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POWESHIEK

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Poweshiek

HIS POWER, POLITICS AND PEOPLE

By Thomas Burnell Colbert

On the Iowa frontier in the 1830s and 1840s, there were Indian leaders of regional and even national recognition. Among them were the Sauk Chief Keokuk, the Meskwaki Chief Wapello, and a handful of others. One of the most important, but sometimes overlooked, was Meskwaki Chief Poweshiek, who became the namesake for an Iowa county.

In certain respects, he was second only to Keokuk, though Poweshiek would rise eventually to dominate the Meskwaki tribe. And like his sometimes ally and rival, Keokuk, he faced a collection of problems that determined the unhappy fate of his people and partially sullied his own reputation.

Poweshiek was born between 1787 and 1790 — the dates vary — in a Meskwaki village on the Rock River in Illinois close to the Mississippi River. He was reputedly the grandson of Muck-e-te-nan or Black Thunder, one of the greatest Meskwaki chiefs.

Poweshiek was a large man, most described him as weighing about 250 pounds. However, opinions differed about his character and personality.

A history of Poweshiek County published in 1880 states that Poweshiek had “a disposition full of exactness and arrogance” and was “blunt and outspoken.” A 1910 Scott County history called him a “striking specimen of his race,” remarking that, “those who knew him called him a man of great energy, a wise counselor and the soul of honor” who “remembered kindness, and his word could be relied upon.”

Historian Perry Armstrong offered that Poweshiek “was not only witty but sharp as a whip in financial transactions.” Thomas McKenney, who had served as U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, described Poweshiek as “not distinguished by brilliant talent” but a man “of prudence and capacity.” He further noted that Poweshiek was a daring warrior who was respected in council but overshadowed by Keokuk.

Others said that he had a “passion for justice” and “his word was regarded as sacred.” Yet another commentator noted that he was of “good character, truthful and just, and ruled his Indians with an iron hand.” And Col. S.C. Trowbridge, who “became an intimate friend” of Poweshiek’s, in 1837 described him as “a fat lazy man, weighing about 250 pounds, and fond of whisky; often drunk. He had a strong sense of justice, and was brave, true to his word and faithful



No photographs of Chief Poweshiek are thought to exist, but this painting, which appeared in Thomas McKenney and James Hall's "History of the Indian Tribes of North America" is the most iconic image of the legendary Meskwaki chief. McKenney was the head of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs during the early part of the 19th century. After taking office in 1816, he began to document Native American culture, including recording their likenesses by commissioning artists Charles Bird King and James Otto Lewis to paint their portraits. McKenney's goal was to educate the American public about these greatly exotic warriors and chiefs and to preserve them for posterity in a series of beautiful oil portraits.

to a friend. His word was sacred ... He was rather slow to be aroused, but when fairly aroused to action, showed a great deal of energy and force of character, combined with a fair degree of executive talent and judicial facility ... He was on the whole, rather a noble specimen of the American red man."

After a few chiefs influenced by alcohol signed away Sauk and Meskwaki lands in Illinois in 1804, Poweshiek's

group of Meskwakis were some of the first to move across the Mississippi onto the Iowa side of the river, joining other Meskwakis who had earlier settled in Iowa, coming down from the Wisconsin region and operating their lead mines with Julian Dubuque, the so-called Mines of Spain.

While the prospect of hostilities with whites grew in Illinois with Sauk war chief Black Hawk opposing removal from Saukenuk, their main village, and his rival Keokuk wanting to cooperate with the whites, the Meskwakis, as well as Sauks, were also in the midst of conflict with the Sioux for hunting grounds in northern Iowa.

In the spring of 1830, when a delegation of the principal Meskwaki chief and some of his warriors were massacred by a Sioux and Menominee war party while traveling to Prairie du Chien, Wis., for a peace conference, Poweshiek rose in power. The Dubuque village of Meskwakis was devastated by the deaths of most of their leaders, except for war chief Morgan who led those left to the Meskwaki village at present-day Davenport. When Morgan died, the Meskwaki council met to declare a new peace or civil chief. The rightful hereditary chief, a minor son of the slain leader, was considered too young to lead and the question of leadership was debated. Poweshiek's sister related that she had a vision in which Poweshiek would be chosen as chief. Consequently, it was decided that Poweshiek, a member of the Brown Bear clan, should lead until the young man of the legitimate Black Bear clan could become chief.

Once in this leadership position, Poweshiek exerted his authority. The mixed-lineage Meskwaki anthropologist William Jones offered years later that Poweshiek, not Keokuk, doomed Black Hawk's ill-fated return to Saukenuk to his failure in the Black Hawk War of 1832. Thus while Keokuk kept a number of his Sauk followers from joining with Black Hawk, almost all of the Meskwakis, influenced by Poweshiek, did not join in the fighting.

On the other hand, it is clear that Black Hawk wanted to peacefully return to Saukenuk, and once conflict commenced, Black Hawk had no way of winning against the might of the white forces regardless of whether Meskwakis and reluctant Sauks joined with him or not.

Poweshiek's decision to remain out of the war benefited him in several ways. He did not lead his people into a disastrous defeat and his efforts to restrain militant Meskwakis fostered some popularity for him with American government officials. Consequently, he became known as the "peaceful chief." But that was only with regard to whites, not the Sioux.

His tribal status equalled or possibly surpassed that of Wapello and Appanoose, the other leading Meskwaki chiefs at the time. His rise also came as the Sauks declined relatively in power due to casualties and defeat in the Black Hawk War.

At the same time, Poweshiek brought more unity to northeastern Iowa Meskwaki villages. The Meskwakis now exhibited prominence in the region, and as the major chief, Poweshiek became a person of great authority for the re-



According to a handwritten documentation with the specimen, this cape was made for Chief Poweshiek by his youngest daughter in the winter of 1839. It was subsequently given to Dr. Henry Murray of Iowa City by Poweshiek as payment for medical bills. The cape was later donated to the State Historical Society by Murray's granddaughter and then transferred to the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History. The cape represents one of the few examples of feather work for the period in the Midwest and allegedly is the only such specimen attributable to the Meskwaki tribe.

talized Meskwaki tribe, even though U.S. authorities made Keokuk the recognized chief of confederated Sauk and Meskwaki tribes.

Along with Keokuk and other tribal leaders, Poweshiek "touched the goose quill" to the treaty of 1832, surrendering a large slice of tribal land in eastern Iowa to the U.S. government, land which the Meskwakis considered their's alone. Thereafter, conflicts arose over annuity payments as these funds were entrusted to the chiefs to encourage their tribal power and friendship with the U.S. government.

However, in 1833, Keokuk, Poweshiek, Wapello, Appanoose and others were angered when annuity money was not paid to them so they could pay tribal debts owed to traders. The next year, annuities were given to Keokuk to distribute to the three other "money chiefs" who would pay the traders. In turn, Poweshiek and Appanoose sent three petitions — with the help of traders — to the president of the U.S., one "signed" by more than 400 Meskwaki men, complaining that Keokuk had spent the money paying the American Fur Company and had left nothing for them.

In 1835, Poweshiek called for heads of families to receive the payments. When his request was denied, again Poweshiek and Appanoose petitioned the president and Congress. Then, they sent retractions for they feared that the traders would cut off their credit.

In the midst of this squabbling over annuity payments, the missionary Cutting Marsh made his way to Poweshiek's village in 1834 and later recounted his visit. He wrote that Poweshiek was "savage in appearance, and very much debased." Poweshiek, he wrote, wanted two or three interpreters, but did not want his people to receive white schooling. He desired "to have his young men as warriors," declaring "The Great Spirit made us to fight and kill one another when we are a mind to." With regard to becoming farmers, and thus "civilized" as the white man saw it, Poweshiek replied that his braves would use hoes but not plow the earth, for "they chose rather to hunt for a living than cultivate ground."

In 1836, Poweshiek agreed to the sale of the Keokuk

Reserve to the government. In 1837, Keokuk led a delegation of tribal leaders, including Poweshiek, to Washington, D.C., to confront the Sioux over territorial claims. While Keokuk served as the primary spokesman for the Sauk and Meskwakis, the other chiefs had their say as did Poweshiek who exhibited his bombastic militant streak. "When I kill a Sioux," he averred, "I revenged myself on my own land, not theirs. These men are like I was when a little boy; there is a great deal of mischief in their heads."

At the Washington council, the Sauks and Meskwakis not only strongly asserted their ownership of much contested land in Iowa, they also sold more to the U.S. government. Then, they went on a tour of the East. They danced on the Boston Commons and spoke at Faneuil Hall along with the governor of Massachusetts. There, Poweshiek said, "This is the place where our tribe once lived ... I wish I had a book, and could read in it all these things. I have heard that is the way you get all your knowledge. As far as I can understand the language of the white people, it appears to me that the Americans have reached a high stand among the white peoples — very few could overpower them. It is the same with regard to us — though I say it. Where I live I am looked up to by others, and they all respect me."

But regardless of Meskwaki prowess in warfare, Poweshiek learned just as Keokuk had learned earlier when traveling to the eastern United States, that the great number of whites and their wealth and technology made them too powerful to fight.

Once back in Iowa, Poweshiek with some of his warriors escorted agent Joseph Street to find a spot for a new agency on the Des Moines River. Poweshiek and his followers, moved up the Iowa River while the other Meskwakis and Sauks planted new villages on the Des Moines River. Before leaving the area of Johnson County, Poweshiek was invited to the trading post for a Fourth of July ceremony and asked to speak. There, he reportedly made a short but often recounted speech:

"Soon I will go to a new home. You will plant corn where my dead sleep. Our towns, the paths we have made, and the flowers we love will soon be yours. I have moved many times and have seen the white man put his feet in the tracks of the Indian and make the earth into fields and gardens. I know I must go away and you will be so glad when I am gone that you will soon forget the meat and the lodge-faire of the Indians have been forever free to the stranger and all times he has



James Poweshiek, seated in the center row of this family photo taken in Tama in 1935, courtesy of the Tama County Historical Society, was the grandson of Chief Poweshiek. Some say that the town of Tama was named after Taomah, who was the wife of Chief Poweshiek.

asked for what he had fought for, the right to be free."

A change in locale, though, did not end the conflict over annuity distribution and Poweshiek once again voiced his displeasure as the money chiefs used the money for their own personal benefits. Moreover, Poweshiek charged that Keokuk and his supporters received favoritism from the government agent.

Still, a bigger threat arose in October 1841. Iowa Territory Gov. John Chambers wanted the Sauks and Meskwaki to sell their remaining land in Iowa and move to the Great Plains. The feuding factions, however, united in opposing the offer, which led Poweshiek once more to speak out:

"We hold this country from our fathers. We have a hereditary right to it, and we think we have a right to judge whether we will sell it or not ... According to our custom, our chiefs own all

the trees and earth and they are used for the benefit of our people. We should give up a timber for prairie country when we want, not when you wish. I call the Great Spirit, earth, sky, and weather to witness that we choose what is best for our people. After being a powerful people, we are now but a shade of one. We hope that the great spirit will now pity and protect us."

No treaty was made, but pressure from the U.S. government remained.

In 1841, Poweshiek believed that he commanded the largest Meskwaki village, reportedly composed of 40 lodges and 400 tribesmen. He actually had leadership over several smaller villages besides his home village, and only together did their numbers eclipse those of Wapello's large village. Poweshiek promoted this fact as a justification for his assumed power in the tribe and when Wapello died in March 1842, it further enhanced Poweshiek's status as the main tribal leader.

That October, another treaty council was called, this time needing money to pay their debts to traders. Poweshiek spoke for other leaders and offered to sell some of their land in Iowa. It was the first time that a Meskwaki had ever spoken first in council with whites, but Gov. Chambers replied that it was not enough so Keokuk promised that they would regroup and come back to talk.

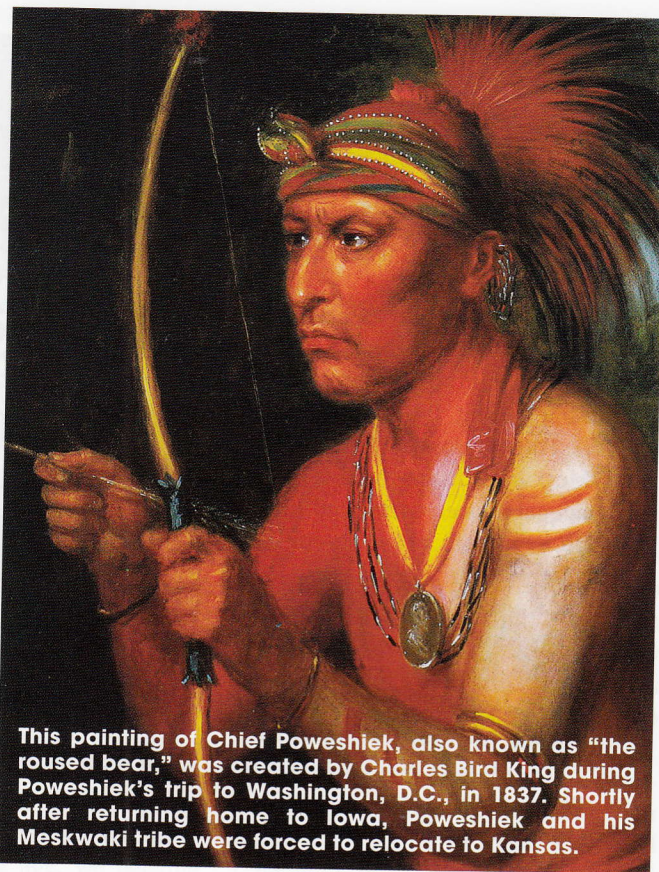
Two days later, Poweshiek spoke again and announced that the Sauk and Meskwaki chiefs were ready to accept the offer of 1841. On Oct. 11, 1842, Keokuk, Poweshiek and the other chiefs signed the treaty relinquishing remaining tribal land for 10 cents per acre. But Article IV in the agreement

held special importance to Poweshiek and the Meskwakis as it named Poweshiek as principal chief of the Meskwakis, giving them autonomy from the leadership of Keokuk. As for their removal, the tribes were to move their villages west of a line on the Des Moines River and thereafter to leave Iowa for Kansas in three years.

The Meskwakis, however, did not welcome this treaty, and Poweshiek faced much criticism. So much so, that he changed his mind about moving. He refused even to meet with agent John Beach, and when he finally did, he again fell into the annuity dispute, favoring payment to the chief while Keokuk now wanted family heads to receive funds directly. Moreover, contrary to the terms of the treaty, Poweshiek and his followers returned to the sites of their old villages on the Iowa River in 1843 and 1844, only to be evicted each time by white militia.

Afterwards, Poweshiek and his followers then established themselves on the Grand River, thinking that they were in Missouri and no longer subject to white authority in Iowa Territory. They were wrong and as disputes arose with local white settlers, the story went out that the Meskwakis were preparing for war rather than to leave Iowa.

Three white friends of Poweshiek from Des Moines hastily rode to his camp and urged him to head for Kansas before any bloodshed might occur. Poweshiek did ask the agent to allow



This painting of Chief Poweshiek, also known as "the roused bear," was created by Charles Bird King during Poweshiek's trip to Washington, D.C., in 1837. Shortly after returning home to Iowa, Poweshiek and his Meskwaki tribe were forced to relocate to Kansas.

Many achievements....

- > 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist **John Sullivan**
- > First woman to command the U. S. Space Station, **Peggy Whitson**
- > Famed Hollywood star **Gary Cooper**
- > Discoverer of the Earth's radiation belts, **Dr. James Van Allen**

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the old and sick to remain in Iowa that winter of 1845. Beach did agree that only those too sick to travel could winter where they were camped, and in 1846 the bulk of the tribe settled along the Nodaway River.

Finally, Poweshiek reluctantly led some of his people toward Kansas, while others ran off and hid in the timbers along the Iowa River. In 1850, Poweshiek would also lead some Meskwakis back to Iowa, but white acquaintances convinced him to return to Kansas before any hostilities might occur.

In Kansas, an unhappy Poweshiek faced the hostility of many of his fellow tribesmen. He had sold the land they loved. Moreover, whether he was principal chief of the Meskwakis or not, they were still tied to Keokuk and the Sauk.

Consequently, Poweshiek met the Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Medill at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and requested to meet with the president asking to separate the Meskwakis from the Sauks. Poweshiek declared that the Meskwakis wanted their own home area, annuities, and chiefs, but his request was denied. In turn, he led his people to the Kickapoo Reservation in 1848. The Kickapoo had for several generations been very friendly to their Meskwaki "cousins," and Poweshiek wanted Meskwaki annuities paid there rather than at the Sauk headquarters. Again, the U.S. government refused.

Thereafter, Poweshiek lost his leadership to a rightful hereditary heir from the Black Bear clan. Another story, though, is that he died in 1854 after falling from a horse, still principal chief of the Meskwakis.

As tribal chief, Poweshiek earned respect for his opposition to the Sioux as a spokesman for the Meskwakis and as a warrior leader in fighting them. On the other hand, he aligned with Keokuk when many Meskwakis resented being led by a Sauk.

Additionally, he not only relied upon traders for goods and other aid, but he used them against each other. He used his control of annuities to gain followers, especially as he separated himself from Keokuk and Wapello in the annuity disputes. However, as Poweshiek and the other contesting chiefs disputed, it not only weakened the role of the tribal council, but tribesmen became more tied to other leaders, causing further fissure in tribal unity.

But Poweshiek's greatest liability as a tribal leader came with all the treaties he signed surrendering land to the whites. For these, especially the treaty of 1842, many Meskwakis never forgave him. They greatly cared for their land in Iowa — the timber, the rivers and the rich black soil. Indeed, they



Chief Poweshiek's grandson, James Poweshiek, age 94, poses for a picture in Tama in 1946, courtesy of the Tama County Historical Society, which indicated his age on the back of the photo. In an interview in 1942, Poweshiek told researcher John Hauberg that he was born in 1854, the same year that his grandfather (Chief Poweshiek) died, which would have made him 92 years old at the time of this photo, instead of 94. He told Hauberg that he was born in a home built out of bark in Tama County and that his father died when he was two years old and that his famous grandfather "was an old man at the time of his death."

considered their history beginning in Iowa, regardless of the fact that they

had moved often in their long past and had not entered Iowa until the 1730s.

Furthermore, it has been said that, "tribal land is a symbol of a refuge from oppression" for the Meskwakis. "It is a place of safety." Poweshiek and chiefs who sold the land had, in their minds, violated the tribe's welfare and their security. Concurrently, Poweshiek, along with all the chiefs, felt not only the pressure of white settlers who wanted more land in Iowa, but also the U.S. government's Indian Removal policy to induce eastern tribes to move onto the Great Plains.

Also, the Meskwakis and Sauks were running out of game and furs as they were forced farther westward away from timbered land. As a result, their debts to traders grew as they purchased more than their furs and hides could cover. They began to depend on white goods and foods for survival, and the excesses of alcohol consumption, along with disease and malnutrition, fostered a significant loss of tribal population. To further complicate matters, the government endeavored to get them to take up individual land holdings.

When confronted with such problems, Poweshiek no doubt felt compelled to accept removal, even if he soon regretted and repudiated the Treaty of 1842.

In all, however, Poweshiek's legacy of leadership was a mixed bag, which not only gave him political distinction among the Meskwakis but also fostered dissension. He was, nevertheless, an important native leader who clearly played an important role in Meskwaki affairs during a crucial time in their history on the Iowa frontier. ■

(Dr. Thomas Burnell Colbert, retired professor emeritus at Marshalltown Community College where he taught history for more than 30 years, has written many book reviews, encyclopedia entries and magazine articles. Among his major research topics are American and Native American history.)