



The Long Way Home

Mesquakie tradition tells us that the tribe's original homeland was located on the eastern coast of North America. Over time, they moved to the Midwest and settled in Wisconsin. Around the year 1665, the Mesquakie tribe (also referred to as "Fox" Indians) met European explorers. Then, because of conflicts with the French and their Indian allies, the Mesquakie were forced to travel by foot, horse, and canoe to eastern Iowa.

From 1830 to 1851, Iowa land was bought up by white settlers, and Sauk (yellow earth people) and Mesquakie (red earth people) were ordered to move to a reservation in Kansas. The U.S. government made treaties (agreements) with the

Mesquakie tribe during the 1840s. Many times, however, the government lied to the tribes about the contents of the agreements or forced the tribe to sign treaties.

The Mesquakie were supposed to leave Iowa by the year 1845. To enforce the treaties, the government sent soldiers to Iowa to drive the Indians out.

The book We Are Mesquakie, We Are One, by "Hadley Irwin" (a pen name, or made-up name, for Iowan authors Lee Hadley and Annabelle Irwin) tells the story of Hidden Doe, a Mesquakie girl. The book is fiction but is based on the true story of a Mesquakie Indian woman. The part of the story you are about to read took place in 1843.

“Listen! They come!”

I heard nothing but the shouts of the children and the barking of our dogs.

“Who comes?” I asked, but Gray Gull ran forward, calling to the women.

“They come! They come!”

They rode up from the river, their blue coats black against the colors of autumn, their guns glistening in the morning sun. They trotted past me. I was frightened. The horses were big and the men’s faces white where the hair did not grow. They did not look at Gray Gull nor me nor the rest of the women, but rode on in a swirl of dust up to my father.

One from the Yellow Earth was with them and he talked to my father, repeating the words that the **Bluecoats** [American soldiers] told him. My father stood beside his pony until they were through speaking; then he motioned with his hand the direction we would go for the winter hunt. Bluecoats moved their horses in closer. The One from the Yellow Earth spoke more words and pointed back toward our village. My father shook his head.

I crept up beside Gray Gull. “What is happening?”

“I think they are telling us we must leave and never come back.” Her voice was harsh and her eyes looked over our village as if she were not seeing.

"What will we do?"

"We will wait until your father speaks. It shall be as the council decides. As always we will go on the winter hunt and return here for the planting. . . ."

The circle of Bluecoats opened, and my father mounted his pony and rode toward us. He said to Gray Gull, "We leave in peace for the winter hunt. We cannot return to this village. . . ."

We were far out on the open prairie when Gray Gull turned to look back toward our village.

"They burn . . . our . . . lodges."

Threads of gray smoke rose and mingled in a dark cloud that veiled the sky above our river. . . .

We camped that night among the willows along Stony Creek. We did not go to our village. One of the braves said, "Everything is gone. Even the earth is scorched."

That night the council was long. Many spoke. I sat in the circle of women and listened until I fell asleep. . . .

"We can go on our winter hunt. We cannot return to this village. It is written in the treaty All lead their people toward the west. Black Hawk, the great leader, is in chains." So spoke my father.

"Treaties are but milkweed blown on the wind." So spoke Gray Gull. "Our Grandmother Earth knows no treaties. The land does not

belong to us. We belong to the land. One cannot trade what one does not own. We stay on our river. Should we leave for the winter hunt we are saying we no longer care."

It was decided. We would not leave our Iowa. We would scatter along the river like quail when they hide their nests in deep grasses. In the spring we would gather to plant our fields again. . . .

"We will starve," I said.

"We will live. Nuts lie beneath the melting snow. Fish swim under the ice. Geese and ducks will soon return. When hunger gnaws, we chew the bark of slippery elm."

I was hungry. All were hungry. We did not starve. . . .

The Mesquakie people stayed in Iowa that winter instead of going to their winter hunting grounds. But as time went on, the U.S. government put even more pressure on the tribe to move out.

With the coming of spring my brothers were sent to call our people back for council. . . .

The council fires burned long through many suns and sleeps. We lived like lost and homeless people. My father, Great Bear, spoke long at the council of the land promised us. Of flowing rivers and wooded hills and rich earth ready for the planting in the Kansas Land far to the south, of Bluecoats waiting to feed us and

give us seed for the planting in the new land, of deer and antelope and buffalo which we had not seen by our River Iowa for many seasons, of land where neither Sioux nor White would threaten.

And so it was decided. . . .

Then Roaring Thunder, my uncle, spoke—my uncle who had not spoken at the council before. "You must go to the Kansas land. You must go to live. Some of us must stay here so our old ways can live. Our Red Earth People who would follow Bluecoats will forget Mesquakie ways and become as White Ones. Those of us who stay will hide along the Iowa as the wounded bear in its den. We will find a way. We will watch and wait for your return. . . ."

My father, Great Bear, said, "So it shall be. . . ."

With guns and soldiers waiting, the Mesquakies knew they had to leave the Iowa land.

"[Spring] has come. Bluecoats take us now to Kansas Land," my father said.

Across [the Des Moines River], brighter than the moon, shone the torches of the White Ones, as many as the stars.

"Why do the White Ones' fires dance so wildly?" I asked my mother.

At first she did not answer. Then



she spoke. "They wait to take our land. With the firing of the big gun, the land is theirs. The treaty says."

It was so.

The cannon sounded. It echoed through the valley like thunder after lightning's arrows. The torches of the White Ones rushed toward us like prairie fire. The river did not stop them.

My father rose and said, "We go."

We left Iowa and followed the Bluecoats as the white settlers staked their claims upon our land. . . .

The Mesquakies moved to the reservation located in Kansas. A reservation is a parcel of land that is set aside for Native Americans to live. In exchange for their land in Iowa, the Mesquakies were paid some money.

The Kansas Land was not the land of promise.

"Great Bear. This will be your field." **White Agent** [a government representative who works with the tribe] led us far from our lodges, across the flat prairie, to a patch marked off by split log fences. The hot sand burned my feet as I followed my father and mother and aunt.

"I am a hunter." My father frowned. "I am a warrior. A chief. It is the women who plant and harvest."

"You must change your ways, Great Bear," said White Agent.

"You are on the reservation. You have no need for warriors. No reason to hunt. You can buy the food with the money we will give you."

"You do not give us money. You pay us because you have taken the land."

White Agent shook his head and scuffed his leather boot in the sand.

"Now, Great Bear. You'll have to do things differently here than you did back on the Iowa."

My father turned and walked back to the village. . . .

In the spring it was time for the payments of the money. My father went again to White Agent. He returned, his face angry.

"White Ones change their words. They make a wooden building and call it school. The say our children must go there to learn the White Ones' ways. Until we do this, they will not pay what they promised."

"We will have need of White Ones' money. There was no harvest of the corn," my mother spoke.

"They have the land. We will not give our children. . . ."

My father went again to the White Agent to take the payment.

Again, he returned, his face angry.

"White Ones change their words again. Our children will not go to

White Ones' school. Then our children must go to White Ones' church. Until we do this, they will not pay what they promised. . . ."

For the third time, my father went to White Agent to take the payment.

Again he returned, his face angry.

"White Ones change their words another time. Our children will not go to White Ones' school. Our people will not go to White One's church. Now they say we must appear before White Agent and name ourselves to him for winter court. This is not good! Until we do this, they will not pay what they promised.

"But father," I spoke. "We are one. We are Mesquakie."

"White Ones do not understand. They name us wrong. They name us Fox. They name us Indian. We are Mesquakie. They cannot learn." He rose and left our lodge, muttering, "Un-civ-il-ized."

My father did not go the fourth time to White Agent to receive our payment. White Agent came to us. He was a new White Agent. We did not see the other one again.

The Kansas Land was not the promised land.

While on the Kansas reservation, many Mesquakies became sick and died from small pox and other diseases.

"Long have we watched the White Ones," Bright Eagle





continued with Gray Gull's words. "Long have we sought a way. When we hunt the possum, we learn of its ways. Only then can we snare it. We eat of the possum. We do not become the possum. White Ones buy our Iowa Land. It cannot be taken from them. No Bluecoats drive them from it. Red Earth People can buy Iowa Land. It cannot be taken from us. No Bluecoats can drive us from it. This is the way. That is all.' And so Gray Gull instructed me to speak."

Bright Eagle finished his words. No one spoke.

Hunters could learn of possum ways. They did not become possums. I had learned of White . . . ways. I was still Mesquakie. My grandmother's ways were good.

Great Bear spoke. "[The White Ones] have taken from us. Now we will use their money to buy from them. . . ."

"But," spoke the first, "we will need much of White Ones' money."

"Our seed is planted in the field," my father said. "Bring to me the money you have left. Meanwhile, taste not White Ones' whiskey, wager not on racing of ponies, chew well on scanty food."

One who had not spoken before said, "We could sell to White Ones: moccasins, beadwork, squashes, pumpkins, even our ponies, if we

must. And bring the White One's money to Great Bear."

"And soon," said another, "the time comes for payment from White Agent. . . ."

"If we stay here, take their money, and buy their food, we are but maggots on the dead growing fat and pale. We must go. We will grow thin and poor, but we will live. We Are Mesquakie." So said Great Bear, my father.

"Here is the money," my father said, bringing out the deerskin bag.

"How much?" asked Bright Eagle.

"Seven hundred, thirty, and five of White Ones' dollars."

"Is it enough?" my uncle asked.

"We do not know," my father answered. "Buy from the White Ones as much as they will sell."

"It will buy but little, yet it will be seed for the new planting," Bright Eagle said, and the others nodded.

"You, Bright Eagle and Little Bear, my brother, must travel long and far down the Iowa River to the home of the **White Father of the Iowa Land** [Governor James Grimes]. They name it 'Iowa City.'" My father paused. "There you will say, 'White Ones buy land. Mesquakie buy land.' Empty the bag before him. Let him count the money. . . ."

In 1856, the Mesquakies used \$735.00 which they had saved from government payments and selling goods to purchase 80 acres of land along the Iowa River near Tama. They were the only Native American tribe that bought back a significant part of their homeland to live on.

At that time in autumn we left the Kansas land and the White Ones' reservation. We went silently, in small groups, so no one would see. We would be gone for the winter count, and we did not want the Bluecoats to search for us.

We met, **eleven lodges** [about 11 large families—76 people in all] of us at the headwaters of the Osage and turned our backs upon the reservation. We travelled only at night until we crossed the Missouri. The way was long, but our steps were swift. The bearskin for the winter lodge in Iowa was light upon my back. . . . I did not speak for many steps, and then I asked Bright Eagle, "How long before we reach our land?"

He pointed. "There where the fences end. Where the mist from the river rests upon the trees. It is a short way now. . . ."

Far down the road, a dark shape moved toward us. As it neared, we saw the horse was old, as was the White One in the buggy.

When we were almost to him, he



called out, "So you made it. Heard you were coming."

The White One walked over to Bright Eagle and held out his hand. Behind us, our people waited.

"Wanted to welcome you and your people back to Iowa. Been keeping an eye out for you folks ever since I found out we'd be neighbors. You look a sight thinner than when you was here before. . . ."

"Name's Anson Cook," the man said, taking my hand and moving it up and down. His hand was rough like tree bark, but warm. . . .

"Our way was long." Bright Eagle spoke to this man as he would with my father. "But you helped make the path."

"Weren't nothing. Just wrote a letter to the governor down there at Iowa City. Got up a petition. Neighbors signed it. Said we'd all be glad to have Mesquakie back here."

Bright Eagle nodded. . . .

"Never have felt quite right about the government chasing you out of here a few years back. There's some around here, of course, claim the

government's givin' ya handouts. Tain't so. You've a right to them payments. It was your land. You didn't get a fair price for it either."

Bright Eagle said, "We will speak again." All shook hands and we walked on.

"This is our land," Bright Eagle stretched his hand toward the River Iowa.

We stopped and looked across the marshy lowlands, to the quiet river, and upon the wooded hills. There were no fences here. The land was as it had been. We were home. ☀

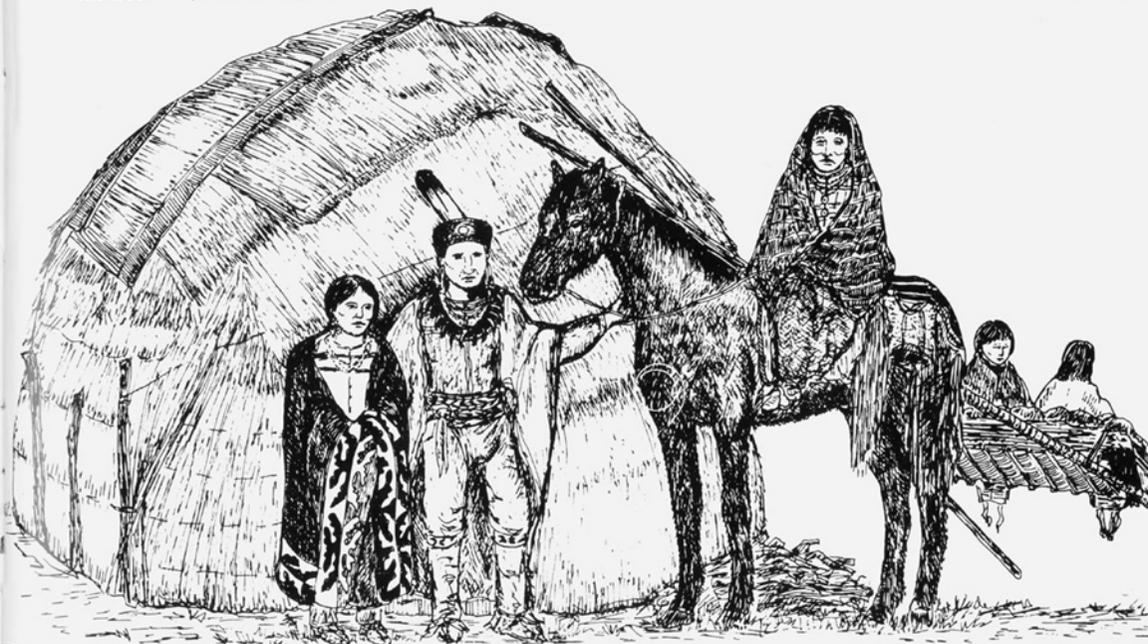


Illustration by Sarah Macht

“How One Learns”

A Mesquakie Woman's Life Story

Adapted by Jean C. Florman

In 1918, a Mesquakie woman told her life story to a historian. The woman did not want her name published, so her autobiography is anonymous.

*Here is part of her story. Some of the language seems unusual because it is an English translation of the Mesquakie woman's own words.**

Well, I played with dolls when I made them. Of course, I would do the cooking in my play. And then I made little **wickiups** [Mesquakie houses] for the dolls to live in. . . .

When I was perhaps seven years old I began to practice sewing for my dolls. But I sewed poorly. I used to cry because I did not know how to sew. Nor could I persuade my mother to [do it] when I said to her, “Make it for me.”

“You will know how to sew later on; that is why I shall not make them for you. That is how one learns to sew, by practicing sewing for one's dolls,” [said my mother].

Well, when I was nine years old I was able to help my mother. It was in spring when planting was begun that I was told, “Plant something to be your own.” My hoe was a little hoe. And soon the hoeing would cease. I was glad.

When the girl asked her mother if she could

*[Brackets like these] go around words we've added to the woman's story to make it easier to understand.



SHN PAINTER, WIFE AND CHI

go swimming, her mother said, “Yes, but you must do the washing in the river.”

“That is why I treat you like that, so that you will learn how to wash,” my mother told me. “No one continues to be taken care of forever. The time soon comes when we lose sight of the one who takes care of us.”

Soon I was told, “This is your little ax.” My mother and I would go out to cut wood; and I carried the little wood that I had cut on my back. She would strap them for me. She instructed me how to tie them up. Soon I began to go a little ways off by myself to cut wood.

And when I was 11 years old I continually watched her as she would make bags. “Well, you try to make one,” she said to me. She braided up one little bag for me. Sure enough, I nearly learned how to make it, but I made it very badly.

[My mother said,] “If you happen to know how to make everything when you no longer see me, you will not have a hard time in any way.”

And again, when I was 12 years old, I was told, “Come, try to make these.” [They were] my own moccasins. She only cut them out for me. And when I made a mistake she ripped it out for me. Finally I really knew how to make them.

At that time I knew how to cook well. When my mother went any place, she said to me, “You may cook the meal.” Moreover, when she made mats I cooked the meals. “You may get accustomed to cooking, for it is almost time for you to live outside. You will cook for yourself when you live outside,” I would be told.

When the young girl was 13, her mother and an older woman she called “grandmother” began teaching her how to behave as a young woman.

“Now the men will think you are mature as you have become a young woman, and they will be desirous of courting you,” [my grandmother told me]. “If you live quietly [your brothers and your mother’s brothers] will be proud. . . . You are to treat any aged person well. . . . Do not talk about anyone. Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not be stingy. . . . If you are generous you will [always] get something.”

The woman who told her life story married at age 19. Two of her children died in infancy, and she outlived two husbands.

What do you think?

1. Who has the most influence on this Mesquakie girl? She never mentions her father in her story. Do you have any ideas why?
2. What kinds of things did Mesquakie girls learn when they were growing up? Why were these things important to learn? Was it all work and no play?
3. What do you think Mesquakie boys learned as they were growing up? Do you think boys and girls worked or played together?
4. What did this girl’s mother mean when she said “the time soon comes when we lose sight of the one who takes care of us”?
5. How do you learn and play today? Who teaches you about life? Are boys and girls today taught different things? Do boys and girls today work at the same things and play together? Why or why not?

