

19th- and 20th-Century Potawatomi Culture and the Railroad

The Rails of Change

Cultural anthropologists are often interested in patterns and themes in human thinking; more specifically, the relationship between personality and culture. Although most anthropologists have rejected the discipline's earlier attempts to characterize populations utilizing a few psychological terms,¹ researchers are still interested in dominant themes or values emphasized by a particular culture. Quite often, contradictory values and attitudes are manifest as well.² An analysis of the cultural values of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and its stroll through the political trends in American Indian "management" during the 19th and 20th centuries are the topics of this essay. Special attention is afforded to the railroad companies operating in Kansas and Oklahoma, and the legacy they left with the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

The Citizen Potawatomi Nation epitomizes the diversity and adaptability of any American Indian group currently residing in the United States. A quick review of tribal history illustrates this point. Actual first contact between Europeans and the Potawatomi was established in 1634 by French trader Jean Nicolet on the western shore of Lake Michigan.³ At the height of the fur trading era (1700s–1800s), the Potawatomi controlled a tribal estate that encompassed Wisconsin, Michigan, northern Illinois and Indiana, and a portion of Ohio. Control was accomplished through tribal democracy and savvy business skills—personality traits encouraged by the culture. The Potawatomi challenged the Ottawa as "middlemen" for trade in the Green Bay area. Using their entrepreneurial skills, the Potawatomi began to hire their local tribesmen to collect and trap the furs that they once procured themselves. In turn, the middlemen-Potawatomi would sell or trade the furs to the French, thereby expanding their tribal control and tribal estate.

During the Removal Period of the 1830s, the Mission Band of Potawatomi (today known as the Citizen Potawatomi) were forced to leave their

new homelands in the Wabash River Valley of Indiana. From Indiana, the Mission Band marched across four states (over 660 miles) to a new reserve in Kansas. Of the 850 Potawatomi people forced to withdraw, more than 40 died along the way during the September–November 1838 exodus.

Until this point in modern Citizen Potawatomi Nation history, the tribe had not been directly influenced by railroad interests but rather by government interests. All that would change when the Potawatomi moved into Kansas and began to encourage entrepreneurship even if it meant a change in traditional culture. For the discussion at hand, it is most profitable to concentrate on the personality traits that were encouraged by Potawatomi culture rather than on blood-degree or the history of intermarriage with French traders.

From 1846 to the 1860s, the Potawatomi were concentrated on a reservation along the Kansas River containing approximately 568,223 acres. While in Kansas, a prior rift between two groups of Potawatomi expanded due to the inevitable culture change associated with their assimilation into the dominant American culture. In 1861, the more acculturated Potawatomi exchanged their communal ownership of reservation lands for individual plots amounting to approximately 28,229 acres while the other group chose to retain a portion (about 77,440 acres) as common property. The remaining portion of the Kansas reserve was to be sold to the Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western Railroad Company.⁴ In fact, a provision in the 1867 "Treaty with the Potawatomi" provides for the purchase of the unassigned or surplus lands by another rail company if the original deal did not materialize.⁵ This is exactly what occurred, with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (AT&SF) Railroad Company purchasing the surplus lands at \$1 an acre. The railroad was to pay the Secretary of the Interior over a five-year period after posting an initial

bond. The AT&SF later sold these lands at an average price of \$4.41 an acre.

To our amazement we discovered that treaties for land acquisitions were often penned by railroad companies who later solicited the local Indian Agents for support.⁶ Too late for the Potawatomi, the history of railroad pressure and Indian removal in Kansas was becoming well understood by American Indian strategists; the common pattern being the United States government negotiating treaties which sold tribal lands directly to railroad companies.⁷ This alliance coincided with the railroad companies' recent entry into the arena of national politics.⁸

Many of the allotted Potawatomi later sold their lands for individual profit or maintained their ownership and developed entrepreneurial ventures such as blacksmith shops and ferry crossings. A measure of Potawatomi prosperity and hospitality is illustrated by several passages from a dragoon's journal dated 1849. After spending the entire summer eating rations and wild meat the dragoons made contact with Joseph LaFramboise, fourth chief of the Potawatomi, who supplied the men with pig, pumpkin, cabbage and potatoes in abundance. The soldier goes on to describe the Potawatomi as being well-behaved, well-clothed and living comfortably in cabins.⁹ Nonetheless, both profiteer and entrepreneur fell destitute during this period of acculturation and assimilation. The complex dichotomy of culture change and entrepreneurship was facing the Citizen Potawatomi head-on.

Eventually the Citizen Potawatomi made arrangements with the United States for a reservation in Indian Territory.¹⁰ Again the Potawatomi, during their direct and indirect intercourse with railroad companies, experienced both prosperity and failure. The Oklahoma experience had less to do with railroad companies purchasing Indian lands and more to do with making or breaking small Indian communities. Many of the early reservation towns missed by the railroad quickly conceded and moved to the nearest railpoint or disappeared altogether.¹¹ Moreover, railroad promoters demanded that each community served must pay half of the value of the townsite in order to establish a railstop.¹² Despite the influence the railroad routes had on town survival, other reservation towns, named for prominent Potawatomi families such as Trousdale and Burnett, still survive today. In fact, many other towns in the Potawatomi Reservation, such as Harrah, Macomb, and Maud, were established on Potawatomi allotments.

Although actually part of the Kickapoo and Sac and Fox reservations, the town of Shawnee, Oklahoma was quickly becoming a major Potawatomi community at the turn of the century. The townsite immediately emerged following the opening of the Sac and Fox and Potawatomi reservations for non-Indian settlement in September 1891.¹³ A group of land speculators, bent on forming a city and making their fortune, established the town along the North Canadian River, the river forming the north-south reservation boundary between the aforementioned tribes. Overall, many tribal citizens believed that railroad construction would help industrialize Indian Territory thereby bringing prosperity.¹⁴ The Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf (CO&G) Railroad Company, approved by Congress in 1894, was the first railroad to cross the Potawatomi Reservation. However, in 1904 the line was leased to the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific (CRI&P) Railway Company for 999 years.¹⁵ The first rail service arrived in Shawnee on July 4, 1895, and the company began building its shops there in 1896. The CO&G Railroad Company was the first of five rail companies to pass through Shawnee toward points beyond. Most of the rail routes headed south, deeper into the Potawatomi reservation where there were few roads.

Once again the Potawatomi, and the non-Indian residents of the Potawatomi Reservation, experienced prosperity and failure at the hand of outside influences. While drafting the state constitution in 1906, delegates from Indian Territory asked for provisions to protect tribal allotments from speculators and grafters. Railroad activity in promoting townsite development and in exploiting mineral and timber resources had long angered the Five Civilized Tribes.¹⁶ Settlers in western Oklahoma were also hostile to railroads because of discriminatory freight rates and schedules. In fact, some political analysts argue that the nine railroads serving the Oklahoma Territorial capital of Guthrie caused the city to lose its bid for the state capital. Guthrie symbolized the railroads' influence in the territory, and many constitutional delegates charged that railroad and business interests would dictate the new constitution.¹⁷

While some Indians and non-Indians claimed that a vast railroad conspiracy was underway, the more acculturated Potawatomi found jobs in planning and construction of the new railroad routes. Potawatomi tribal member Henry Peltier, an ancestor of one of the authors, served as a railroad "bull" for the CRI&P Railroad Company fol-

lowing statehood in 1907. Bulls were responsible for the safety of newly established routes, Peltier's area being all of the newly established Pottawatomie [sic] County, created from a portion of the Potawatomi Reservation. Most of the railroad routes in the Potawatomi Reservation crossed the rivers at well-known crossings and followed old trails such as the Osage Trail and the Arbuckle Wagon Road. Perhaps the one factor that influenced the survival or death of many of the towns in Pottawatomie County was the railroads.

With new towns springing up along the routes, older communities either moved to the new towns or disintegrated. Some reservation towns prospered; the newly established town of Brooksville, for example, received its water supply from a lake constructed by the Santa Fe Railroad Company to serve its engines. Oftentimes, railroad companies avoided communities that they could not force to pay tribute for service. Furthermore, if rail lines did pass nearby an unsolicited town the rail companies refused to stop. In the case of the town of Wanette, the railroad company laid out its own town a mile to the north, eventually luring the residents to the new townsite. Conversely, the town of Pearson became a large activity center when great quantities of freight were unloaded there for use in the Saint Louis, Oklahoma, oil fields to the east. Saint Louis is the only remaining town in the county that has never had a railroad nor recruited the companies. However, according to local residents, Saint Louis never really tried to be a town.¹⁸

Culture change at the hands of the railway companies and the federal government has been a dominant theme in recent Potawatomi history. Settlement patterns changed on the Potawatomi Reservation due to alterations in the physical and social environment brought on by the railroads. The appearance of trading posts and towns along the rail lines introduced new and clustered resources, thus promoting concentrations of people in these locations. The Potawatomi, like other American Indian groups, were not mystified by the railroad or the magic of its financial operations. Intelligent and well educated, the Potawatomi sought to play the game in hopes of turning an invasion into a boon for American Indian society. Railroads left their legacy on the Potawatomi Reservation and the Potawatomi people and that legacy continues today. The Citizen Potawatomi Nation has prevailed throughout the "rails of change."

Notes

- 1 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).
- 2 Marvin Harris, *Our Kind: Who We Are, Where We Came From, Where We Are Going* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).
- 3 David Edmunds, *The Potawatomi: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978) 3-23.
- 4 Charles Royce, "Indian Land Cessions in the United States," in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1896-1897, Part 2* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1899).
- 5 Treaty with the Potawatomi, 27 February 1867, United States-Citizen Potawatomi Tribe, 15 Statute S.531.
- 6 Joseph Murphy, *Potawatomi of the West: Origins of the Citizen Band* (Shawnee, Oklahoma: Citizen Band Potawatomi Tribe, 1994), 259.
- 7 Craig Miner, "'Little Houses on Wheels': Indian Response to the Railroad," in *Railroads in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977) 7-18.
- 8 Joseph Murphy, *Potawatomi of the West: Origins of the Citizen Band*, 220.
- 9 Percival Lowe, *Five Years a Dragoon ('49-'54): And Other Adventures on the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 73-74.
- 10 Treaty with the Potawatomi.
- 11 Phil Cannon and Glenn Carter, *Tecumseh, Oklahoma: An Illustrated History of Its First Century* (Inola, Oklahoma: Evans Publications, 1991), 107.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 38-43.
- 13 John, Morris, C. Goins and E. McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 50.
- 14 Craig Miner, "'Little Houses on Wheels': Indian Response to the Railroad," 7-18.
- 15 Preston George and Sylvan Wood, *The Railroads of Oklahoma* (Boston: The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, 1943), 40-44.
- 16 Wayne Morgan and Anne Morgan, *Oklahoma: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984) 81-88.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 18 Phil Cannon and Glenn Carter, *Tecumseh, Oklahoma: An Illustrated History of Its First Century*, 187.

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