

“The old incorrigible rogues will have their way”: Prairie Band Potawatomi Foodways in the Age of Removal

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In September of 1852, Indian agent Francis W. Lea revealed deep disappointment in a report detailing the present condition of the Potawatomi tribe on the Kansas reservation. As Agent Lea began his account, he bemoaned the lack of progress made by the tribe since his previous report. Lea complained that, “with the ample funds set apart by the government to aid them, they should now be much further in the culture of the soil and other kindred pursuits of a civilized community; but they perform all kinds of manual labor with a great reluctance, and very few of them have been induced to abandon their deep-rooted improvident habits.”¹ Later that same year, J.B. Duernick composed his federal report claiming the success of St. Mary’s mission in acculturating the Potawatomi tribe. Still, Duernick regretfully informed the U.S. Secretary of the Interior that much was left to accomplish. “The Pottawatomie Prairie Indians have not yet laid aside their wild and uncivilized mode of living,” he admitted. “[T]hey are averse to work, and live in wretched cabins and wigwams. They paint their faces and delight in all sorts of motley and fantastical dress and trappings.”² The Potawatomi’s “wild and uncivilized mode of living” and “deep-rooted improvident habits” that caused the missionaries and agents such profound grief and frustration included, most notably, the Native practice of communal horticulture and a belief in the spiritually-sanctioned power of Native women as producers in Potawatomi foodways.

Lea’s and Duernick’s conclusions concerning the lifestyle of the Potawatomi proved a common theme in government reports of the mid-nineteenth century. Throughout the 1850s, in fact, the perceptions of Native culture proposed by government agents and missionaries often included numerous disparaging remarks regarding tribal interpretations of equality, reciprocity, and gender. These interpretations, which frequently stood in direct contrast to Euro-American conceptions, resulted in a century of American history marked by attempts to reform, missionize, and acculturate Native peoples. The nineteenth century fashioned a government and a people who pursued an imperialistic land policy, claiming that their national identity—viewed through the lens of Christianity and

¹ Francis W. Lea, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” Office of Indian Affairs (1850), 86.

² J.B. Duernick, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” Office of Indian Affairs (1850), 90.

the ideology of Manifest Destiny—justified the attempted destruction of Native peoples and cultures. The “Americanization” movement of the mid-nineteenth century, in particular, exhausted countless resources in efforts to “civilize the savage.” As demonstrated by agent Lea, the success of these reform efforts varied from tribe to tribe. Certain nations, such as the Prairie Band Potawatomi, resisted Euro-American notion of “progress” and “civilization.” By maintaining traditional gender roles in food production, they resisted acculturation and attempts to destroy Native identity.

During the mid-nineteenth century, federal Indian policy focused on acculturation and allotment as a means of eliminating Native communities. This legislation sought to end the practice of communally held lands within tribal societies, while at the same time forcing Euro-American conceptions of agriculture onto Native peoples.³ Though policy attempted to individualize property, Native peoples sought to maintain traditional communal land ownership as a customary cultural construction. Arguably, the strength of these beliefs facilitated the strongest Native resistance to United States colonization. The Prairie Band of the Potawatomi tribe, who hailed from the Great Lakes region, exemplified this kind of resistance to federal policy, even after their removal to northeastern Kansas. As evidenced by the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indians Affairs and the mission records of the 1850s, the Prairie Potawatomi opposed “Americanization” throughout the 1850s, defining themselves as the most defiant and uncooperative tribe in terms of participation in, and acceptance of, federal programs and legislation.

Prairie Band resistance took many forms, most notably in their rejection of Euro-American farming methods and associated gender roles thrust upon them by the federally-funded Catholic missions. The Prairie Potawatomi, at a time when other tribes struggled to endure the influence of missionization, effectively rejected the Euro-American emphasis on agriculture, opting instead for food production methods geared towards hunting, gathering, and horticulturally-oriented communal farming. The Prairie Band also refused to accept the gender orientation of Euro-American food production roles, and instead, continued to associate the creation of foodstuff with the female sphere. This resistance resulted in accusations of indolence by the missionaries, and further threats of removal by federal agents. Over the course of the 1850s, the Prairie Potawatomi were not only able to resist the influence of Euro-American agricultural customs and techniques, but also numerous attempts to alter gender roles related to food acquisition and production. This resistance enabled the tribe to maintain both Native sovereignty and identity in a new homeland.

³ Prairie Band of Potawatomi Nation. “Tribal History.” *Our History and Culture*. 2009. <http://www.pbpindiantribe.com/tribal-history.aspx>.

Pre-Removal History and Culture

The French first encountered the Potawatomi in the early seventeenth century; they documented the tribe as residing in the lower peninsula of present-day Michigan. The term “Potawatomi,” which translates roughly as “Keepers of the Fire,” has caused much confusion since there are over one hundred documented spellings of the tribal name found in historical records.⁴ Within this Great Lakes location, the Potawatomi, like many other Native tribes, created a culture based on the necessity of full community participation in order to ensure success. Men and women each carried out particular duties and responsibilities in food production and acquisition without hierarchical differentiation. In his history of the pre-removal Potawatomi, R. David Edmunds argues that hunting was customarily a male-dominated event, but in certain instances, women would participate in order to ensure greater success.⁵ By participating in these hunting parties, women demonstrated that their presence in food acquisition was of equal importance in comparison to the male role. Thus, female participation illustrated a pre-removal belief in the equality of the sexes as a defining force in Potawatomi food creation.

James Clifton, in another history of the Potawatomi people, speaks to varied nature of the tribe’s foodways. He claimed that in their Michigan homeland, “The Potawatomi living therein practiced a dual economy, involving digging stick and hoe farming, hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild plant foods. In summer they grew maize, pumpkins, squash, beans and tobacco, and hunted deer, elk, and beaver nearby...”⁶ Clifton’s statement reveals the importance of horticultural methods and a varied food economy in the pre-removal era. Taken together, Edmund’s and Clifton’s analyses of the Potawatomi demonstrate that the tribe operated within a gendered system of food production based on hunting, farming, and gathering. The benefits of this diverse economy were threefold: it allowed them the means to produce food in all seasons, utilize all the resources available to them in a sustainable fashion, and express cultural beliefs about distinct male and female relationships to the earth and food production.

Though Native women occasionally participated in hunting, their primary responsibility was the cultivation of crops and the maintenance of gardens in the pre-removal period. Horticulture, in contrast to the Euro-American practice of agriculture, places an emphasis on working small plots of land, such as gardens without using animals, plows, or irrigation. This method proved not only environmentally sustainable, but also consistent with Native beliefs concerning the land and relationships to the earth. In his book *Teaching Spirits* Joseph Epes Brown explains Indigenous beliefs concerning the natural world. In accordance with the utilization of horticulture rather than agriculture, Brown argues, “Agri-

⁴ James A. Clifton, *The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture 1665-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 13.

⁵ R. David Edmunds, *Potawatomi: Keepers of the Fire*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 4.

⁶ Clifton, 32.

culture was the flagship of Manifest Destiny, for European-Americans identified it with civilization. Many of the historically nomadic tribes, however, found commercial, large-scale farming contradictory to their value systems. Some viewed the earth as sacred and inviolate and not to be torn up with a plow.⁷ In Native tradition, the earth serves an essential and primary force in the cycle of life that inexplicably connects to the “Great Spirit,” and values of reciprocity determine relationships with the land. Accordingly, the practice of horticulture, which leaves less of a human imprint on the earth, reflects Potawatomi beliefs, values, and non-capitalistic economy. Considered to be a channel through which all living things must pass, women were the logical participants in this very spiritual and intimate exchange with the earth. The Great Spirit endowed women with the power to reproduce, thus making them the spiritual vehicle meant to create and cultivate crops, livestock, and children.⁸

Pre-removal Potawatomi food productions practices were gendered, though men and women’s roles were equally important and influential. The Potawatomi of the Great Lakes region depended on a varied schedule of food acquisition that placed an equal burden on both sexes, while attempting to avoid unnecessary environmental degradation. Tribal leaders distributed the food throughout the community, reflecting a belief in the sharing of resources based on a relationship of reciprocity within Potawatomi culture. Thus, Potawatomi foodways were defined by a distinct gendered division of labor and by the principle of reciprocity. These defining characteristics later became key targets for Euro-American acculturation efforts. However, despite the goals of the missionaries, the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and mission records of the 1850s illustrate that Native peoples continued to distribute responsibility for the tribal subsistence according to traditional norms, and to emphasize mixed methods of food acquisition based on a gendered division of labor. This cultural construction not only influenced other gender-power relationships within the community, but also remained influential enough that it could cross geographic borders, reestablish itself in a new homeland, and effectively counter Euro-American pressure to “civilize.”

The Post-Removal Experience

By the late 1840s, the Prairie Band settled in the northeastern corner of Kansas. At the end of that same decade, St. Mary’s mission opened with the sole purpose of “civilizing” the recent arrivals. In the view of St. Mary’s and the federal government, the goal of the civilization program would culminate in the phrase, “kill the Indian, save the man.” In other words, Euro-Americans aimed to fashion productive, albeit inferior, “Americanized” citizens from the Native American populations. Missions became the vehicle for this task; St. Mary’s

⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, *Teaching Spirits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 100.

⁸ Brown, 80.

serves as an illustrative example of how the missionaries achieved this. The St. Mary’s mission was divided into men’s and women’s schools, with each sex being trained for lives structured by Euro-American gender norms. St. Mary’s trained the males in manual labor and agriculture and assigned females to the domestic sphere, practicing activities such as sewing, housekeeping, and embroidery.⁹

The Prairie Band of the Potawatomi tribe, known for being particularly uncooperative, frequently frustrated both the Indian agents and Catholic missionary leaders. John W. Whitfield, agent to the Potawatomi in 1852, claimed that the tribe remained uncivilized and were making no attempt to better their situation: “We frequently tell them to lay aside their gun and blanket...to make the young men work more, and not to saddle so much work upon their squaws. We repeat these things opportunely and importunately; the old incorrigible rogues will have their way—in spite of the world they will live on pumpkins and corn-soup, smoke their pipe, and lie all day before the fire.”¹⁰ Whitfield’s complaint illustrated the use of passive resistance by the tribe, while at the same time emphasizing the persistence of traditional gender roles. Though the Prairie Potawatomi also participated in active resistance, passive opposition proved to be an equally effective means of countering Western influence. The missionaries believed that men should perform agricultural labor, and women’s work should be restricted to the domestic. When Native women performed the work with which they were spiritually sanctioned within Native culture, missionaries then regarded Potawatomi men as indifferent and lazy. These attempts to “Americanize” Native horticulture and gender roles, as demonstrated by Agent Whitfield’s report, resulted in an indirect form of resistance that utilized stubbornness and lethargy as a means of rejecting the missionaries farming techniques. By lying idly and ignoring the requests of the church leaders, the Prairie Potawatomi managed to resist missionization and a subsequent loss of identity. Additionally, by behaving in this manner, the Potawatomi men preserved their culturally sanctioned role in food production. The male food responsibility was centered on hunting, which was performed outside of the mission and away from government leaders. Therefore, by refusing to participate in farming, men both reinstated their own gender identity and protected the female’s role within the food production process. Regardless of the objectives or accusations of St. Mary’s mission or the government, the Prairie Potawatomi demonstrated a profound opposition to Euro-American influence, and in doing so, defined themselves in their new homeland as decidedly “Native.”

Father Maurice Gaillard, head of the mission, viewed food production and distribution as key markers of civilization; if the Native population abandoned traditional food methods and replaced them with Western techniques, the entire Native culture would soon follow suit. The mission system operated under this

⁹ J.B. Duernick, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” Office of Indian Affairs (1853), 90.

¹⁰ John W. Whitfield, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” Office of Indian Affairs (1852), 86.

perception and relentlessly pursued agricultural change as the ultimate determinant of progress. Father Gaillard's diary reveals the obstacles that the mission schools faced in attempting to alter communal farming and equal distribution of food resources. He claimed, "By their ancient traditions, whatever an individual possesses should be shared with the whole village... As for the rest, we told them they ought to work to make a living... the most sensible took this advice to heart, but to many... the food was too spiritual for them to relish."¹¹ Gaillard's statement demonstrates that the cultural construction of sharing food and wealth held a spiritual significance within Potawatomi culture. Food, as a product of the Great Spirit, held too much significance to be selfishly hoarded for one's own personal enjoyment. To distribute the foodstuff equally throughout the community illustrated a belief in the collectivity of the tribe and a reciprocal responsibility of each member to the whole. This ideology stands in direct contrast to the American notion of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer, and in turn, the goals of the mission. The Western perception of agriculture centers on the notion that production equals profit; one should provide for their immediate family and then push their product through the capitalist market in order to gain a profit. Men are the key players in this exchange, thus relegating women to a passive role in food production. Native tradition, on the other hand, utilizes the labor of both sexes plus the entirety of the crop. This practice mirrors the beliefs, discussed by Brown, that earthly resources are limited and should be regarded as sacred. Leaders such as Father Gaillard interpreted these charitable actions as ignorance, claiming that the Natives had no sense of economy or savings.¹² On the contrary, the Prairie Band refused to abandon their communal foodways because they represented a deeply embedded cultural tradition that had been a staple of their economy for centuries before European contact.

Sharing resources throughout the community served as a food custom of many Native tribes, which also included women as spiritually ordained "producers" of life. This notion of gender equity, expressed through the female's responsibility to produce crops, clashed violently with Western conceptions of gender roles. Strongly influenced by the Second Great Awakening, Euro-Americans believed that women, as domestic beings, should not labor in the fields to produce food for their families; doing so would damage their femininity and sense of womanly virtue.¹³ Therefore, to "civilize the savage" meant to strip native women of their spiritual relationship to food, and coerce men to abandon hunting and their spiritual relationship to animals in order to adopt a yeoman farmer lifestyle concurrent with Euro-American values. The mission schools, divided by gender, attempted to accomplish this task. The reports of Indian agents and missionaries

¹¹ "The Annals of St. Mary's Mission—1850," *The Dial*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (St. Mary's College, 1891), 2.

¹² "The Annals of St. Mary's Mission—1855," *The Dial*. Vol. 3, No. 8 (St. Mary's College, 1892), 122.

¹³ Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 7.

throughout the 1850s suggest that the missions met the challenge with limited success. While annual records vaguely cited “improvement” in Westernizing the agriculture techniques of the St. Joseph and Wabash bands of the Kansas Potawatomi, instances of opposition and rejection by a particularly influential band of the tribe appeared with equal prominence.¹⁴ The Prairie Potawatomi, as one the most incessantly resistant bands of Native peoples, continued to frustrate both agents and missionaries alike on the Kansas reservation.

Over the course of the 1850s, government agents and missionaries grew more frustrated as the Prairie Potawatomi continued to thwart their plans for change. Potawatomi girls and boys would attend the mission schools, but in many cases left their education and “civilization” at the door. The Native elders, for example, often removed the boys from school when they reached an age that would permit them to hunt with the tribe. Missionary leaders and agents, who often claimed they had made significant “progress” with the children, grudgingly witnessed the young boys as they returned from these traditional hunting excursions. Whitfield, in 1853, wrote, “you see them return with shaved heads, painted faces, and dressed in full Indian costume, and really trying to excel in being of less account than any Indians in the nation.”¹⁵ Later, in 1855, the agent George W. Clark claimed, “The ‘Prairie band’ adheres to the hunter life, nearly all of whom despise the arts and principles of civilization; who regard it as disgraceful for men to work, and they spare no language in denouncing those of the tribe who cultivate the soil or follow the peaceful arts.”¹⁶ These exercises in traditional Potawatomi culture served to strengthen the active resistance of the entire tribe.

Hunting, as a staple of the male food production role, maintained its significance in the lives of the Prairie Band, both before and after removal. Men utilized hunting as a means of food production, but perhaps more importantly, they continued to practice time-honored rituals and customs surrounding the event, such as the donning of traditional clothing. Clark’s and Whitfield’s remarks on the foodways of the Prairie Potawatomi illustrate that food acquisition methods served as a decisive means of expressing a cultural identity that contrasted the Euro-American identity proposed by the missionaries. As a result of this resistance, male food production roles in the post-removal period managed to maintain a noticeably “Native” identity.

In much the same way that government agents attempted to destroy the practice of hunting among Native men, they also sought to end Native female responsibility for cultivating crops. In 1853, Whitfield bemoaned the missionaries’ failure to transform Native attitudes:

*This great people consider it a disgrace for the men to work.
Some years ago the government had some three hundred acres*

¹⁴ George W. Clark, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” Office of Indian Affairs (1853), 97.

¹⁵ Whitfield, 84.

¹⁶ Clark, 97.

of land prepared ready for planting; early in the spring a few commenced ploughing; the chiefs sent their braves into the field, cut up their harness, broke ploughs, and whipped them out, saying they had disgraced themselves, the women alone should work. These poor unfortunate beings do all the work, and, from their education, believe it right. You would be surprised to see the amount of corn they raise with the hoe alone.¹⁷

This statement, more so than any other contained within a decade of reports, demonstrates both the significance of the female role in food creation, and the dramatic cultural clashes that ensued between missionaries and the Prairie Band. Resistance, in this example, became active as Potawatomi men enforced traditional roles under siege in the mission. Men destroyed farming tools and utilized physical violence in order to prevent the destruction of traditional cultural norms surrounding food production. Active resistance, in contrast to the passive forms also employed by the tribe, illustrate that the Prairie Potawatomi were not indifferent to the changes that the missionaries and agents proposed. Instead, this band of Potawatomi violently opposed them as a threat to the identity that they had successfully transplanted from their Michigan homeland. As sanctioned by the tribe's spiritual beliefs, men participated in their gender role by emphasizing a hunter's lifestyle for themselves, and by defending women's relationship to food production through the use of violence and destruction.

Whitfield's remark brings another interesting issue to light: women's efficiency at a task that the missionaries believed they should not perform. His statement again depicted women as the primary food producers. While claiming that they were too ignorant to understand that they should not labor for food production, he was struck by their efficiency and competency at that very task. His remark, "you would be surprised to see the amount of corn they raise with the hoe alone"¹⁸ contradicts the key values of the Second Great Awakening, which claimed that women were not "designed" for a life of manual labor, but were instead "creatures of the heart" who should focus on less physically-intensive domestic activities, such as sewing, cleaning, and child-rearing.¹⁹ Native women, in the context of the 1850s reservation experience, proved very capable cultivators of land, but Euro-Americans often denied them the opportunity on the reservation based solely on these Western conceptions of gender. Whitfield's statement reveals that many Prairie Potawatomi males and females continued to practice their traditional relationship to food and its means of production, and maintained their efficiency at these tasks in their new homeland. If missionaries or government agents threatened those constructions, the Native population could utilize violence as a means of active resistance. Resistance to accultura-

¹⁷ Whitfield, 84.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 57-8.

tion, particularly in reference to foodways and gender roles, defined the Prairie Band experience on the Kansas reservation. This opposition and refutation of Euro-American culture, while obviously not well received by the missionaries, also carried with it significant threats of dislocation for the tribe and the members who openly rebelled.

While rejection of Euro-American culture and tradition defined much of the Native experience in the mid-nineteenth century, the fear of displacement served as a check on that expression of resistance. The members of St. Mary’s mission were wholly dedicated to their task of “civilizing the savage” and understood the power and influence that governmental approval afforded them. The use of threats to “bring the population into line” was not uncommon. For example, in a diary entry dated in the year 1850, Gaillard claims, “...we warn them that, unless they abandon their former habits of life and settle down to work for a living... they will be removed from the land and driven away further and further, they will die of hardship and become extinct among the nations.”²⁰ In some cases, the mission used the threats solely as a scare tactic in an attempt to convince the population to cooperate. The threat of removal, however, loomed a very realistic possibility. In either case, the utilization of threats demonstrates a need to “break” the Native person through fear and anxiety.

As a staple of Euro-American “progress,” the mission targeted food production methods with the most rigorous rounds of threats and assault. Nevertheless, according to the personal letters of Father Gaillard in 1854, the greater the civilization efforts on the part of the mission, the greater the counter resistance by the Prairie Band. In his frustration with their refusal to adopt Euro-American methods, Gaillard declares, “...with nearly every one of them his pride is equal to his ignorance... they are like stubborn mules who balk and will not cross the stream...”²¹ While many of the documents contain dramatic statements about the success of the mission, the authors clearly devote equal space to the dogged persistence of tribes, such as the Prairie Potawatomi, who continued to thwart and reject many measures of “improvement.” Clark validates Gaillard’s frustration when he states in 1855:

“The ‘Prairie’ band is a bold and reckless race, and although they form a minority of the tribe, they domineer over it, rule and misgovern the people in a most lawless manner. Thus two conflicting elements prevail to distract and stifle the usual efforts of government to improve these people; and I am of the unchangeable opinion that government should not only *assume* the patriarchal, but *exercise* a dictatorial rule over this tribe.”²²

²⁰ “The Annals of St. Mary’s Mission—1851,” *The Dial*. Vol. 5, No. 3 (St. Mary’s College, 1892), 74.

²¹ Father Maurice Gaillard, “Letter to Father Hubert,” in *Mid-America, A Historical Review*. Vol. 36, No. 4 (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1954), 246.

²² Clark, 97.

Even under the threat of removal and tyrannical rule, the Prairie Band continued to defy the American agents and missionaries who attempted to control their methods of food production, and in turn, their Potawatomi identity.

The production of food in the Prairie Band of the Potawatomi tribe, as an integral expression of culture, was the target of drastic reform measures in the mid-nineteenth century as yet another attempt to colonize Native peoples. These measures attempted to mold Potawatomi foodways into an “Americanized” form that emphasized a yeoman farmer tradition, coupled with gender roles that stressed the domesticity of women. As this issue grew in importance, it evolved into a key struggle between the Potawatomi, the missionaries, and the Indian agents. The Prairie Band, however, continued to resist Euro-American influence even under constant threats of removal. The gender roles that defined the tribe in the Great Lakes region continued to do so once the community was removed to Kansas. Women, as divinely empowered producers, remained the primary cultivators of crops, thus resulting in the refusal of many Native males to perform agricultural labor as demanded by the missionaries. Men expressed their role as “provider” by hunting, which maintained its importance within the context of reservation life. Both of these means of food acquisition resulted in the continued practice of distributing food equally throughout the tribe as a symbol of collectivity and responsibility to the whole. These cultural constructions proved influential enough to traverse geographic borders and reinstate themselves in a new homeland, plus resist the degradation and intimidation inflicted by the government and church leaders. The Prairie Band Potawatomi—in spite of Euro-American colonization and removal—protected their Native identity and culture by sustaining their unique foodways and distinctive gender roles.