the lodge of the dying man, and the Sauk was present. The dying Sioux enquired of the Sauk, about his family and relations, and finding by his answers that he had lost all his nearest relations the Sioux proceeded. You see this woman and that little Boy, I am their only support. I am about to pass away. And who will take care of and comfort them? They will soon have no person to hunt for them. I received my death-wound in the battle when you were taken, and your friends slain. I shall very soon pass away and who will take my place in this family?—The Sioux paused and then proceeded—My Son, (speaking to the Young Sauke) will you relinquish your country and your people, when there is no Father, or wife, Mother or child, brother or Sister expecting you, and looking for your return, and fill my place in this family? Will you take care of this woman and this child? Will you comfort and feed them?—After a long silence the Sauk, replied slowly with his eyes cast to the ground—I have heard all you have said and considered it. It is true—I have no dear friends to return to, & I have no strong desire to go to my people. The places where I have lived with those I loved, will look gloomy, and my heart will feel sore when I see my people & miss those who loved me. I have no wish to return to scenes that will remind me of my lost friends. Here all is new to me, and I will make this my

*new home*—I will take care of this woman & this Boy and they shall be dear to my heart just as they are dear to your heart. I promise to comfort & feed them, and love them as you have loved them. And when you have passed away, they will be to me what they are to you. They then shook hands and all went out but the two men, the woman and the little Boy. A few days after the Warrior Chief died, & the Young Sauke, took his place in his family, and is now an active hunter and the Squaw & their little Boy are his family. He dresses like the Sioux, hunts when & where he pleases and could go to his country whenever he pleased. Yet he renounced his people, & is in fact a Sioux & never can be induced to leave them.

How can the Govt. interfere in these cases?—Of the others I do not know, and untill the receipt of the Sac Agents letters, I was unap-  
prised there was any beside these two. *Nor do I believe there is any others.*—My individual belief is, that it is *an effort to raise a ground of complaint against the Sioux.*

The Sacs & Foxes mean to be revenged upon the Sioux for following those who escaped from Genl. Atkinson. If they can make out some plausible pretext will—if not they will do it at all risques. And to this, white-persons advise them. Cast your eyes over an anonymous paragraph in the St Louis Republican of the early part of this month or last of May. The Writer says—*who instigated the Sioux to persue & Massacre the fugitive Sacs & Foxes who had escaped across the Mississippi and were returning to their homes? More of this Annon.*—I quote from recollection after a hasty perusal, as my time while at St. Louis did not permit me leisure to examine all that had been published. Is not this singular language for white-men? The Sioux Menominees and Winnibeagoes of My Agency, had been urged by me to persue the course they did in the whole war,—and in the permit of the “*fugitive*” Sacs & Foxes, the Sioux were acting in strict obedience to the directions of Genl. Atkinson, who specially sent them in persuit of the Sacs & Foxes. I have many strange facts yet to develope in relation to the Sacs & Foxes—but my letter is now too long.

I saw Keokuck to day on his way to the trial of the Indians he gave up for murdering a white-man last summer in Hancock Co. Ill. Why does the Govt. and its agents suffer this *farce* with all its attendant experiences to go on? *I know that neither of these Indians can be convicted, and so does Keokuck.—And I would not have received them of Keokuck.* Keokuck knew when he gave up those Indians that he could exprisly prove them all innocent & many miles distant at the moment the Murder was committed. *He knew who did the murder—and he now Knows.* The Indian who murdered the white-man came directly to Keokuck, and told him what he had done—Keokuck had just heard of the compleate destruction of the Black Hawks party, and he was greatly alarmed. Keokuck said to the murderer, “My Son you have acted foolishly—I must go to Rock Island and let the great Chief



Know what you have done, and if he desires it I must deliver you to him." And he immediately came to R. I. and gave the first notice of the murder. Now, Sir, is it not the extreme of folly to receive any but this murderer from Keokuck? The men he delivered & the Agent recd. he knew could be proved innocent, & he has gone to do it. These are the things that lessen us in the estimation of the Indians, and give them an idea of fancied superiority. Had I been the Agent, I would never have recd. those Indians, and I would now give them up to Keokuck this day & make a new demand of the *murderers*—Yes I would say in his "teeth" *You know the murderers, and before one dollar of the annuity by the Treaty of 1832 is paid you must deliver to me as the representative of your Great Father the President, the murderers.*

Keokuck now wants of me he says to day, the Prophets wife & children and the horses taken from them & Black Hawks party. I referred him to you. But they never shall have either unless I am pre-emptorily ordered to deliver them. And if such is required, I have much to say, why in point of justice & policy, it should not be done. The Prophets family are Winnebeagoes—Keokuck acknowledged to day his wife a *full* Winebeagoe—And the Horses were the prise of the captors.

I am with great respect

Your Mo. obt-St.

Jos. M. Street, U. S.

Ind. Agent.

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BRIDGE ACROSS THE NICHINABOTTENA  
[NISHNABOTNA]

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The undersigned have erected a bridge across the Nichnabotna (Nishnabotna) River at the Rock Ford at their own expense, directly on the Route from St. Joseph, Mo., to Kanesville, Old Fort Kearney and the Mouth of Platte River. The road is excellent and the Bottoms is above high water mark. Emigrants can cross with safety and without delay. Charges cheap. And they leave it to the decerning public to say whether they shall be patronized or not.

CANSLER & LIVERMORE.

Fremont County, Iowa, May 1, 1850.—3m.—*The Frontier Guardian*, Kanesville, (Council Bluffs), Iowa, June 12, 1850. (In the Newspaper Division of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.)

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