

# Meskwaki Culture

Don Wanatee

Within the vast Great Lakes region and in another area east of the St. Lawrence Seaway lived a tribe the U.S. government called the Sac & Fox. Many of the Algonquin-speaking tribes in this region succumbed to the rapid advance of Europeans who were seeking riches and land, often making treaties or creating wars by setting one tribe against another, and finally colonizing the tribes into their present-day enclaves — reservations and cities. Some tribes have all but lost their identities and most of their lands; and the sociolinguistic and ethnoreligious patterns, once the hallmark of all American Indians, have all but vanished as many people migrated out of their communities to the major population centers. It could be asked, how can any nation survive with half of its people gone?

In the central part of Iowa, among the major industrial and agricultural communities, reside the Meskwaki or, literally, the Red Earth People. They were once closely associated with the Sauk, Mascoutan, Shawnee, and Kickapoo, who controlled most of the southern region of the Great Lakes.

By the early 1600s, the Meskwaki were identified in the Detroit area. Moving to the Green Bay region, they set up their villages, planted their corn, beans, and squash, raised their children, made war against the French, and moved on to the Mississippi River. There they established villages along its tributaries as far north as Ft. Snelling and south to St. Louis. By 1848, all nations west of the Mississippi River, in the territorial region out of which the



state of Iowa was created, were removed to Kansas, with some taken to the Oklahoma Territory. Only the Red Earths remained, perhaps by divine intervention and with the permission of the newly formed state called Iowa ("this-is-the-place").

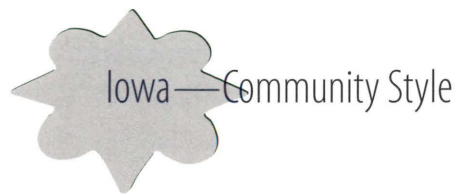
It has been told by the elders that an understanding was reached with the United States and Iowa that this small tribe would stay in Iowa. Under the terms of the agreement, 1) the Meskwaki would live in peace and not trouble anyone; 2) the Meskwaki would only use friendly means to find a way to remain in Iowa by purchasing land; 3) the Meskwaki would not seek help from either the State of Iowa or the U.S. government, financially or in any other way, to buy land; and 4) they must obey all laws of the state and pay taxes on any land(s) purchased. Most of the Meskwaki lived hidden along the tributaries of the Mississippi until July 13, 1857, when the first eighty acres were sold to them by a Mr. Isaac Butler along the Iowa River, where the present Pow Wow grounds are located.

In the early 1850s, the people of eastern Iowa circulated a petition requesting that the Meskwaki be allowed to remain in Iowa. The

*A color guard opens the ceremonies at the 80th Annual Meskwaki Indian Pow Wow in Tama in 1995.*

Photo by Catherine Hiebert Kerst





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legislature introduced a bill in 1856 and passed it unanimously. Within the year, the Meskwaki began to conduct their religious ceremonies in earnest in order to acquire funds to effectively “own” land in Iowa (at the time gold was the only legal tender in Iowa). Each clan took part in the ceremonies, and within a short period of time the Meskwaki had received a blessing from the Creator. By that very act, they are still living in Iowa today.

The Meskwaki continue to maintain their ties to the past, to their language, and to their spirituality and religion. Communication between the generations is key to holding on to customs and traditional ways. According to Priscilla Wanatee,

Growing up on the Meskwaki Settlement allowed me to visit and talk and learn from my grandparents. Every day was interesting and I learned something new, and now I wish I had asked the elders more questions about the culture, but it was the practice, a code, of not asking questions but only to listen to the vast wealth of knowledge. Sometimes when the children would be attentive to their elders, they would often go way into the night telling teaching stories, and when the children were getting tired or fidgety, the elders would start telling jokes or funny stories. Most of the things my mom and grandmother told me were things concerning the raising of children and other duties and responsibilities of caring for a child. Today, we still carry on the practice of a naming ceremony for a newborn child; the baby’s name is determined by the father’s clan affiliation, or in the case of a member of another tribe, the mother’s clan names can be used. The child’s name is picked and used so that the Creator will know and identify the “new human being” as part of the earth, and the name is intended to protect the baby’s spirit while very young and living on this earth. The

baby’s family then is responsible for the baby-child’s well-being by worshipping and praying to the Creator by using the sacred tobacco.

The newborn infant is treated with respect and spoken to as a little grown-up person not yet fully developed. We speak [to] and treat them gently and firmly and never lie or mistreat them; we don’t make any negative remarks about their person or spirit, or anything they may cherish. We consider them as sacred, and at that early stage in life, their spirit is vulnerable and may leave because the infant is being mistreated. Sometimes the baby will ... cry a lot or become ill [without anyone knowing] and eventually die. I suppose it could be considered as a sudden-death syndrome. I did things like whenever one of my babies sneezed, I would make a sound and act like I was sucking or catching their sneeze, thereby preventing further discomfort. One of the teachings from the elders [that] may seem overly strict but [is] necessary in our culture is when a girl reaches womanhood, special care and activities need to be done privately. During their monthlies, they are restricted from eating with the family during mealtimes or cooking on the stove, touching any sacred objects or attending any religious activities being conducted by the clans. Only by protecting and cultivating the time-honored traditions can an Indian nation survive [and] hold their religious beliefs as being pure and sacred. Our parents, grandparents, and all our relatives have taught us all they can, and I am only telling some of the things I learned.

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