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Topenebee and the Decline of the Pottawattomie Nation

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About three miles southwest of the town of Earl Park, in Benton county, Indiana, there is a section of land, known by way of legal description as section 31, in township 26 north, range 9 west, but otherwise known as "Sumner's Indian Float," and this section was at one time set apart by treaty to the renowned Topenebee, who for forty years, was the principal chief and sachem of the Pottawattomie tribe of Indians.

The grand prairies west of the Wabash, comprising all of what is now Benton county and the greater portion of Warren, were really a part of those vast savannas of wild grass-land, interspersed with blackrush sloughs, willow-lined creeks, and pleasant groves of mixed timber, which extended as far west as the Illinois river, and which, up to about the year 1790, were grazed by herds of the American bison. About that time

> A big snow, about five feet deep, fell, and froze so hard on the top that the people walked on it, causing the buffalo to perish by starvation. Next spring a few buffalo, poor and haggard in appearance, were seen going westward, and as they approached the carcasses of dead ones, which were lying here and there upon the prairie, they would stop, commence pawing and lowing, then start off again in a lope for the west. Forty years ago (i. e., forty years prior to 1878) buffalo bones were found in large quantities on the prairies; in some places, many acres were covered with them, showing where a large herd had perished, and their trails leading to and from watering places, were plainly to be seen.[1]

[1] *Memories of Shaubena,* by N. Matson. Chicago, 1878.

Early settlers were familiar with great depressions and hollows in the prairie, known as buffalo wallows, and these were the last traces discernible of the giant herds.

Notwithstanding the departure of the buffalo, these great plains still held forth allurement for savage huntsmen. The pleasant groves were ofttimes situated on the margin of sparkling streams, or were blessed with springs of cool water; wild berries and nuts abounded in the wild woods; the rich alluvium of sunny slopes yielded a bountiful harvest of yellow maize; and the wilderness of grass, the banks of the creeks and the groves themselves, were threaded with numberless paths made by the feet of the timid deer. In fall and springtime great flocks of Canadian geese and wild ducks filled every pond and depression, wild turkeys were abundant, and the great flights of wild pigeons were at times so thick as partly to obscure the sun.

The beauty and grandeur of these great level stretches of prairie, studded with groves, was incomparable. Standing on the hills to the west of Parish Grove, in Benton county, one could not only view the whole of the slope that extended for miles to the south and west, but could look over into the plains of the Illinois. To the north and east lay Hickory Grove, with a small lake to the south of it; to the north and west the prairies again, and the slopes of Blue Ridge, twelve miles away, so named because the dews of the morning made the prairies appear like a sea of blue. In the autumn, the giant blue-stem, growing so high that horsemen could tie the tops together above their heads, filled the whole plains as far as the eye could see.[2]

This was the land of the Pottawattomies. In 1640 the *Jesuit Relation* records that they were the neighbors of the Winnebagos in the far north. In 1670, a portion of them were on the islands in the mouth of Green Bay. They were then moving southward. Friendly with the Kickapoos, with whom they afterwards lived in mixed villages on the prairies west of Lafayette, they seemed to have joined with that tribe and the Sacs and Foxes in wiping out the last remnants of the old

[2] J. Wesley Whicker, *Sketches of the Wabash Valley*, published by Attica *Ledger*, 1916, p. 108.

Illinois Indians,[3] and the three conquering tribes then divided the country between them; the Kickapoos taking the territory along the Vermillion river, the Pottawattomies the domain in eastern and northern Illinois and northwestern Indiana north of the Wabash river, while the Sacs and Foxes went further to the west. In approaching the Wabash, the Pottawattomies became trespassers upon the lands of the Miamis, but that tribe never seems to have been able to prevent their encroachments.

By other tribes the Pottawattomies were called "squatters," charged with never having had any lands of their own, and being mere intruders upon the prior estates of others. They were foremost at all treaties where lands were to be ceded, clamoring for a lion's share of the presents and annuities, particularly where the last were the price paid for the sale of others' lands, rather than their own.[4]

At the Treaty of Fort Wayne in 1809, the resentment of the Miamis at the unlawful claims of this tribe to the territory watered by the Wabash and its tributaries, was one of the principal obstacles to be met and overcome by General Harrison.[5]

The following account was given by Joseph Barron, interpreter to General Harrison, to Prof. W. H. Keating, of Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1824, as to the origin and meaning of the word "Pottawattomie":

A Miami, having wandered out from his cabin, met three Indians, whose language was unintelligible to him; by signs and motions he invited them to follow him to his cabin, where they were hospitably entertained, and where they remained until dark. During the night, two of the strange Indians stole out of the hut, while their comrade and the host were asleep. They took a few embers from the cabin, and placing these near the door of the hut, they made a fire, which, being afterwards seen by the Miami and his remaining guests, was understood to imply a council-fire between the two nations. From this circumstance the Miami called them, in his own language, Wa-ho-na-ha, or firemakers, which, being translated into the other language, produced the term by which the Pottawattomies have ever since been distinguished, and the pronounciation of which, spoken by themselves, is Po-ta-wa-to-me, in their language, "we are making a fire."[6]

[3] *Fergus Historical Series, IV,* No. 27, p. 174.
[4] *Fergus Historical Series, IV,* No. 27, p. 174.
[5] *Indiana Magazine of History,* 1915, pp. 366-367.
[6] *Fergus Historical Series,* IV, No. 27, p. 164.

The characteristics of these savages, who have left behind them so many names of groves, towns and streams, in northern Indiana and western Illinois, may be described in part as follows: They seem to have lived in separate roving bands, which separated or divided, "according to the abundance or scarcity of game, or the emergencies of war." They loved the remoteness and seclusion of the great prairies, from which they emerged at frequent intervals in Tecumseh's day to make raids on the white settlements in southern Indiana and in Illinois, burning the cabin of the settler, tomahawking his family, and stealing his horses. Pursuit, if not made immediately, was futile. Traveling by day and night, the murderous bands were lost in the great wilderness of the north, and the Prophet was a sure protector. The savage chief, Turkey Foot, for whom two groves have been named in Benton and Newton counties, stealing horses in far away Missouri, murdered three or four of his pursuers, and escaped to the great prairies between the Wabash and Lake Michigan.[7] He was never taken. The cowardly and brutal massacre at Chicago, August 15, 1812, was the work, principally, of the Pottawattomies, "and their several bands from the Illinois and Kankakee rivers; those from the St. Joseph of the Lake, and the St. Joseph of the Maumee, and those of the Wabash and its tributaries were all represented in the despicable act."[8]

Unlike the Kickapoos, who were tall and sinewy, and more cleanly in their habits, the Pottawattomies were shorter and more thickly set, very dark, and squalid in appearance, and were given the significent name by the French-Canadians of "Les Poux," or those who have lice.[9] Their language was of the rough, gutteral variety,[10] they used huge quantities of fire water, and were inveterate gamblers. Of all the tribes of the northwest, none were more treacherous, or prone to break a treaty, and none were more under the influence of Tecumseh and the Prophet and the British agents at Malden.

For nearly half a century, Topenebee, whose name, according to Jacob Piatt Dunn, signifies "A Quiet Sitting Bear," was

[7] *Dawson's Harrison,* 176-177.
[8] *Fergus Historical Series,* IV, No. 27, p. 173.
[9] *Wau-Bun, the Early Day in the Northwest,* Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, Chicago, 1855.
[10] *Fergus Historical Series,* IV, No. 27, p. 136.

their head and principal chief. He was probably born near Niles, Michigan, on the upper bend of the St. Joseph of the Lakes, for here there was located "the great Pottawattomie village, ruled over by Aniquiba, the great chief of the Pottawattomies,"[11] who was the father of Topenebee. Topenebee was thus of the royal blood, and the ruling clan of his tribe. His sister, Kaukeama,[12] married William Burnett, a famous French fur trader, who thereafter became very influential and powerful among the tribesmen. His sons, by this Indian princess, were unfriendly to the advancing white settlements of the West, and Abraham Burnett, in command of a mixed band of Pottawattomies and Kickapoos, is said to have laid a plan to ambush and surprise Harrison's army near Perryville, Indiana, on its march to the battleground at Tippecanoe.[13] This plot, however, failed.

From the first, Topenebee seems to have been hostile to the United States. He was no doubt in the battle of Fallen Timbers, fought with Anthony Wayne, in 1794, for he appears as a signer of the Treaty of Greenville, Ohio, of August 3, 1795, signing that document as "Thu-Pe-Ne-Bu,"[14] and the fact that he signed as the first of the "Putawatames of the River St. Joseph," shows that at that early date he was their chief and principal sachem. At an early date, Topenebee embraced the teachings of the Prophet, and became an ally of the Shawnee brothers and the British. When Tecumseh and the Prophet came to the Wabash in the year 1808, for the purpose of organizing their Confederacy of Indian Tribes to oppose the further advance of the new Republic, they settled at the mouth of the Tippecanoe on certain lands granted them by the Pottawattomies and Kickapoos, although this grant was opposed by the Miamis, who were the rightful occupants and owners of the soil. In the negotiations leading up to this transaction, Topenebee took an active part. Local tradition at Attica, Indiana, preserves the tale that

> Sometime in the Fall of the year 1807, Topenebee and the Kickapoos and Pottawattomies, Miamis and Winnebagos, met Tecumseh and his prophet beneath the spreading branches of a splendid oak that stood within

[11] *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Recollections*, XXX, 88.
[12] *United States Statutes at Large, Indian Treaties*. 298.
[13] *Sketches of the Wabash Valley*, p. 11.
[14] *United States Statutes at Large. Indian Treaties*. 54.

the corporate limits of the city of Attica. In this council it was agreed that the Shawnee tribe, under Tecumseh and his brother, the Prophet, might have as their hunting ground the territory drained by Shawnee creek, and then a line drawn from there to the watershed of the Tippecanoe river, and up the Tippecanoe river about twenty miles.[15]

The Pottawattomie chief was thus largely instrumental in bringing the impending conflict closer to the Vincennes settlement, and in hastening incidentally the downfall of his own people. Neither is there any doubt that during the troublesome period preceding the battle of Tippecanoe and until after the War of 1812, that Topenebee and all the leading chiefs of his tribe were in close communication with the British agent, Matthew Elliott, at Malden. According to Mrs. Kinzie:

The principal men of the Pottawattomie nation, like those of most other tribes, went yearly to Fort Malden, in Canada, to receive a large amount of presents, with which the British government had, for many years, been in the habit of purchasing their alliance.[16] The presents they thus received were of considerable value, consisting of blankets, broadcloths or strouding, calicoes, guns, kettles, traps, silver-works (comprising arm-bands, bracelets, brooches and ear bobs), looking glasses, combs, and various other trinkets distributed with no niggardly hand.[17]

These and a vast quantity of whiskey, won them away from General Harrison and made them British allies in the War of 1812.

Topenebee, if he did not actually take part in laying the plot, was fully aware of the impending massacre of the troops of Ft. Dearborn, on August 15, 1812. This is shown by the fact that,

Early in the morning Mr. Kinzie (the trader located at the old post), received a message from To-pen-nee-bee, a chief of the St. Joseph's band, informing him that mischief was intended by the Pottawattomies, who had engaged to escort the detachment; and urging him to relinquish his designs of accompanying the troops by land, promising him that the boat containing himself and family should be permitted to pass in safety to St. Joseph's.[18]

Bearing in mind the close relations between the British and the Pottawattomie chiefs, the fact that this warning was

[15] *Sketches of the Wabash Valley.* 18.
[16] *Wau-Bun, the Early Day in the Northwest,* p. 204.
[17] *Wau-Bun,* 21.
[18] *Wau-Bun,* 222.

sent to a personal friend, and the further fact that Pottawattomies from the St. Joseph river were present at the slaughter, the evidence is rather strong that Topenebee was the leader in the whole affair from the beginning.

After the crushing of the Prophet in 1811, and the destruction of British influence in the northwest, consequent upon the War of 1812, the decline of the Pottawattomies was swift and appalling. The terrible ravages of firewater played no inconsiderable part. Many of their principal chieftains became notorious drunkards, reeling along the streets of frontier posts and towns and boasting of their former prowess. Topenebee was no exception. Reproached by Gen. Lewis Cass, because he did not remain sober and care for his people, he answered: "Father, we do not care for the land, nor the money, nor the goods, what we want is whiskey, give us whiskey!"[19]

Without leadership, without any intelligent plan of cooperation with his fellows, a prey to savage appetites and propensities, and without the nowledge or inclination to utilize his land, except to hunt thereon to relieve his immediate and pressing wants, the Pottawattomie became a wanderer and a beggar in his own country, roving here and there in quest of game, or falling into the hands of unscrupulous traders, who robbed him of his peltries and possessions for a pint of rum. To withstand the advancing tide of white immigration was impossible. Says Logan Esarey:

> No description can give an accurate impression of the sattlement of Indiana. One who has watched the rising waters of a flood overflow the land will appreciate the overflow of the State by the swelling tide of immigration. By 1825 the settlers were entering the northern half of the state.[20]

Already, on October 2, 1818,[21] there had been consummated at St. Mary's, Ohio, a treaty between the Pottawattomie nation and Jonathan Jennings, Lewis Cass and Benjamin Parke, whereby said nation ceded to the United States, "A large tract of country lying in central-western Indiana and eastern Illinois, fronting on the Wabash from the mouth of the

[19] *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Recollections.* XIV, 260.
[20] *History of Indiana,* Logan Esarey, 273.
[21] *United States Statutes at Large. Indian Treaties.* 185.

Tippecanoe to the mouth of the Vermillion, and extending westward to a line drawn as nearly parallel with the Wabash as practicable, so as to strike the two latter streams twenty-five miles from their respective confluence with the Wabash; and now embraced in parts of Tippecanoe, White, Benton, all of Warren, the north half of Vermillion counties, Indiana, and the greater portion of Vermillion county, in Illinois."[22]

A few years later this cession was to be occupied by herdsmen and great droves of cattle, and the famous Chicago road was to run through the northern stretches of this area from the towns on the Wabash to the growing town around old Ft. Dearborn.

This was but the beginning of the retirement. On October 16, 1826,[23] there was concluded at the mouth of the Mississinewa, between the Pottawattomies and Lewis Cass, James B. Ray, and John Tipton, a treaty whereby the tribe released all claim to valuable tracts of land north and west of the Tippecanoe, along Eel river, and about Fort Wayne. This was followed by the treaty of September 20, 1828, granting a great tract in northeastern Indiana, and the final treaty on the Tippecanoe river, on October 27, 1832,[24] concluded between the Pottawattomies and Jonathan Jennings, John W. Davis, and Marks Crume, commissioners, wherein "the chiefs and warriors aforesaid cede to the United States, their title and interest to lands in the States of Indiana and Illinois, and the territory of Michigan, south of Grand River."

Thus, from the year 1818, to the year 1832, a short space of only fourteen years, the Pottawattomie nation had lost practically all of its valuable holdings and claims in northern Indiana and southern Michigan, and the tribe had sunk into a terrible decadence from which it was never to recover.

In all these treaties Topenebee had signed as chief sachem of his tribe, but in 1832, old, drunken and decrepit, he had fallen from his high estate as the associate of Tucemseh, and the lordly commander who had led all the bands north of the Wabash, until there was reserved for him out of all the vast prairies and woodlands of northern Indiana, but one section of

[22] *Fergus Historical Series.* IV, No. 27. Note, pp. 179-180.
[23] *United States Statutes at Large. Indian Treaties.* 295-297.
[24] *United States Statutes at Large. Indian Treaties.* 399-403.

land—the exact language of the Treaty of 1832 was: "To To-pen-ne-bee, principal chief, one section."[25] This section was to be selected under the direction of the President of the United States.

The section of land thus reserved for Topenebee proved to be of no benefit either to himself or his descendants. Under authority of the President, one J. T. Douglass, on January 20, 1836, reported to the government that he had selected section 31, in township 26 north, range 9 west, as Topenebee's land. This selection was confirmed by President Martin Van Buren, on March 29, 1837.[26] The section thus selected was ideally located to suit a prairie Indian. From a memorandum attached to an old deed discovered in the archives of the Benton circuit court, this section, or Indian Float, was described as being at Sugar Grove, in Benton county, seven miles north of Parish Grove, and thirteen miles south of Iroquois, or Bunkum, on the Chicago road from Williamsport, Warren county, to Chicago. The west side of the section was in the eastern verge of Sugar Grove, and the entire eastern side was a prairie of Blue-stem, watered on the northern side by Sugar creek, which extended on west through the Grove into the State of Illinois. From the viewpoint of the early cattle men, it was just the location adapted for an ideal ranch. The timber afforded fuel, and also protected the herds in winter; the creek afforded an abundant supply of fresh water, and the surrounding prairie was an ideal grazing ground. Edward C. Sumner, the greatest cattle man north of the Wabash river, riding over the old Chicago road, about 1834, immediately perceived its advantages, and afterards built a ranch on its western side and along the banks of the creek.

Long before the section was located by Douglass, however, Topenebee had parted with all his title to Alexis Coquillard. The treaty was made, as has been shown, on the 27th day of October, 1832. On November 27 of the same year, Topenebee, by a deed executed in St. Joseph county, Indiana, did

> Grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto the said Alexis Coquillard and David H. Colerick, and their heirs and assigns forever, all that section

[25] *United States Statutes at Large, Indian Treaties*, 400.

[26] *Final Court Record* No. 1, page 284, Clerk's Office, Benton Circuit Court. See also, Verden *vs.* Coleman, 4 *Ind.* 457.

of land called a floating reserve, made to the said To-pe-ne-bee at the Treaty of Tippecanoe, made and concluded by and between the chiefs of the Pottawattomie nation, and Jennings, Crume and Davis, commissioners.

The consideration named in the deed was eight hundred dollars, or one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre, and this deed was placed on record in Benton county on July 17, 1846.[27]

In Judge Timothy E. Howard's *History of St. Joseph County,* Alexis Coquillard is named as the founder of South Bend. He was of French descent and had served in the War of 1812 in the American Army under General Harrison, although but seventeen years of age. He later became a trader on the St. Joseph river and wielded such an influence over the Pottawattomie tribe that they would have made him their chief, if he had not prevented it.[28] He is mentioned by Logan Esarey as one of the traders who were present at the payment of annuities to the Indians, and at the various treaties made with the tribes. He was undoubtedly present at the treaty of October 27, 1832, for by the terms of that instrument he was paid five thousand one hundred dollars, due him for debts incurred by the Indian tribes.[29] Let us hope that he took no advantage of the aged and besotted chieftain of the Pottawattomie tribe. On October 7, 1846, Alexis Coquillard and his wife, Frances, conveyed this section to Edward C. Sumner for the consideration of twelve hundred dollars.[30]

Thus passed away the last dominion that Topenebee ever exerted over the prairies, which, in his youth, he had been so familiar with. Six years after the treaty of 1832, his tribe passed beyond the Mississippi and old, feeble and broken, he retired to southern Michigan, where in August, 1840,[31] to use the melodious language of J. Wesley Whicker, "he passed from among the inhabitants of earth and took his trackless way alone to the Happy Hunting Ground."[32]

[27] *Deed Record* No. 1, page 214, of Benton county, Indiana. Recorder's Office.
[28] *History of St. Joseph County, Indiana.* Timothy E. Howard, 1907, p. 132.
[29] *United States Statutes at Large. Indian Treaties,* 403.
[30] *Deed Record* No. 1, page 323, Recorder's Office, Benton County, Indiana.
[31] *Bureau of American Ethnology. Handbook of American Indians.* Part II. 785.
[32] *Sketches of the Wabash Valley.* 18.