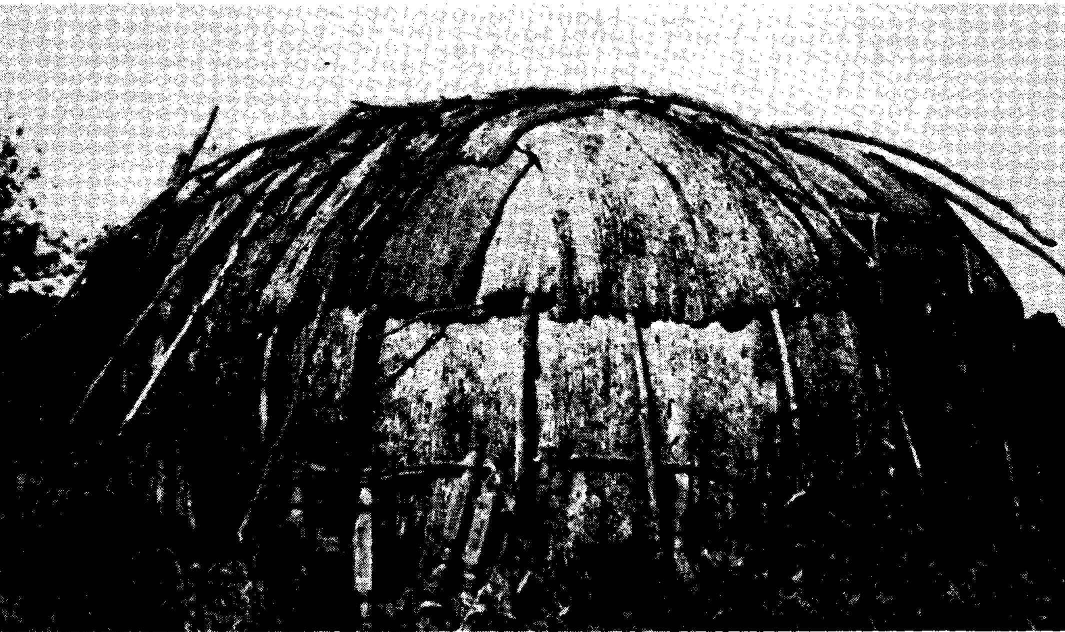
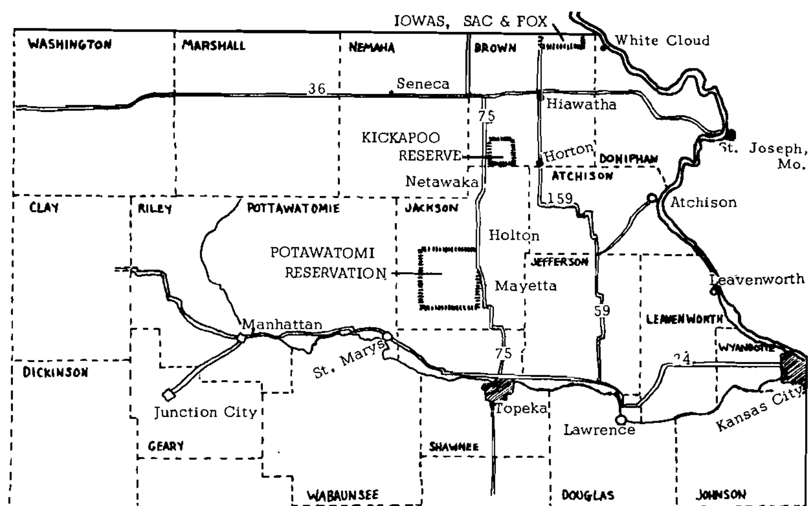


Potawatomi bark wickiup. (Courtesy of Rev. Alexander Eckert)

Facts and Fiction

There are three Indian reservations in Kansas today. All three are in the northeastern part of the state, and all are under the jurisdiction of the United States Potawatomi Area Field Office at Horton.



Northeastern quarter of Kansas showing present Indian reservations in relation to nearby towns and federal highways.

The largest reservation (an eleven mile square tract in Jackson county) belongs to the Potawatomi Indians, the next largest (a rectangle five miles by six miles in Brown county) to the Kickapoos, and the smallest (on the Kansas-Nebraska border) to the Sacs, Foxes, and Iowas.

These reservations are not populated with bare-skinned bow-and-arrow experts whose conversation with the white man consists of "How" and "Ugh." The majority of the Indians are monolingual (speaking only English), or bilingual (speaking both English and an Indian tongue). According to the present director

of the Potawatomi Area Field Office, just two living Kickapoos can speak the Kickapoo language with any facility, and there are only five or six Potawatomi left who thoroughly know *that* language. Most of the old ways of the Indians have died out, and the languages will soon be a thing of the past, too.

Whether this direction and the ultimate result is "good" or "bad" is not a question to be answered here. Perhaps it is always sad to see a group lose its identity and become indistinguishable from everybody else. On the other hand, it is probably easier for the members of the group to become "just like everybody else"—in this case, just like the surrounding white man.

. . . As the old sayings go (more or less), "When surrounded by Romans, do as the Romans do," and "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

To think of these reservations as belonging to the Indians is inaccurate: from two-thirds to five-sixths of the land is owned by white men who bought up the land of deceased allottees. Nowadays there are comparatively few permanent reservation Indians, and those are mostly older people. The younger ones have been educated in public schools and have gone off to make their fortunes, to work in offices and factories, to become absorbed in the mainstream of contemporary life. For example, there are an estimated 120 to 150 Potawatomies now on the reservation, whereas in the mid-1860's, a hundred years ago, there were around 2000.

This small group of "Old Guard" reservation Indians has for years been under the leadership of Minnie Evans, who sometimes goes by her Indian name of Weshkeenoo, or by the Indian name Wabaunce. She inherited her position as chief from her father, according to the tradition that the title is passed on to the eldest child regardless of sex. She is a powerful woman who fears neither white man nor Indian when it comes to going after what she believes to be right. Because of her aggressiveness in fighting for her principles, she has won the respect of all who deal with her, whether they agree with her or not. Minnie Evans will not soon be forgotten as a leader of the Potawatomies.

This group of traditionalists have pretty much refused to adopt the white man's ways. They have not accepted citizenship nor Christianity. They still adhere to the religion of their forefathers. One of the symbols of this religion is the "Chief Drum," in which they put much faith. All religions, Christian and non-Christian, have certain relics which the people hold to be sacred

Minnie Evans and Curtis Pequano reading old treaties and tribal rolls of the Prairie Band. (Courtesy of the **Kansas City Star**, September 24, 1961)

—and the Chief Drum is such for the so-called "Drummers."

According to Josette Wahwassuck, in whose family the drum has been passed down for many generations, "That drum *is* Potawatomi. It's what makes us a Prairie band. We must trust the drum." (From the *Kansas City Star*, September 24, 1961). The Chief Drum, which is decorated all around the outside with intricate beadwork, must be moved only by the drummer of the tribe,

must rest so that the beadwork is in a certain relationship to the points of the compass, and must in general be treated with the care and respect that any religious group reserves for its sacred objects. Until its picture appeared in the *Kansas City Star*, the Chief Drum had never been photographed, and it is never used at public pow-wows because outsiders have no respect for its religious significance.

The Chief Drum of the Potawatomi Prairie Band, and Josetta Wahwassuck, in whose family it has been passed down for generations. (Courtesy of the **Kansas City Star**, September 24, 1961)

The non-Christian Potawatomi sects (of which the Drummers are probably most prominent) have long served their devotees as a mystical and moral guide. The fact that there is a belief in a higher being is the important thing, not the manner of worship. Of the total Potawatomie population, it has been estimated that about a third embrace a non-Christian religion, a third are Protestants (mostly Methodists), and a third are Catholics. However, these are only approximations.

Jesuits founded a Catholic Mission at St. Marys in 1848, and much of the early Catholic work was done in the Potawatomi language, some in French, and a little in English. In the mission school (which was supported by government subsidies), both Potawatomi and English were used. The school was formally closed in 1869, but the influence of the Church did not cease. In 1912 St. Mary of the Snows was founded on the reservation itself.

The Baptists had been with the Potawatomies in Iowa, and followed the Prairie Band to Kansas in 1848. They maintained a school and mission on the eastern edge of the reservation until 1859 or 1860. Most of the pupils at the Baptist school were from the Prairie Band, and in 1859, just before it closed, there was an enrollment of 110.

In 1873, after a short period when there were no schools on the reservation, the government put in the Industrial Boarding School. It had no day pupils, and had facilities for only forty boarders in 1892; by 1898, however, it had an enrollment of 105. The school burned down in 1905 and was not replaced by another boarding school. Instead, the youngsters went to district day schools (there were thirteen in the 1930's, and only one in 1961), to the Methodist mission school (which was open from 1904 to 1909), to Haskell Institute at Lawrence, to the Catholic boarding school at Marty, South Dakota, or to Kansas public schools.

A few customs of the Potawatomies which are no longer followed are of interest to the modern student of Indian lore. For example, Catherine Linehan, a native of the Holton area, tells that as late as the 1920's, many of the Potawatomi women wore long dresses that almost touched the floor. "The skirts were very full, gathered around the waist, with ruffles on the bottom. These ruffles were often trimmed with baby ribbon. Nearly all of them wore plaid shawls, and black scarves on their heads. The material in the dresses was usually calico and the head scarves were silk.

"In earlier days it was not uncommon to see an Indian man

wearing a shawl. One day my uncle went to Netawaka with a load of corn. An Indian was unloading corn at the elevator too. Every time the Indian threw a scoop of corn off the wagon, he had to stop and put his shawl in place."

According to Janice Baker, also a native of Holton, if a Potawatomi enters a house with a gift of tobacco and the host accepts it, then he is obligated to do whatever the visitor asks. If an Indian invites someone to eat with him and the invitation is accepted, then the guest must eat whatever is served, be it just a crust of bread.

E. J. Calkins, a long-time student of Indians in Kansas, described for the *Heritage* a Potawatomi bark wickiup which he visited a number of years ago: The wickiup was the old-time dwelling place made from elm bark and green saplings. In shape,

Potawatomi bark wickiup, with E. J. Calkins, retired agent W. R. Honnell, and boys. (Courtesy of E. J. Calkins)

it resembled an oblong haystack. Very supple saplings as large as a man's wrist were used for the frame, and were lashed together so that they stood strong and sturdy. Large strips of elm bark (about four feet up and down and a foot or more in width) were lashed to the frame in an overlapping fashion, much like giant shingles. At the center of the top of the lodge was left an opening for the smoke to escape from the fire pit below.

Besides the fireplace in the center of the room, the lodge was furnished with beds along the wall for sitting and sleeping. Sturdy

poles were run lengthwise to serve as the frame for the long sides of the bed. These rested on upright forked supports six inches high. The crosspieces running from side to side (the width of the bed) were made of springy saplings. The bed was then covered with deerskin and buffalo robes.

Outside was located a ridgepole resting on two Y-shaped poles which were about six feet high. From the poles were hung cooking pots, and sometimes meat was hung there to dry. The height kept animals and children from tampering with either the utensils or the food hung there.

The Indians, who were originally hunters, lived, in their earliest days in this region, on game such as buffalo, antelope, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, quail, prairie chicken, deer, elk, dog, fish, waterfowl, and even skunk. (The Indians would never eat possum, however, prbobaly because this animal is a scavenger.) Beside fried dough (similar to Frenchfried pie dough) and fried game, the Indians supplemented their meals with the fruits, nuts, and vegetables which were available in the area: pawpaws, persimmons, wild poppy mallow, mulberries, gooseberries, cherries, walnuts, hickory and hazel nuts, pecans, biennial sunflower tubers, and Jerusalem artichokes, to name a few.

Tobacco was reserved for religious use. Young Indians were not allowed to use it until they were formally initiated as adults. A Kickapoo-Potawatomi girl once told Mr. Calkins of a custom of putting a bag of tobacco out on the rocks during thunderstorms, no doubt as an appeasement to the god causing the storm.

The Potawatomies were early divided into two rather distinct bands — an independent, roving group known as the Prairie Band, and a less aggressive group known as the Potawatomies of the Woods, later as the Christian or Mission Band, and still later as the Citizen Band (when they accepted citizenship and land allotments in 1861). Most of the latter group had moved out of the state during the nineteenth century. The Prairie Band remained in the state, and it is this group that still live in Jackson county.

In the following pages on the history of this Kansas Indian group, the modern spelling, *Potawatomi,* has been used except in direct quotations, in which the spelling used by the authors is kept. The Kansas county of Pottawatomie retains three "t's," and an "e" on the end in its spelling. The federal agency at Horton, the Potawatomi Area Field Office, uses only two "t's," and has