

Black Hawk

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BLACK HAWK.
THE MAN—THE HERO—THE PATRIOT.

—
BY MRS. W. F. PECK.
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In the history of the Northwest there is probably no more conspicuous, interesting and romantic figure than the illustrious Indian chief, Black Hawk, the hero of the war bearing his name.

Some of the difficulties usually encountered in sketching the life of an Indian are obviated in this instance by reason of the fact that the chief has left a personal record wherein his character, principles and motives are clearly indicated. Various flippant historical writers have attempted to discredit his "Autobiography" by impugning the veracity and motives of the persons who acted as interpreter and amanuensis. It is enough for those who were personally acquainted with Antoine Le Claire, the official interpreter of the United States for the Sac and Fox Indians, to know that his name is attached to the publication to guarantee its authenticity, but in addition an affidavit is appended in which he says the narrative is strictly correct in all particulars. The amanuensis and editor, J. B. Patterson, enjoyed no less the confidence and esteem of all who knew him in the vicinity of his home, Oquawka, Illinois, where he lived for many years prior to his death, which recently occurred.

In this paper, however, as far as possible Black Hawk will be permitted to speak for himself. His book was published in 1833, and was dedicated to Brigadier-General Henry Atkinson, in whose charge the old chieftain was placed at the conclusion of the Black Hawk War. The reasons for its publication cannot be better indicated than by quoting from the dedication:



BLACK HAWK.

An etching after the colored lithograph in McKenny and Hall's "Indian Tribes of North America," by Charles A. Gray.

“The changes of many summers have brought old age upon me, and I cannot expect to survive many moons. Before I set out on my long journey to the land of my fathers, I have determined to give my motives and reasons for my former hostility to the whites, and to vindicate my character from misrepresentations. The kindness I received from you whilst a prisoner of war assures me that you will vouch for the facts contained in my narrative, so far as they came under your observation. I am now an obscure member of a nation that formerly honored and respected my opinions. The pathway to glory is rough and many gloomy hours obscure it. May the Great Spirit shed light on yours, and that you may never experience the humility that the power of the American government has reduced me to is the wish of him who, in his native forests, was once as proud and bold as yourself.”

The Indian name for Black Hawk as given in his book is Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak. He was in his 67th year when it was dictated, having been born at the Sac village on Rock River in 1767. There is scarcely a page of this unique story that does not convey the impression that the author was as much the sage, the philosopher, the patriot, as the warrior, if not more so. The innate barbarian religious instinct associated with the refined feeling and delicate sentiment of the author permeates the entire narrative.

In speaking of the daily feasts which various members of his tribe were accustomed to make in the autumn—some to the Good Spirit, others to the Bad Spirit to pacify him, he says—‘For my part I am of the opinion that, so far as we have reason we have a right to use it, determining what is right or wrong, and we should always pursue that path which we believe to be right.’ Again, he says, “We thank the Great Spirit for all the good he has conferred upon us. For myself, I never take a drink of water from a spring without being mindful of his goodness.”

His ethical views are quite definitely explained in these words: "We can only judge of what is proper and right by our own standard of what is right and wrong, which differs widely from the whites, if I am correctly informed. The whites may do wrong all of their lives, and then if they are sorry for it when they die, all is well; but with us it is different. We must continue to do good throughout our lives. If we have corn and meat, and know of a family that have none, we divide with them. If we have more blankets than we absolutely need, and others have not enough, we must give to those who are in want."

His criticism on our political methods is also tersely stated. He says: "The white people appear never to be satisfied. When they get a good father, they hold councils at the suggestion of some bad, ambitious man, who wants the place himself, and conclude among themselves that this man, or some other equally ambitious, would make a better father than they have, and nine times out of ten they don't get as good a one again."

The occasional glimpses given by Black Hawk of the folk-lore of his people show it to be full of interest and fanciful beauty, and also that he was himself exceptionally impregnated with the aboriginal propensity for mysticism. Into various ingenious tales the Indian story-tellers of the different nations have woven the idea that maize or Indian corn, was a special and mysterious gift from the Great Spirit; but of all the popular myths concerning its origin the traditional belief of the Sacs, representing it with beans and tobacco as a heaven-sent offering is richest in poetic imagination.

"According to tradition handed down to our people," says Black Hawk, "a beautiful woman was seen to descend from the clouds and alight upon the earth by two of our ancestors who had killed a deer and were sitting by the fire roasting a part of it to eat. They were aston-

ished at seeing her, and concluded that she was hungry and had smelt the meat. They immediately went to her, taking with them a piece of the roasted venison. They presented it to her. She ate it, telling them to return to the spot where she was sitting, at the end of one year, and they would find a reward for their kindness and generosity. She then ascended to the clouds and disappeared. The men returned to their village and explained to the tribe what they had seen, done and heard, but were laughed at by their people. When the period had arrived for them to visit this consecrated ground, where they were to find a reward for their attention to the beautiful woman of the clouds, they went with a large party and found where her right hand had rested on the ground corn growing, where the left hand had rested beans, and immediately where she had been seated, tobacco."

Black Hawk was a precocious youth, and was early trained by his father, Pyesa, in the arts of Indian warfare. At the age of fourteen he distinguished himself by wounding an enemy. He was not then allowed to paint or wear feathers, but was assigned a permanent place in the ranks of the braves. A reputation for courage and skill was soon established, and in later life he was very fond of relating the thrilling exploits of his youth to his many white friends at Fort Armstrong, on Rock Island. He was nineteen years of age when his father was fatally wounded in an encounter with the ancient enemy of his nation, the Cherokees. His father being the direct descendant of Nanamakee, or thunder, to whom by the will of the Great Spirit the great medicine-bag of the Sacs had been first entrusted, the treasure was now in his possession. At his death it passed into the hands of Black Hawk, his only heir. Grave responsibility, however, attached to its possession, for it symbolized the "soul of the nation," and had been delivered originally to his distinguished ancestor with the admonition that "as it had never been disgraced, it must forever be kept unsullied."

In accordance with the customs of his tribe, after the death of his father, Black Hawk blacked his face, fasted and prayed to the Great Spirit for five years. During this period he did not engage in any warlike expedition. Though actively participating in the wars of his nation afterward, it is possible that this long period of quiet, sorrowing, and self-contemplation, may have given him the habit of solitary reverie for which he was distinguished in later life. In commemoration of this trait the magnificent promontory on Rock River near his old home has been given the name "Black Hawk's Watch-Tower." "This commanding point was," says Black Hawk, "a favorite resort, and was frequently visited by me alone, when I could sit and smoke my pipe and look with wonder and pleasure at the grand scenes that were presented by the sun's rays, even across the mighty water."

Black Hawk figures prominently in the annals of American history for the first time in the war with Great Britain in 1812. When the relations between the two countries were becoming so strained that a war-cloud was distinctly visible, the Sacs and Foxes were asked to send representatives to Washington for a conference. They responded, and an agreement was entered into that, in consideration of strict neutrality to be preserved by the Indians in the event of war, our government would furnish them with supplies upon the same terms of credit that they had been getting from the English.

Through ignorance or a misunderstanding of the nature of the compact, the pledge on the part of the government was violated by its agent at Fort Madison, upon the first application of the Sacs, when credit was denied and cash payment haughtily demanded for goods.

However sincere the desire of these people may have been to keep their own promise, this refusal, in connection with the overtures of the English immediately following, turned the scale against it. At this critical moment

Colonel Dixon of the British army, stationed at Green Bay, anticipated the needs of the disappointed Red Men, and when dejected and gloomy they returned from their fruitless journey to Fort Madison, an agent with two boatloads of goods, which were distributed gratuitously, was awaiting them on Rock Island. The agent had other business, too, besides ministering to the immediate wants of the disaffected Indians. He was the bearer of a private message to Black Hawk, which induced the warrior to visit the British officer at his headquarters, and eventually to join him with two hundred picked men, who were ever after known as the "British band," as a confederate. As the crafty English Colonel grasped the chief's hand he addressed him as "General Black Hawk," and whispered in his ear these seductive words: "You will now hold us fast by the hand. Your English father has found that the Americans want to take your country from you and has sent me and my braves to drive them back to their own country." Nothing could have stirred so profoundly the intrepid chief to action as this utterance, and he entered heart and soul into the contest.

Although he does not speak of it in his memoirs, there is ample proof for the assertion that Black Hawk was with the great chief Tecumseh when he so valiently led the Indian forces, and fell in the famous battle of the Thames. After the war was over it was Black Hawk's misfortune to be regarded with suspicion as a contentious and turbulent spirit by our government.

Very soon after the acquisition of the vast domain west of the Mississippi, known as the Louisiana purchase, it became the design of the government to transfer, eventually, all of the numerous tribes of Indians that had for untold ages roamed at will, within boundaries fixed by conquests among themselves, over the eastern territory bordering on the river, to the newly acquired possessions. In pursuance of this policy, President Jefferson commu-

nicated with the Indian authorities at St. Louis directing them to obtain by purchase or treaty a part, at least, of the extensive holdings of the Sacs and Foxes.

In an accidental way an opportunity was soon presented and a treaty, with some prudent reservations on the part of the Indians, was effected, which ceded to the United States the immense tract of territory claimed by these Indians east of the Mississippi River. The compensation was ridiculously inadequate, and although the treaty was at various times after ratified by the representatives of these nations, the charge that deception was practiced upon them was always loud and long. The stipulations which were its saving grace were at length openly violated, and the bitter feuds and dissensions that grew out of the treaty, finally ending in the Black Hawk War, have fastened the stigma of bad faith and unfair dealing with these people upon our government.

During Black Hawk's absence in the British army his village on Rock River was left unprotected. An emergency arose which seemed to menace its safety. A council was called and immediate flight contemplated. As this decision was being reached, word was received that the clever young brave, Keokuk, had volunteered to gather the warriors and take charge of the defense of the village. The alarm proved to be false, but Keokuk's conduct met with such emphatic approval that he was at once admitted to the council lodge and elected war-chief.

In all the distracting troubles that subsequently ensued with the Sacs and the Foxes, there were ever after two factions; one under the leadership of Black Hawk, the other of Keokuk; the former the war, the latter the peace party. The establishment of Fort Armstrong upon Rock Island in 1816 was the first warning of the government to the Indians that the provisions of the treaty of 1804 would be enforced. They were sorry to give up this island, which had been used as a garden and pleasure resort, but

they soon became reconciled, and formed for many of the occupants strong and lasting attachments. A few years later when the surging tide of civilization began flowing towards the great West, the indescribably beautiful country of the Sacs, with a soil so spontaneously fertile that it responded as if by magic to the touch of cultivation, became irresistibly fascinating to the unworthy as well as the worthy pioneer.

The scenery all about the ancient village site—the home of Black Hawk, was a wilderness of bewildering beauty. The rippling, winding waters of Rock river bounded it on one side and the majestic Mississippi on the other. There were broad green valleys and great encircling hills that skirted the banks of the two rivers in which were numerous islands clothed with luxuriant foliage.

Here in this spot, gifted with natural graces, these undaunted sons of the forest, and their fathers before them, had lived unmolested for more than a century. Here they had tilled their fields, hunted and fished, made their feasts, indulged in their various games and pastimes, celebrated their national war-dance with a perfect sense of security born of confidence in their own superior strength. Their numbers had rapidly increased and they were, as Indians go, prosperous, progressive, industrious and happy.

Naturally there were many peculiarly strong ties that bound these people to the home of their ancestry and birth. Strongest perhaps was the sacred regard which they entertained for the graves of their kindred. Yet, when the demand came to relinquish this consecrated spot the superior power of the whites was being so well understood by many that, though it cut their heart-strings to do it, all would have been mournfully surrendered without a struggle, if it had not been for the heroic stand taken by their implacable leader. By the terms of the original treaty the Indians were to live upon their lands until they were sold. As a matter of fact when the order was issued

for them to vacate not one acre had been legally transferred, and the persons who were forcing themselves upon the Indians were doing so in violation of both the spirit and letter of the treaty.

Acting upon the advice of friends at Fort Armstrong the practical and pacific Keokuk gathered his adherents about him and crossed to the West Side of the Mississippi. This ready acquiescence of Keokuk in yielding to the unjust demand was construed by Black Hawk as an act of cowardice and treachery, and all friendship between them was then ended.

“What right,” says Black Hawk, “had these people to our village, and our fields which the Great Spirit had given us to live upon? My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence, and so long as they occupy and cultivate it they have a right to the soil; but if they voluntarily leave it, other people have a right to settle on it. Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away.” It will be readily recognized that in the doctrine so simply and forcibly expressed by an untutored barbarian is contained the germ thought that underlies the revolutionary philosophy of some of the profoundest thinkers and writers on social topics to-day. In explanation of the fact that Black Hawk himself had at one time signed a ratification of the objectionable treaty of 1804, he says, “What do we know of the manners and customs of the white people? They might buy our bodies for dissection, and we would touch the goose-quill to confirm it, and not know what we were doing. This was the case with me and my people in touching the goose-quill the first time.” Upon these issues Black Hawk took his stand and firmly and resolutely refused compliance with the order to abandon his village. To clothe themselves with legal authority to enforce the order the government authorities quietly sold the section of land

occupied by the Sac village to a private citizen. Black Hawk still remained obdurate, and refused to recognize the validity of the sale, and amid the turmoil of conflicting claims to possession between the aggressive and insubordinate white settlers and the determined red men, many grievous wrongs were doubtless perpetrated on both sides. A startling appeal setting forth in strong colors the Indian atrocities was made to the Governor of Illinois on the part of the whites and General Gaines with a large force of men was sent to Fort Armstrong to dispatch the Indians with bayonets. Black Hawk for once argued that discretion is the better part of valor, and under cover of night deserted his village, crossed to the west side of the Mississippi river and encamped under the protection of a white flag.

A council was immediately called at the Fort and a new treaty with the express stipulation that the Indians should forever remain on the west side of the Mississippi was made. It was during the deliberations that Black Hawk delivered the characteristic speech which was quoted in a former article on Fort Armstrong.

In commenting upon the memorial, Black Hawk says: "Bad and cruel as our people were treated by the whites, not one of them was hurt or molested by our band. I hope this will prove that we are a peaceable people—having permitted ten men to take possession of our corn fields, prevent us from planting our corn, burn our lodges, ill-treat our women, and beat to death our men without offering resistance to their barbarous cruelties. This is a lesson worthy for the white man to learn; to use forbearance when injured. The whites were complaining at the same time that we were intruding upon their rights. They made it appear that they were the injured party and we the intruders. They called loudly to the great war chief to protect their property. How smooth must be the language of the whites when they can make

right look like wrong, and wrong like right." Misery and destitution confronted the banished Indians in their temporarily improvised home, and yearning for the old one was not extinguished by written compact. In their extremity Black Hawk counselled with the bad prophet Wabokieshiek and listening to his persuasions to recross the river, he did so with his braves, women and children, and such domestic equipments as they owned. The action, however, was taken with expressed intention of making their Winnebago friends a visit and to supply themselves with the means of subsistence.

An alarm was immediately given, among others an army under General Scott was ordered to the frontier and the altogether needless Black Hawk war was fought—a war which resulted in the extermination of almost the entire remnant of Sacs and Foxes under Black Hawk, including the women and children. Black Hawk, betrayed by a treacherous Indian, was captured and taken to Jefferson barracks where he was kept in confinement for many months. Finally, under military escort, he was taken on a tour through the East, and was the recipient of much flattering attention and many mementos. Upon his return he was released after a formal ceremony deposing him and substituting Keokuk as leader of his people.

To what stage of moral and intellectual development these savages would have attained if they had been left among the beautiful hills and rivers of their native wilderness to work out their own destiny in their own appointed way, can only be a matter of idle conjecture. Contact with the whites proved in this, as in most other instances, a blighting instead of a civilizing influence. The vices of the dominant race were emulated, but not their virtues. The testimony, however, of those who knew him well is abundant on the point that Black Hawk was a notable exception to this rule. He not only abstained himself from the use of intoxicating beverages, the red man's curse, but

used his personal influence, sometimes actively enforcing it, to prevent its consumption by his people. To his sorrow he found that the young men who were ever willing to follow his counsel in the weighty affairs of the nation did not heed his admonitions in these matters.

Benjamin Drake, Black Hawk's able and discriminating biographer, gives the following pen portrait of the old chief:

"In height Black Hawk is about five feet ten inches, with broad shoulders but limbs not very muscular. His nose is sharp and slightly aquiline, and his eyes are of a dark hazel color. The most striking peculiarity in his personal appearance is his head, which is singularly formed, and has been pronounced by some observers the envy of phrenologists. His countenance is mild and benevolent, having little of that dark and ferocious expression, not uncommon among Indians, and which during the late border war was imagined to be eminently characteristic of Black Hawk."

Apart from his own writings, the fact is otherwise well attested that Black Hawk displayed, uniformly, great forbearance in dealing with the encroachments and rapacity of the white settlers in his village. He was very hospitable and often shared by invitation his lodge, his belongings and humble fare with his white neighbors. By force of circumstances he was made their enemy, by inclination he was peaceful, affable and friendly with them. Black Hawk was not a bigamist as were many of the chiefs of his nation, and his kindness to and affection for his wife and children have been subjects of much favorable comment. Upon the death of his eldest son, followed soon after by that of his youngest daughter, he left his village with the remaining members of his family and built a lodge in a secluded corn-field. He gave away his entire possessions and fasted, "only drinking water during the day, and eating sparingly of boiled corn at sunset for twenty-four moons."

As an orator and counsellor Black Hawk enjoyed a wide reputation not only in his own, but among neighboring tribes of Indians. He was liberally endowed with those magnetic qualities that are ever potential factors in achieving personal popularity and success. Unlike Keokuk, Black Hawk was secure of his rank and station by hereditary right, and he never sought to enhance his dignity and influence by ostentatious display or other meretricious actions, as did his ambitious competitor. His cult of great men, especially military heroes, was a remarkable trait of his character. He feelingly speaks of the disappointment he felt because General Scott was not permitted to visit him on board the steamer when passing Fort Armstrong en route for Jefferson barracks, where he was taken as a prisoner immediately after his capture.

Although Black Hawk's reputation for personal bravery is well attested, little has been known about his ability as a military commander and strategist. Bearing upon this point a new light has been thrown by Charles Aldrich in a recently published article, wherein he quotes the gracious tribute paid to the old hero in a personal interview with Jefferson Davis,* a conspicuous participant in the Black Hawk war. His graphic account of a masterly maneuver of which he was a witness is as follows:

We were one day pursuing the Indians when we came close to the Wisconsin River. Reaching the river bank the Indians made so determined a stand and fought with such desperation that they held us in check. During this time the squaws tore bark from the trees, with which they made little shallops, in which they floated their papooses and other impedimenta across to an island, also swimming over the ponies. As soon as this was accomplished, half of the warriors plunged in and swam across, each holding his gun in one hand over his head and swimming with the other. As soon as they reached the opposite bank they also opened fire upon us, under cover of which the other half slipped down the bank and swam over in like manner. This [said Mr. Davis] was the most brilliant exhibition of military tactics that I ever witnessed—a feat of most consummate management and bravery, in

* *Midland Monthly*, Des Moines, Iowa, May, 1896, pp. 406-411.

the face of an enemy of greatly superior numbers. I never read of anything that could be compared with it. Had it been performed by white men, it would have been immortalized as one of the most splendid achievements in military history.

Black Hawk concludes his own account of the same encounter in these words:

In this skirmish, with fifty braves, I defended and accomplished my passage over the Wisconsin, with a loss of only six men, though opposed by a host of mounted militia. I would not have fought there, but to gain time for our women and children to cross to an island. A warrior will duly appreciate the embarrassments I labored under—and whatever may be the sentiments of the white people in relation to this battle, my nation, though fallen, will award to me the reputation of a great brave in conducting it.

In Black Hawk was incarnated the very spirit of justice. He was as inflexible in all matters of right and wrong, as he understood them, as flint or steel. Expediency formed no part of his creed, and his conduct in the trying emergencies that ended in the fatal conflict, was eminently consistent with his character. No thought of malice or revenge entered into his great soul; the contest was waged with no other purpose in mind than to protect his people in what he believed was their inalienable right to the wide domain that was being wrested from them. It matters not whether his skin is copper-colored or white, the brave man, the man who has the courage of his convictions, always challenges the admiration of the world, and as such pre-eminently the noble old Sac war chief will ever be an admirable figure. Having learned his invincible daring, the government certainly acted prudently, if not fairly, in officially depriving him of his commanding position, for by this act he was rendered powerless to form new alliances to regain his lost prestige and possessions. When the inevitable came, though his proud spirit was crushed, he accepted defeat grandly. He saw the sceptre of leading chieftainship pass from his own into the hands of his successful rival with the resignation of a martyr.

Black Hawk's last public utterance was at the house

of a friend in Fort Madison a short time before his death. The occasion was a Fourth of July celebration and a number of distinguished guests were assembled. He spoke in response to the toast, "Our Illustrious Guest, Black Hawk." In the course of his remarks he said: "Rock River was my beautiful country. I liked my towns, my corn-fields and the home of my people. I fought for it. I have looked upon the Mississippi since I have been a child. I love the great river. I have dwelt upon its banks from the time I was an infant. I look upon it now. As it is my wish, I hope you are my friends."

The closing words of his memoirs are: "The tomahawk is buried forever. We will forget what has passed, and may the watchword between the Americans and the Sacs and Foxes ever be friendship."

If love of country is one of the cardinal virtues, and if the man who is willing to risk his life and all he holds dear for its defense is a patriot, then it may be written of Black Hawk that he was a virtuous man and a patriot.

The Cincinnati Atlas of the first announces that "Governor Slade of Vermont, left the Broadway Hotel this morning for Iowa, Tennessee and Missouri, with thirteen young ladies designed for school teachers in those States." This is the second party of New England teachers that has been brought out for distribution among the Western States.—*Dubuque Miners' Express*, October 26, 1853.

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