

# INDIANS AS PIONEERS



## Potawatomis on the Frontier

*By R. David Edmunds*

Throughout this century, any discussion of the American frontier has conjured images of dauntless pioneers, hardy men and women who trekked west to open the “wilderness” for the American dream. More recently, illustrations in dusty junior high social science texts have pictured covered wagons moving slowly toward the horizon, while men in broad brimmed hats and women in starched sunbonnets guide the stubborn mules or faithful oxen pulling those “prairie schooners.”

During the nineteenth century, the advancing frontier was pictured in even more allegorical terms. In 1872, John Gast's painting, entitled "American Progress," pictured a goddess striding from east to west across a broad prairie landscape. At her feet strode stalwart hunters and miners, while in her wake a sunlit Currier and Ives America basked in agricultural and industrial prosperity. To the west, in the goddess's path, mountains and deserts were bathed in darkness, while buffalo, wolves, and bears fled her approach, seeking refuge over the western horizon. And of course, accompanying these denizens of the wilderness were several families of Indians, who like the beasts of the forests also fled from such "enlightenment."

Within the past two decades historians have re-examined the westward movement and have reassessed the role of both white pioneers and their Indian neighbors. Frederick Jackson Turner's argument that the West was the land of opportunity still seems to hold true, but some of Turner's ideas regarding the American frontier and American frontiersmen have come under considerable scrutiny. More recent studies, such as John Unruh's *The Plains Across*, or John Farragher's *Sugar Creek*, illustrate that the American frontier produced about as much communal economic effort as rugged individualism, and that the lure of free land may have attracted settlers west, but more fortunes were made in commerce than in agriculture. Moreover, Unruh's study of Overland emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West indicates that the threat of Indian attacks have been much exaggerated. Although the popular media has long devoted considerable space to depictions of wagon-trains under attack by circling war parties, Unruh illustrates that many white travelers saw few, if any Indians, and that the contacts between the two groups were more often amenable than otherwise.

Obviously, conflicts between Indians and whites occurred, but in retrospect Indians posed a far greater threat in terms of pilferage than as perpetrators of violence. Tribesmen sometimes stole horses from a wagon train's picket line, and they often wandered through camp, pocketing items that they thought were useful. Diaries kept by emigrants are full of entries such as: "They [the Indians] are friendly disposed and no disposition to hostility is shown. They, however, steal all they can, but as yet they have not got much from us." Another wayfarer reported back to his hometown newspaper that he believed, if given the opportunity, the Pawnees could "steal a horse from under his rider."

Rumors of bloodshed were far more common than any actual loss of

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

life. Of course such violence did occur, but in the two decades between 1840 and 1860, approximately 316,000 emigrants traveled west over the Oregon Trail. During that period the Indians killed 362 travelers. In the same decades, by their own admission, American emigrants killed 426 Indians. Incidentally, the homicide rate for either group is less than similar statistics for several of our modern American urban areas. Ironically, one was considerably safer on the Oregon Trail than on certain streets in Detroit or Houston.

But Indians played another role in this drama of westward progress, a role that often is ignored or misinterpreted. Far from being the foils for the advancing frontier, in many instances the first large numbers of new "settlers" to move onto the eastern fringes of the Great Plains were Indians themselves: eastern tribesmen who were fleeing the political and economic disruption sweeping through their old homelands, or tribes pushed west by the forced removals of the 1830s and 1840s. Most students of history are well aware of the role that the five Southern or "Civilized" Tribes played in this process. Certainly historians such as Grant Foreman, Angie Debo, and A. M. Gibson have vividly portrayed these people's struggles to rebuild their lives within the old Indian Nations, but other tribes who also transmitted an acculturated lifestyle onto the Great Plains often have been overlooked. Many of these people, like the Five Southern Tribes, eventually settled in Oklahoma.

Emigrating west from their homes near the Great Lakes or in the Ohio Valley, tribes such as the Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Senecas, Miamis, and Potawatomis represented Indian cultures which had been markedly transformed by their previous interaction with Europeans. Although most of these people arrived in Oklahoma only after brief sojourns at other locations on the middle border, their westward migrations and experiences in Iowa, Missouri, or Kansas reflect their roles as Indian "pioneers," people who transformed the West. Since these people's trek from their old homelands to Oklahoma encompassed circuitous routes and several decades, records chronicling their experiences are scattered across at least half-a-dozen states. Perhaps this explains why historians have encountered difficulty in investigating their story.

The Citizen Band of Potawatomis, whose tribal headquarters now occupy a tract of land just south of the modern town of Shawnee, Oklahoma, offer a good example. Like the Five Southern Tribes, they too had maintained extensive contacts with Europeans for a century and a half before their removal; but unlike the Southern Tribes, who with the exception of the Choctaws had been heavily influenced by

## INDIANS AS PIONEERS

first the British, then the Americans, the Potawatomis' close relationship was with the French. Of all the western tribes, officials in New France considered the Potawatomis to be the most faithful, and from the 1670s through the French and Indian War, Potawatomi warriors participated in the French fur trade and assisted French military efforts against the British. Meanwhile, Potawatomi women intermarried freely with French *coureur de bois*, creating a significant mixed-blood element within the tribe.

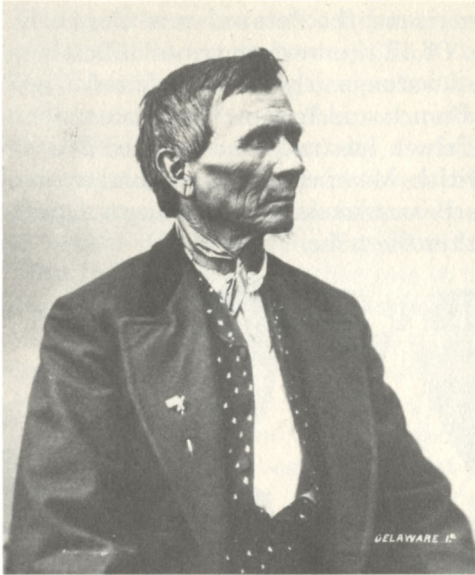


*From the 1670s to the 1800s the Potawatomis slowly adopted European values and customs (Reprinted from N. Matson, Memories of Shaubena, 1878).*

Unlike British or American settlers, who were primarily interested in agriculture, the *coureur de bois* and the French Creole population who later supplanted them were primarily merchants, occasionally farming on a limited scale, but much more interested in the fur trade and other commercial ventures. Moreover, they remained Roman Catholic, in form if not in substance, and as late as the 1840s almost all of their priests were of European origin, emigrating to the United States only after the completion of their religious training.

Such characteristics did not endear these Creoles to Anglo-American settlers who distrusted their Catholicism, and who complained that the Creoles "wasted" their lands since they did not

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



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*Black Beaver, a mixed-blood Delaware, serves as the perfect example of an Indian who served as a "westering pioneer" for the expanding American nation (Courtesy OHS).*

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devote themselves, full-time, to farming. Regardless of the fact that many of these Creoles were, by frontier standards, very successful businessmen, they did not conform to early nineteenth century American ideals and often were described by their Anglo-American neighbors as "idlers," irresponsible, or "only half-civilized."

Such an understanding of American attitudes toward the French Creoles is necessary if we are to recognize the acculturation patterns of the Potawatomis. Just as John Ross, the Ridge family, and other prominent Cherokees acculturated toward the values of southern farmers and planters, those whites with whom they had the most contact, so too the Potawatomis adopted some of the values of their white role models, the Creole French. But by the 1830s these values were in disfavor among the flood of American settlers who were pouring into Indiana and Illinois. And since the Americans considered most of the Creoles to be less than "civilized," those Indians who emulated the Frenchmen also were categorized as "primitive and unchanged."

But such was hardly the case. By the 1830s many of the Potawatomis whose sons and daughters would later form the Citizen Band were sophisticated mixed-blood traders who dominated much of the Indian trade in southern Michigan and Indiana. Like their white neighbors, they lived in log cabins and dressed in ruffled shirts and

frock coats. Moreover, many were quite wealthy by frontier standards. Portraits and camp scenes painted by artist George Winter illustrate an abundance of embroidered brocade, silver jewelry, and fine blooded horses in trappings so rich that they resemble the ceremonial finery of Bedouin potentates. And although he was not a Potawatomi, a Miami mixed-blood, Jean Baptiste Richardville, whose way of life was identical to his Potawatomi neighbors, was, in fact, the wealthiest man in Indiana when that state entered the Union.

Negative appraisals of the Indians' "progress," coupled with the western states' hunger for Indian lands led to the Indian removal policies of President Andrew Jackson's administration. The tribesmen of the North, like the Five Civilized Tribes, would be removed beyond the Mississippi River, where this "poor degraded set of human beings could follow the ways of their fathers until they finally became capable of making those changes desired by their government." Accordingly, while the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Creeks were being delivered to Arkansas and the Indian Territory, the Potawatomis and their neighbors were carried west to Iowa and Kansas.

Before continuing with the discussion of the Potawatomis' role as "pioneers," a perfunctory examination of one of the primary problems of this removal process should be considered. Although the government was transporting the eastern tribesmen beyond the white frontier, it ignored the reality that these western lands already were occupied—they belonged to the western Indians. Ironically, just as the Potawatomis, Shawnees, or Cherokees once had fought the intrusion of foreign settlers into their lands, they now found themselves opposed by the Sioux, Cheyenne, Pawnees, and Osages. And, again, just as European pioneers had once forced them from their lands in Michigan and Indiana, the Potawatomis emerged as the new pioneers who challenged the hegemony of the western tribes.

The contest was rather one-sided. Although popular fiction usually touts the fighting prowess of the plains tribes, in armed encounters with the emigrant Indians they usually got the worst of it. Cheyenne, Arapaho, or Kiowa warriors were both brave and dedicated, but the Potawatomis and their allies were better armed and better organized.

When some of the Potawatomi emigrants first arrived in Kansas they were opposed by the Pawnees who clashed with the new arrivals over control of the Kansas River Valley. But as George Hyde indicates in his volume, *The Pawnee Indians*, the warfare did not go in the Pawnees' favor. In 1848, while hunting with some Sacs and Foxes



## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



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*From clothing (left) to housing (opposite page), eastern tribes helped establish American influence on the frontier (Courtesy University of Kansas Library and OHS).*

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in central Kansas, a party of Potawatomis were attacked by a large contingent of Pawnees and Comanches. In the ensuing fire-fight several Pawnees were killed. The Pawnees attempted to retaliate by raiding the Potawatomi villages for horses, but Potawatomi horseflesh cost the Pawnees dearly. Some horses were taken, but Potawatomi warriors more often intercepted the raiders, exacting a terrible price in Pawnee killed and wounded. Moreover, the Potawatomis sold their services as mercenaries, protecting the livestock of white emigrants in exchange for payments of trade goods or silver. Realizing their mistake, the Pawnees later attempted to make peace with the emigrant Indians by offering the Potawatomis a large number of horses which had been stolen from the Arapahoes. Although the Potawatomis accepted the payment and for a short time remained on friendly terms with the Pawnees, the cultural differences between these two people were so marked that they had relatively little in common.

## INDIANS AS PIONEERS

The temporary peace did prove to the Pawnees' advantage, however. In June, 1853, both the Pawnees and a mixed party of Potawatomi and Sacs and Foxes were hunting buffalo along the Republican River when the Pawnees were attacked by a vastly superior force of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and even a few Brule Sioux from Nebraska. Pawnee riders enlisted Potawatomi assistance, and when the Potawatomi arrived on the scene they found the Pawnees besieged in a creek bottom, desperately defending their women and children. Most of the Potawatomi were well armed, and they or their fathers had once fought with the British against American troops during the War of 1812. Forming ranks, the Potawatomi slowly rode toward the plains warriors, then fired volleys, carefully coordinating their assault within the best traditions of European military tactics. When the smoke cleared, the plains warriors retreated from the field, their losses exceeding 100 warriors. The Potawatomi suffered only four killed and one wounded. One year later, in a similar incident, about 200 Potawatomi and Sacs and Foxes again were attacked by almost 800 Cheyennes, Kiowas, Comanches, and Osages on the Smoky Hill River in western Kansas. In this encounter the Potawatomi and their allies dismounted, again formed ranks,

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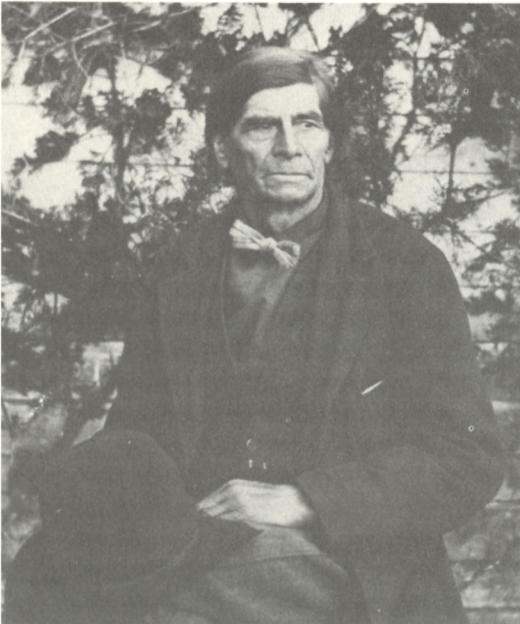
## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

and effectively repulsed the repeated charges of the mounted plains Indians.

Battles between "pioneers" and Indians have always attracted historians, but it is imperative that scholars recognize that many of these initial clashes were between the indigenous tribes and emigrant Indians. Unquestionably, the Cherokees' role in terminating Osage control over the trans-Ozark region needs further investigation, as does the role of other emigrant tribes along the eastern regions of modern Kansas and Nebraska. Such contests usually are excluded from any history of "Pioneer-Indian" conflicts, but they formed an important part of this warfare.

The emigrant Indians made an even greater contribution to the development of trade and commerce in the region. Since many of the northern tribes had amassed considerable expertise in this field prior to their removal, they were quick to adapt it to a wide range of opportunities that awaited them on the eastern fringe of the plains. They immediately benefitted from at least two other facets of the broad sweep of western migration: the Mormon trek to Utah, and the gold strikes in California and Colorado.

In 1835 about 500 Potawatomis were first removed to a new



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*By the 1870s, tribal leaders such as Irvin P. Long of the Wyandottes were more like neighboring pioneers in Arkansas than the Kiowa and Comanche warriors fighting on the Great Plains (Courtesy OHS).*

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reservation on the Missouri River in western Iowa. Within five years their numbers had swollen to almost 3,000. Since they believed that their tenure in the Council Bluffs region would only be temporary, they refused to "settle down" and develop the small farms championed by their Indian agents. In contrast, they were eager to trade with the other major emigrant group in the region, the Mormons. During 1845 and 1846, as the first great waves of Mormon migration swept through the Council Bluffs region, opportunistic Potawatomi businessmen bartered or sold large quantities of government issued annuity goods to the Saints at inflated prices. In addition, they willingly permitted the Mormons to graze their livestock (for a price) on tribal pastures and sold wood from Potawatomi woodlots for the Mormon campfires. Tribal leaders such as Billy Caldwell and Joseph Lafromboise constructed gristmills and sawmills to provide meal and lumber for Mormon travelers. Indeed, by late 1846 Indian agents in the region had grown so apprehensive of the growing commercial ties between the Potawatomis and the Saints that they feared the two groups might be planning a military and political alliance against the United States. To forestall such a "conspiracy," Indian agents attempted to cut the commercial ties between the two peoples and arbitrarily ordered the Saints to leave the Potawatomi reservation. Meanwhile, federal officials withheld any further payment of annuities until the Indians ceded their lands in Iowa in return for a new reservation in Kansas.

Joining about 2,000 other Potawatomis who had previously moved to Kansas, the 2,500 Indians from Council Bluffs resettled on their new lands astride the Kansas River, just west of modern Topeka. Fortunately, the new reservation also was astride routes that connected with both the Oregon and California trails. As American interest in gold and silver strikes in the West increased, the Indians found themselves in an enviable position. Emigrants traveling west along the Kansas River Valley were forced to cross the river near Potawatomi settlements, so in 1849 and 1850 entrepreneurs such as Lucius Darling and Joseph Ogee established two ferries near Uniontown. During the following years other Potawatomis such as Charles Beaubien, Joseph Savelle, and J. N. Bourrassa also built ferries.

Business was brisk. During April and May of 1849, Joseph Ogee charged from one to five dollars per trip, depending upon the demand and the flood stage of the river. One traveler indicated that in late May, at least 70 wagons per day were lined up on the southern bank of the Kansas, waiting to cross. Another emigrant indicated that by

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



*The acculturation of border tribes was displayed in the clothing of: 1. Oquemahahthem, Kickapoo; 2. Thomas W. Alford, Shawnee; 5. Tahpahthea, Kickapoo; and 6. Kahkhahtothequah, Kickapoo (Courtesy OHS).*

June 1 at least 700 wagons had been ferried across the Kansas at Uniontown. Meanwhile, other enterprising Potawatomis constructed toll bridges over the many creeks which fed the river. For gold-seekers traveling west, the route was made easier, but it also was made more expensive.

Other Potawatomi businessmen provided the emigrants with a wide range of goods and services. Located just over 100 miles west of Fort Leavenworth, Uniontown, and nearby St. Mary's Mission were

## INDIANS AS PIONEERS

logical places for migrating gold-seekers to stop, catch their breath, and replenish their supplies prior to entering the high plains. Profiting from their Iowa experiences, Potawatomi businessmen at the settlement reestablished sawmills to provide the emigrants with lumber to repair their wagons. They also built gristmills and sold corn meal and flour to the travelers and peddled considerable quantities of beef, bacon, and produce. Emigrants whose livestock had become injured or disabled could purchase new horses from Potawatomi herdsman, while other tribal businessmen purchased (at a considerable discount) all those household items which emigrants found too heavy or impractical after 100 miles on the trail. By 1849 these entrepreneurs were prospering so well that they advertised their services in border newspapers such as the *Missouri Republican*, where their ads stated that they offered "a good supply of articles and provisions at reasonable rates." The advertisement also indicated that they were willing to sell "a considerable quantity of household goods recently purchased from travelers enroute to the Pacific."

During the following decade they diversified their activities. Some tribesmen seemed to specialize in procuring supplies, grain, and horses for the military, while others opened roadside inns or restaurants, catering to travelers whose mode of travel or finances allowed them to sample such "luxuries." Others, especially the Potawatomis at St. Mary's Mission, performed band concerts for weary travelers or enticed them into a broad spectrum of entertainments ranging from games of chance, horse-racing, or marksmanship contests (the latter two endeavors also replete with considerable wagering). Not all travelers found such experiences pleasurable, however. In 1859, after dining at the Red Vermillion, a Potawatomi-owned inn near St. Mary's, Horace Greeley complained that his stomach was struggling with "the worst half-dollar dinner I have ever consumed."

Greeley's complaints aside, the Potawatomi community at St. Mary's was described favorably by most travelers and was considered as a prototype for Indian agencies by Bureau of Indian Affairs officials. Under the tutelage of the Jesuits, Potawatomis at the mission expanded their agricultural activities and were widely known as the breeders of excellent saddle-horses. Moreover, throughout the 1850s they continued to expand their corn and wheat production, harvesting crops which they both sold to emigrants or shipped east to St. Louis. Adapting to the latest innovation in agricultural technology, they owned and operated the first McCormick's Reaper to be used in Kansas, and even declined an offer by McCormick to serve as agents

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

for his company in the territory. In 1851, while enroute to Washington, federal Indian agents conducted a delegation of Crow, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe leaders through St. Mary's where the Plains tribesmen were shown the Potawatomis' acculturation. Given the recent military confrontations between the Potawatomis and the Plains tribes, observers commented that the visiting Indians seemed noticeably nervous, but they were properly impressed with the Potawatomis' obvious prosperity.

The Indian agents' choice of the Potawatomis as acculturation models is not surprising, for by all accounts, during the 1850s their settlements along the Kansas River were seen as centers of "civilization" on the middle border. In addition to the repeated commentary upon their economic prosperity, both travelers and Indian agents described their life style as approaching that of most other residents of frontier Kansas. They lived in typical frontier log cabins, although by the late 1850s some of the more prosperous tribesmen had constructed frame houses. The dwellings were well furnished, since many of the tribesmen had purchased bulky furniture which the California gold-seekers had sold at bargain prices. Although such furnishings varied considerably from house to house, United States dragoon captain Percival Lowe characterized the residences as quite "comfortable" and commented that many of the Indians had enclosed their fields with rail fences common to the frontier regions. Another observer reported that the home of J. N. Bourrassa was "well furnished" and that his parlor was graced by a piano. By 1854 the mission church even featured a small organ.

Descriptions of individual Indians also mirror such commendations. Frontier travelers were particularly lavish in their praise of the mixed-blood Potawatomi women who were described as handsome and hospitable. Although some of the emigrants resented the sharp business acumen of the Potawatomi merchants, they admitted that they were "courteous," "well-dressed," and relatively sophisticated. Emigrant George C. Anderson commented that most "dressed like their white neighbors," although he thought they had a fondness for brightly colored sashes.

Like other frontiersmen in Kansas, some Potawatomis drank too much, some formed temperance societies, and some were swept with religious revivals. They too were concerned with the slavery crisis, and although different segments of the tribe supported either the North or the South, the vast majority of the Indians were pro-Union. When the war erupted, about 100 warriors voluntarily enlisted in the



## INDIANS AS PIONEERS



*Kack Kack's house on the Potawatomi Reservation was a symbol of American lifestyle transplanted on the frontier by borderland tribes (Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society).*

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Union Army. In contrast, about two dozen fought for the Confederacy.

In retrospect, these Indians, like many other tribesmen who first were removed to Kansas then forced into Oklahoma, shared many of the frontier experiences usually associated only with white frontiersmen. They too moved out onto the frontier, battled with the tribes indigenous to the region, engaged in frontier commerce, and did much to "tame the wilderness." Although they maintained a separate ethnic identity, and did not wholly subscribe to all the values of mid-nineteenth century American society, they adopted many of its trappings. Certainly they played a significant role in the transformation of the American West, and although both the plains tribes and their white neighbors continued to see them as Indians, perhaps they can best be described by emigrant James Rusling who commented that the Potawatomis he met in Kansas were "not much rougher than the average borderer, though their headgear ran somewhat to feathers."

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