THE REMOVAL OF THE WINNEBAGO

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The Black Hawk War sealed the fate of the Rock River band of Winnebago, and made their cession of that country inevitable. The whites had already looked with covetous eyes upon this rich and well watered region, especially on the western portion that abutted on the lead mines. After the Winnebago uprising of 1827 this tribe was summoned the ensuing summer to Green Bay to cede their portion of the lead mining region to the United States. Too few of the chiefs were present to form a treaty, so a provisional agreement was made for the cession of the territory west and south of the Blue Mounds and the Pecatonica River. This arrangement was confirmed by the treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1829, when the tribal lands were sold for an annuity of $18,000 annually for thirty years. The Indians were also to be provided with three blacksmith establishments—one at Prairie du Chien, one at Fort Winnebago, and one on the waters of Rock River; they were also to have a cart and two yoke of oxen at the portage.

Meanwhile two sub-agencies were erected for this tribe—one at Fort Winnebago, whose incumbent was the well known John H. Kinzie. The other agent was Henry Gratiot, whose home at Gratiot's Grove was outside the Winnebago territory; he thereupon built an agency house on Sugar River, and there the blacksmith, Maurice Mata, of whom Mrs. Kinzie speaks so favorably, had his forge.¹

Matters were in this condition until the Sauk uprising of 1832. There can be no doubt that many of the Winnebago sympathized with the hostiles, although the Rock River band was held to its allegiance with the United States by the efforts of Gratiot and Kinzie, ably seconded by Henry Dodge. In fact, White Crow, Little Priest, and other Rock River chiefs did the whites unrequited service not only as guides and scouts, but as the agents in the rescue of two captive white girls from Black Hawk's band.

Nevertheless, it was determined that the Winnebago must be removed from a territory so close to the settlements; so in September, 1832, their chiefs were summoned to Fort Armstrong, where General Winfield Scott and Governor John Reynolds, of Illinois, secured the cession of all their land south of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. In return for this cession the Winnebago were granted the so-called neutral tract in Iowa ceded by the treaties of 1830 with the Sauk and Foxes on one hand and the Sioux on the other. This large tract was well watered and full of game. Its drawback was the fact that it lay close to the habitat of these fierce tribes still at enmity, and that its neutrality was far from being assured. In compensation for this exchange of lands the Winnebago were accorded an additional $10,000 annually for twenty-seven years; they were to be served with a school and a band of white farmers to teach them agriculture, and the Rock River band was to be supplied annually with 1500 pounds of tobacco. In addition to the new cession in Iowa, the tribe still possessed a large tract of territory north of the Wisconsin River extending to the sources of Black River, sparsely settled by one or two small tribal bands. The treaty further stipulated that “In order to prevent misapprehensions that might disturb peace and friendship between the parties to this treaty, it is expressly understood that no band or party of Winnebagoes shall reside, plant, fish, or hunt after the first day of June next, on any portion of the country herein ceded to the United States.”

The winter following the Treaty of Rock Island was one of great hardship for the Winnebago. The Black Hawk War had prevented them from planting or harvesting any corn; game was not plentiful, and numbers of the tribe literally starved and froze to death. Mrs. Kinzie has given a graphic picture of this starving time, and told of the distress of her husband and herself at their inability to alleviate the condition of their poor Indian “children.” “They would climb up on the outside [of the agency house], and tier upon tier of gaunt, wretched faces would peer in above, to watch us, and see if, indeed, we were as ill-provided as we represented ourselves.” Corn had been purchased by the government to supply the Winnebago; but it had been detained at Green Bay during the winter, on account of the frozen waterways. Finally, in the spring the boats arrived and the famine was for the time being relieved.

2 Charles J. Kapler, Indian Treaties (Washington, 1904), 345-351.
Now the time drew near when the major part of the tribe must abandon its ancestral home, and remove all its villages either north of the Wisconsin or to the new cession in Iowa. The government would not specify which region should be occupied. There was, however, rivalry among the government agents on this score. Agent Joseph M. Street, at Prairie du Chien, was strongly in favor of the Iowa location; he argued that it was merely a matter of time when the tribe must relinquish all its lands east of the Mississippi, and it would be best if it should be removed at once to the west bank. On the other hand, Kinzie and Gratiot, who best knew the Rock River band, urged a location just north of the Wisconsin. Street accused them of doing so in the interest of the American Fur Company and from self-interest for their sub-agencies. He was, however, intensely jealous of Kinzie, who was much more popular than himself both with the whites and the Indians. Street was a good man, with humane views, but not well adapted to the exigencies of the frontier, and somewhat impracticable in his plans for civilizing the red men.

Meanwhile the Fox River and Rock River bands were besieging their agents with importunities to be allowed to remain on their homelands until fall. If they might plant their accustomed fields once more and gather the harvest, then they promised that they would take their annuities and remove without making any difficulty. Both Kinzie and Gratiot favored this course, but were unable to secure the coveted permission from either the governors of Michigan or Illinois or from the commissioner of Indian affairs. The white settlers of the Illinois frontier were terrified by the recollections of the hostilities of 1832. John Dixon, of Rock River, informed the army officers of the frontier posts that he believed that the Winnebago were plotting with the Potawatomi for a new uprising. Gratiot was hurried to his Sugar River agency house; there he met an officer from Fort Winnebago who had been sent to test the temper of the tribesmen. The latter were terrified by what they thought was a threat of war. They could not be dissuaded from the belief that the whites were plotting to make war upon them. They admitted to Gratiot that the Potawatomi had sent them a message by their trader, Thibault, but insisted that it was a peaceful message. Gratiot himself saw the wampum and that it was tied with a green ribbon, signifying peace. The message was an invitation to hold a great council at Turtle village (on the site of Beloit). Here they were to have, wrote Gratiot,
a great "Medicine Feast," or a "Smoke to the Great Spirit." Then they hoped to secure permission to plant large fields of corn in that locality and to postpone their removal until the autumn.

In the meanwhile, Colonel Henry Dodge, who had been on the southwestern frontier organizing his regiment of dragoons, arrived at his home in Dodgeville. He had also been, during part of the winter, at Washington, where he was hailed as the victor over Black Hawk. He then proceeded to his Wisconsin home via Dixon's Ferry, where he heard the news of the Indian gathering. He wrote on April 13th, to General Alexander Macomb of the United States army, that he had seen Gratiot, who informed him that the Winnebago were peaceful, and that they requested until fall to make their removal. This, Dodge asserted, would by no means to be tolerated by the frontier inhabitants. The tribesmen must go before June 1st. He ordered two companies of his newly-enlisted dragoons to march at once for the Illinois River and to be ready when ordered to advance into the Rock River region. Meanwhile Dodge met Kinzie, who assured him that the Winnebago were much frightened and would accede to any proposals from Dodge and their agents; that they were still in a state of semi-starvation and in great dread of the future.

Dodge decided to hold a conference with the principal chiefs at the Four Lakes, and sent them word to meet him at the old council ground on Fourth Lake, where he had talked with them the previous May, and restrained them from joining Black Hawk. April 28th was the day appointed. Dodge, Gratiot, and Kinzie arrived with their escorts; all the principal chiefs of the Rock River were there—Whirling Thunder, White Crow, Little Priest, Little Black, Spotted Arm, White Breast, and others. The Indians made their plea for time, which Dodge refused; they then asked for help to remove their families, for wagons and oxen to portage their canoes from the Rock River headwaters to the Wisconsin, and for provisions to enable them to live. These requests the white men granted. Dodge ordered his two companies of dragoons under Captains Browne and Beekes to bring wagons from Illinois; Gratiot ordered three wagons full of corn from Galena, and wrote to Governor Porter that he would be in person at Four Lakes by May 15th to superintend the distribution of rations.

Meanwhile the Winnebago of the lake of their name and of the upper Fox River had begun their removal to the Baraboo Valley. The Rock River Indians decided to settle on Sauk Prairie, where
there had previously been a large Indian village. By the latter part of May the dragoons reached Dodgeville, whence they proceeded at once to Fourth Lake, where they built a camp on the northwestern shore near a great spring which they named for the spring Camp Bellefontaine. They also built another on the Wisconsin River, naming it Camp Knox. Their instructions were to observe a mild but firm attitude towards the removing Indians, and to range up and down the streams to see that all the Indians crossed the Wisconsin. On the fifteenth of May thirty lodges of the tribesmen gathered at Four Lakes ready to cross to Sauk Prairie. They held a grand medicine dance somewhere near the present city of Madison, and performed ceremonies of removal. "On the eve of their departure they extinguished all their old fires, and kindled a new one procured by the friction of two sticks of wood, which they 'hoped would burn clear and make them happy,'" wrote their agent Gratiot. He then gave them some few presents, after which their canoes, wigwams, and effects, already brought up the chain of the Four Lakes, were loaded on to wagons and transported to the shore of Wisconsin River. Man Eater's village was left behind as the chief himself was at Fort Winnebago; Spotted Arm also was tardy in removing his band. June 10th Dodge himself visited the camp on Fourth Lake and went thence to Fort Winnebago, where he learned that sixty lodges of tribesmen were still left on the eastern branches of Rock River.

Kinzie had meanwhile sent out word that the annuities would be paid July 1st at the agency house at the portage. Unfortunately this payment was the occasion for a disgraceful orgy. Whisky dealers brought in a vast quantity of liquor, and opened it on private ground, where it could not be seized by the government. Several Indians were killed in drunken rows, and most of the silver paid them by the government passed into the hands of the liquor dealers and traders, so that the Indians were worse rather than better off for their annuities.

Dodge thought it necessary to keep the troops in the ceded territory, being certain that many of the Indians would return to Rock River waters after the annuity payment. Whirling Thunder and his band, encouraged by the traders John Dougherty, Oliver Armel, and Stephen Mack, returned to their old village. Lieutenant T. B. Whee lockdown, of the dragoons, followed them to Sugar River and arrested the white men and carried them and the Indian band to the Fourth Lake camp. Dodge being notified by
express, rode over from Dodgeville, released the traders, and sent a troop of fifty dragoons to escort Whirling Thunder and his party to Portage, and there set them across the river. This chief and some others of his tribesmen then decided to settle in the neutral ground. They went down the Wisconsin River to Prairie du Chien, and by mid-July Whirling Thunder with two hundred and fifty of the tribe, many of them from Lake Koshkonong and Turtle River, had crossed into Iowa. The dragoons’ camp on Fourth Lake was kept up until October, when the troops had effectually cleared the region of Winnebago stragglers.

It would be too long a story to attempt to follow the tribesmen to their new homes. Those who went across to Iowa speedily returned because of an outbreak of hostilities between the Sauk and the Sioux, in which they feared to be involved. After this, the tribe felt badly crowded in the territory north of the Wisconsin. "We are too many to live in so small a country," complained Chaetaar to General Street at Prairie du Chien in 1834. Early in that year Whirling Thunder sought out his old friend and agent at Gratiot’s Grove, who has preserved for us his pathetic speech: "Father—I have come to see you and get you to write a letter in my name and in the name of my Rock River band of Winnebagoes. We are tired of having no home—we are scattered all over the country like wild beasts, and wish to unite in the spring, and build a village and plant corn.

"Father Cass [Secretary of War]—I call on you particularly because you know us, you have traversed our country and know our habits, and our needs. . . .

"Father—you know better than we do that the land you gave us west of the Mississippi, is occupied by the Sac’s and Foxes, the Sioux’s and other tribes, and you know it [is] impossible for us to go and live there, because all these natives are jealous of us—it is useless for us to ramble about as we do. . . .

"Father—The Great Spirit has made the white and the read [sic] man, the white he made more numerous than the red, and gave them more sense they can read and they can write—it is for that reason the Great Spirit created a distinction between the two. The whites were made by the Great Spirit to take care of the red people who are ignorant." He then stated that the Prophet was intriguing against the whites and was at his old home on Rock River. Black Wolf, White Crow, and Little Priest
were also known to have visited their old homes during the winter of 1833-34.

So they came back—the dispossessed—year after year. White pioneers tell of the long trains of Indian visitors that used to come each summer to their old Rock River homes, to fish once more in the beloved waters, to stand once more beside the effigy mounds of their clans. The dispossessed make a sad picture, yet an inevitable one. The Great Spirit had willed that this valley of the Rock should be no longer a wilderness, haunted by barbarians, but the home of a great civilization. Let us, however, in our plenty and prosperity prove our humaneness by giving now and then a look into the past and a sigh of sympathy for the dispossessed red man, who loved the woods and streams and lakes of his ancestral home with a deep and abiding affection. "This," said one of the Winnebago tribe to the writer, "is the home of my spirit." From this home they were forced to go in the early summer of 1833, because of the unreasoning terror of the frontier settlers, and by the stern orders of the officers of the United States government.  

*This paper is based almost wholly upon the documents in the Indian office at Washington, copies of which are in the State Historical Library. Dodge's letters of this period are printed in Iowa Historical Record, v; 337-361; vi; 391-422, 445-467. See also a trooper's experience, in Wis. Hist. Colls., x; 231-234. Mrs. Kinzie's valuable record in Wau Bum closes just before the removal and the payment of 1833. See incidents connected with the repeated return of the Winnebago, in Wis. Hist. Colls., x; 258-259.