

Indian Sepulture

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INDIAN SEPULTURE

In their recollections concerning the sepulture of Wabaunsee, Moses Gaylord, in this issue of the ANNALS, and C. W. Tolles, in that of April, 1925, there is some small discrepancy of fact, and they differ enough in opinion sufficiently to warrant some discussion of Indian sepulture.

The so-called scaffold sepulture occurred among the Pottawattamies after their removal from the lower Lake Michigan area into what is now western Iowa.

The recollections have been taken by the Historical Department of many travelers and there yet survive a few witnesses of burial structures yet standing in 1860 in Cass, Pottawattamie, and Mills counties. But the supposition of our two contributors as to why the dead were elevated to scaffolds or trees are types of suppositions common in all civilized observers of whatever degree of experience and intelligence.

We have felt that the Musquakies at Tama offer the best opportunity of obtaining unalloyed truth of such of their own habits as are clearly racial and of the corresponding habits, current and traditional, of other races observed by or experienced among them.

Moreover, there are among the Musquakies a number of pure Pottawattamies descended from those of their tribe who were transported from western Iowa beyond the Missouri River. At least two of the age of eighty, who are intermarried with the Musquakies, survived until recent years at Tama. They refused to go with their tribe to Kansas and remained in Iowa. The Pottawattamie, Johnny Green, can be remembered by many. He was nicknamed among his people Wa-wa-wa, but his true name they say was Kish-ka-qua. A grandson of Kish-ka-qua, Charles H. Chuck, is the sturdy marshal of the "reservation." Numerous other co-descendants survive and speak with certainty

of the habits and traits of the old Pottawattamies as differing from the Musquakies and Winnebagoes at the Tama grounds. John McIntosh, a Pottawattamie, over ninety years old, recently died at Tama. He was a medicine man possessing clear memory of much, if not all, of the information we require.

Every such informant will say in effect that both scaffold and earth sepulture occurred among the Pottawattamies in western Iowa, and that bodies of the same clan, lodge and even family, deceased under identical circumstances and near the same time, were disposed of in the two ways of sepulture, including also the subsequent removal from scaffold to earth, and the permanent abandonment on scaffolds to the natural elements.

Choice of method was exercised much as white people choose, by one or more persons from a tie of blood or public responsibility, upon considerations of preference of the surviving relatives, or upon consideration that the nation might soon remove or permanently remain, and upon the faith, often called by our people their superstition, that the dead would be animated and facilitated in Elysian movements by special disposition made of the mortal form. In this and in some score of practices in sepulture among the Musquakies there is a singular parallel with our own ways of earlier frontier times before functions of sepulture passed from the home to church and commerce.

It seems then that while scaffold sepulture had the effect for instance of securing the remains against attacks from coyotes, one does not see why these animals and their like should be less welcome than the vultures.

It is safe to conclude that to all peoples the disposition of the dead came unchanged from practices so ancient that their causes have been lost. No one has deigned to ascribe to any inventor of our most ancient times a precedent for funeral styles, nor has he within recent times found much innovation in our habits as to the burial of our dead. If not among ourselves why hope to do so in the antiquity of the "savage"? Scaffold sepulture of Wabausie was a solemnity ancient as our tears. The wails of his children were merely as those of our own kin in the Ural wilds.

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