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Please forward one or both messages to Margie Fiel if you have her e-mail address. (If you have a printer, give her a copy instead.) My computer would not wade through a security issue when I tried to call up Notre Dame's directory last night. I think that she would have preferred a FAX, but I don't have a FAX machine.

Surviving Violence: The Potawtomi

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The Potawatomi have a long history with the French, but the association has been interrupted at various nodes by historical happenings. Disregarding the interruptions, the length of our association with the French is about equal to the time between now, 2010, and when we became distinct from the other Anishnabe in the 1600's. The two other Anishnabe to whom we are closely related are the Ojibwa and the Odawa.

One example of the French connection is reflected in a true story told to me by Jerry Tuckwin who is Prairie Potawatomi. French Nuns visited the Prairie Potawatomi last century in Mayetta, Kansas. During a stop in the Lady of the Snow Catholic Church, the Nuns asked the Potawatomi women to sing a hymn so that they could hear it in Potawatomi. The women gladly obliged. Before they could finish the song, the Nuns joined in the singing. One of the Potawatomi women asked the Nuns how they knew the words. The reply was, "The words were in French."

Past warfare in Potawatomi history mainly involved two major groups, namely the Iroquois and the Americans who track back through British ancestry. The purpose of my talk is not to present a history of the Potawatomi, but it is necessary to provide an underlying foundation to help you understand who we are today and how we managed to survive.

Visualize the Great Lakes and the states of Michigan and Wisconsin. The Iroquois, who were allied with the British, warred with us. They wanted to spread their territory westward from New York in order to increase their economic ties with Britain. The economic base related to trading furs for European-style goods, and furs were more plentiful in the Midwest than in the New York area. The forays of the Iroquois also were against the Illinois-based tribes and the weakening of peoples in northern Indiana. These intrusions eventually created a vacuum that allowed us to move southward into northern Illinois and Indiana after having gotten shoved northward by the Iroquois.

Our alliance with the French helped keep the Iroquois, who were allies of the British, partially in check.

One would expect that the economic and military pressure from the Iroquois would increase when the French were removed from the equation by the British. However, we quickly turned our alliance to Britain which, in turn, was defeated by the American colonists. The defeat of Britain by the American colonists diminished any lingering thoughts that the Iroquois may have had in expanding their influence into the Midwest.

We did not have a unified policy on how we dealt with the British and the succeeding government, the United States of America. We were composed of separate villages, each led by its own chief who had his own thoughts of how he would deal with the oncoming Euro-Americans. Some took one position and others took a contrary stance. Unfortunately, there were violent events for which we were all blamed even though not all of the Potawatomi people were of the same mind. The result was that the Potawatomi people of that era were categorized as “savages.”

One example is the “Ft. Dearborn Massacre” in Chicago. Siding with the British, some Potawatomi were goaded into attacking the occupants of Ft. Dearborn as they retreated to Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Other Potawatomi came to the rescue of the American survivors of the Ft. Dearborn Massacre, but their humanitarian efforts largely were discounted. Siding with the British during the War of 1812 did not help our cause either.

The above is an over-simplification of our history prior to the revolt of the colonists against Britain and up until the War of 1812, but it is a summary of how we always seemed to chose the losing side. A more complete history was written by David Edmunds in his 1978 book, *The Potawatomis Keepers of the Fire*.

Because the winning side had no appreciation of the Potawatomi culture, it became relatively easy to diminish the land base of the Potawatomi through a long series of treaties that started early in the history of the USA. Most of the treaties that we signed were not the result of military conquests by the USA. In fact, the Potawatomi hold the record of being the most “treatied” tribe in the history of the USA. The record reminds me of the record in major league baseball for the one hit by the most pitches.

The association of the Potawatomi with the French in the 1600’s began the tribe’s first exposure to Christianity. Through the work of the priests, the “Black Robes,” who traveled with the French fur traders, hymns and prayers were learned by the Potawatomi who were receptive to what was taught by the Black Robes. The missionary work of the Black Robes undoubtedly was made more difficult by the behavior of some on the fur traders with whom the traveled. The tendency of a few of the traders to exploit Indian women was discussed by Jacqueline Peterson in her 1981 PhD Thesis titled *The people in between: Indian-white marriage and the genesis of a Metis society and culture in the Great Lakes region, 1680-1830*.

However, the work of the French Black Robes was punctuated by the defeat of the French in North America by the British. History shows that the British chose to remove as much French influence as possible from the territory that had been won. The smudging even included the removal of the French Black Robes, which resulted in an absence of the Christian message for the Potawatomi for a long period of time.

Eventually, after the defeat of the British by the American colonists, Christian work by the Black Robes and other groups for the Potawatomi and related tribes would return. To the amazement of the Black Robes who began working with the Potawatomi after decades of being forbidden, some of the Potawatomi had retained some of the prayers and songs which had been taught by the early Black

Robes.

Susan Sleeper-Smith noted in her 2001 book, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*, that there were three main groups of villages that existed when early tribes occupied the lands around the Great Lakes: Catholic, Protestant, and Traditionalist. One feature of Christianity that was receptive to the Potawatomi was the concept of angels. This concept was similar to the thinking of “spirits” as envisioned during vision quests. Sleeper-Smith theorized that one of the receptivities to Catholicism was the naming of godparents and their presence during baptisms. Becoming a godparent could greatly extend one’s influence through the tribal villages because one was now a member of the newly baptized’s family. Sleeper-Smith’s theory is based on the revelation of the appearance of the same godparent in greatly distant villages. Traditionalists appeared to accept another’s spiritual beliefs without passing any judgment on the matter.

One can argue *ad infinitum* as to the pros and cons of the removal of Potawatomi from the Great Lakes area. There was not a single removal, but several commenced shortly after President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The removals held two basic challenges to the Catholic Church. Namely, (1) what political position should be taken to help the Potawatomi resist removal and (2) how to continue missionary work among the Potawatomi if removal happens. Regarding the former, one needs to look at politics and the removal of the Potawatomi from northern Indiana in 1838. The removal later became known as the Trail of Death. The initial outward stance by the Catholic leaders was political neutrality. Continuation of the missionary work was put into effect.

The Potawatomi that were removed from the Great Lakes area initially found themselves in three areas: (1) Ft. Leavenworth with the Kickapoo who had been removed there from east central Illinois, (2) southwest and west central Iowa after a brief period in northwest Missouri, and (3) east central Kansas. Regardless of the location, the Potawatomi now faced a three-faceted form of violence (social, economic and cultural disarray) in addition to physical threats of their new neighbors.

Father Benjamin Petit, who now lies buried here on the campus of University of Notre Dame, accompanied and ministered to the Potawatomi on their forced removal from Indiana to east central Kansas. His work was greatly appreciated by the Potawatomi in helping them deal with the hardships that they faced in late 1838 and early 1839.

St. Ferdinand Catholic Church, Florissant, Missouri, became the focal point for succeeding missionary work with Potawatomi. The church sent workers who established missions at Sugar Creek in east central Kansas and at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Saint Philippe Duchense is the most notable person who went to the Sugar Creek Mission. Father Jean DeSmet was sent to Council Bluffs by St. Ferdinand Catholic Church.

Father DeSmet found the work at Council Bluffs somewhat frustrating as indicated by some of his writings. He complained that Potawatomi men changed wives as often as gentlemen in St. Louis changed overcoats and that violent fighting occurred among Potawatomi when smuggled liquor was discovered in cannons aboard a steamboat. The fighting led to some disfigurement.

The Potawatomi were at a loss as to what to do after they were removed from the Great Lakes area and sent west of the Mississippi River. Within 10 years after removal, the federal government was trying to move everyone to a common reservation in northeast Kansas. Quito, a Potawatomi elder, expressed this frustration when he told a visiting army officer in 1843 that we are like birds in a windstorm and do not know which bough to land on.

Physical violence was a real threat when the Potawatomi found themselves in Iowa and Kansas. Threat came to the Potawatomi in Iowa from the Sioux. The same threat followed them to Kansas when the people moved there in 1847 and 1848. Earlier, the Potawatomi in east central Kansas found themselves facing an old enemy, the Osage. The problem in all areas pointed to two basic issues, long-term rivalry and territoriality. The Potawatomi directly dealt with physical violence when confronted by the Pawnee near the common Kansas reservation.

In effort to escape problems emanating from the violence of social, economic, and social disarray following removals from the Great Lakes area, a contingent of Potawatomi and Kickapoo left their reservations in Kansas and headed to Mexico. This was in late 1864. Enroute, they were attacked by the Texas Militia and Confederate Troops along Dove Creek in southwest Texas. The Potawatomi and Kickapoo largely survived the confrontation, but 12 of their party did not.

Contrary to what I was told 25 years ago, Potawatomi still exist. Presently, there are eight Potawatomi bands, counting the one group in Canada and the band in Mexico. The Prairie Band in Kansas is the most traditional group in the USA whereas the Citizen Potawatomi in Oklahoma undoubtedly are the most acculturated.

Most Potawatomi whom I have met are very spiritual, whether they are Catholic, Protestant, or Traditional. This spiritual quality is one of the basic underpinnings that has allowed the Potawatomi to survive the various forms of violence that we have faced. Other strong survival elements include humor and tenacity.

In closing, I think that it has been unfortunate that some of the encounters with Christianity have been negative because of the approach of some Christian workers. Any negativity is not from the message of Christ himself, but the way that messengers have presented His message. I seriously make this statement because as a Christian I have seen first hand some instances of how a loving people have been so unloved.

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