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### Article Title: The Indian as Human Being

Full Citation: John Francis McDermott, “The Indian as Human Being,” *Nebraska History* 52 (1971): 45-49.

URL of article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1971Indian\\_Human.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1971Indian_Human.pdf)  
Date: 6/22/2011

Article Summary: Improvisation of poetry and song in the Indian culture is briefly discussed with excerpts from Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairie* and various travel journals. The article is primarily a lamentation that travelers in the nineteenth century and the army officers, Indian traders, botanists and missionaries made no attempt to record these “frivolous” songs in order “to show the red man as a human being.”

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Washington Irving, Picket Pin, Victor Tixier, Caleb Atwater, Oua-Kondah

Place Names: Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota; Fort Gibson; Prairie du Chien

Keywords: *A Tour on the Prairie*; Osage; Astoria

Photographs / Images: Sioux Chief Picket Pin and his family, photo from John A Anderson Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society

## THE INDIAN AS HUMAN BEING

By JOHN FRANCIS McDERMOTT

A LONG TIME AGO the Indian ceased to be a bloodthirsty redskin villain or a noble Roman or a philosopher of the wilderness, but he has not even yet been recognized by scholars as a human being: the self-concerned frontiersman of an earlier century and the romantic intellectuals have given way to solemn social anthropologists and scientific folklorists who have taken him over as a living artifact to be described, measured, classified, and motif-indexed. So we meet him now not skulking through the forest, bloody tomahawk in hand, or communing with his soul under the beneficent and uncorrupting influence of nature or heroically defying the despoiling white man, but sitting by the tribal fire, singing ancestral songs, repeating the myths of his forefathers, or performing ritual dances – in his lighter moments telling trickster folk tales to inquiring scholars and on occasion perhaps even tricking them. Behaving, in short, as any respectable subject of scientific investigation should behave, with a solemn regard for the high seriousness with which such studies should be conducted.

But from time to time along comes an unscientific, untrained, unscholarly, merely observant person who catches a glimpse of common humanity in the Indian, who discovers that the Indian had a lively sense of humor and enjoyed a turn for satire closely bound to daily life. One such observer was Washington Irving. Now commonly put aside (unread?) as a tourist who gazed briefly and ineffectually on the western

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scene, he showed in his writings about the West an understanding of Indian humanity unusual in his day or since. In *A Tour on the Prairies* he noted:

The Indians that I have had an opportunity of seeing in real life are quite different from those described in poetry. They are by no means the stoics that they are represented; taciturn, unbending, without a tear or a smile. Taciturn they are, it is true, when in company with white men, whose good-will they distrust, and whose language they do not understand; but the white man is equally taciturn under like circumstances. When the Indians are among themselves, however, there cannot be greater gossips. Half their time is taken up in talking over their adventures in war and hunting, and in telling whimsical stories. They are great mimics and buffoons, also, and entertain themselves excessively at the expense of the whites with whom they have associated, and who have supposed them impressed with profound respect for their grandeur and dignity. They are curious observers, noting everything in silence, but with a keen and watchful eye; occasionally exchanging a glance or a grunt with each other, when any thing particularly strikes them; but reserving all comments until they are alone. Then it is that they give full scope to criticism, satire, mimicry, and mirth.<sup>1</sup>

Solemn in face the Indian might appear to the white stranger, but Irving gives us more than one example of his sense of humor. Consider this Osage story the traveler recorded briefly on his western journey: "An old squaw left alone when her party had gone hunting prayed the Great Spirit to make something to amuse her — he made the mosquito."<sup>2</sup> On another occasion, Irving reported, when a missionary talked with an Osage on the necessity of work to happiness, the Indian replied:

"Father, I don't understand this kind of happiness you talk of: You tell me to cut down tree — to lop it — to make fence — to plough — this you call being happy — I no like such happiness. When I go to St. Louis I go to see Choteau or Clark — he says hello — and negro comes in with great plate with cake, wine, &c. — he says 'eat, drink.' If he want any thing else he say 'hello' — three, four, five, six negro come in and do what he want — that I call happy — he no plough — he no work — he no cut wood."

"Ah, but he has negroes to do all that."

"Well, father, you go to our Great Father — tell him to find me one, two, three negroes to cut wood & plough for me and I'll be willing to be happy like white man — but for a man 50 years old to have to plough &c — him too old."<sup>3</sup>

Again, when a newly-arrived agent preached "as usual" about the Osage being civilized and happy, Irving tells us that "one old Indian affected to sleep, then waking up [said], 'What, father, still about that old happiness? — don't talk of that any more. I'll tell you what I call happy — to have my gun — a wide range — to hunt — to kill buffalo — to have plenty to eat — to eat and drink till full — to smoke — to lie down on our backs — beat our bosoms & sing.'"<sup>4</sup>



*Sioux Chief Picket Pin and his family lived on the Rosebud Reservation of South Dakota in the 1890's. The photograph is from the John A. Anderson Collection recently acquired by the Nebraska State Historical Society.*

The Indian gave voice to his war songs when he was working himself and his friends up to an expedition against his enemies, his boasting songs when he returned triumphant, his ceremonial songs for the green corn, his mourning songs, but there was many a moment in his life when he just "beat his bosom" and sang for the fun of it. In *A Tour on the Prairies* Irving related one incident which must have happened many times. One evening, when the party was several days out of Fort Gibson, the Irving-Latrobe mess was visited by three Osages, who seated themselves by the fire and silently accepted food and coffee. Irving wrote this description of the scene:

When they had made their supper, they stretched themselves, side by side, before the fire, and began a low, nasal chant, drumming with their hands upon their breasts, by way of accompaniment. Their chant seemed to consist of regular staves, every one terminating, not in a melodious cadence, but in the abrupt interjection huh! uttered almost like a hiccup. This chant, we were told by our interpreter, Beatte, related to ourselves, our appearance, our treatment of them, and all that they knew of our plans. In

one part they spoke of the young Count, whose animated character and eagerness for Indian enterprise had struck their fancy, and they indulged in some wagery about him and the young Indian beauties, that produced great amusement among our half-breeds.<sup>5</sup>

When it is recalled that the twenty-year old Portales wanted to travel in Osage style and to have an Osage "wife" while on the prairies, the content of the song may be easily imagined.

"This mode of improvising is common among the savage tribes," Irving added, "and in this way, with a few simple inflections of the voice, they chant all their exploits in war and hunting, and occasionally indulge in a vein of comic humor and dry satire, to which the Indians appear to me much more prone than is generally imagined." This conclusion formed on the basis of personal observation was confirmed for Irving by other firsthand sources. In exploring the materials gathered for *Astoria*, he noted that among the Columbia River Indians "a great part of their time is passed in revelry, music, dancing, and gambling. Their music scarcely deserves the name; the instruments being of the rudest kind. Their singing is harsh and discordant; their songs are chiefly extempore, relating to passing circumstances, the persons present, or any trifling object that strikes the attention of the singer."<sup>6</sup>

Others besides Irving recorded the existence of this very human kind of poetry among the Indians. "At the camp," observed Victor Tixier among the Osages in 1840, "the Indians sang some more . . . after sunset. . . . These songs are evening prayers; they praise *Oua-Kondah*, or the exploits of the Osage warriors. Some, which are sung only by young men, are satires of women with bad reputations. On the prairies, as everywhere else, men cause the ruin of women and make fun of them afterwards."<sup>7</sup>

Caleb Atwater found the same improvising habit true among the Sac and Fox Indians whom he met at Prairie du Chien in 1829:

These Indians have among them, what answers to the Italian improvisatori, who make songs for particular occasions, and one of them makes it his business to take off with great effect, the warriors, when they boast of their exploits in the intervals, in the music and dancing at the war dances. He is a great wag, and dresses himself in a manner as grotesque as possible. On his head, on such occasions, he fixes two horns of the antelope, and nearly covers his face with bison's hair, dyed red.

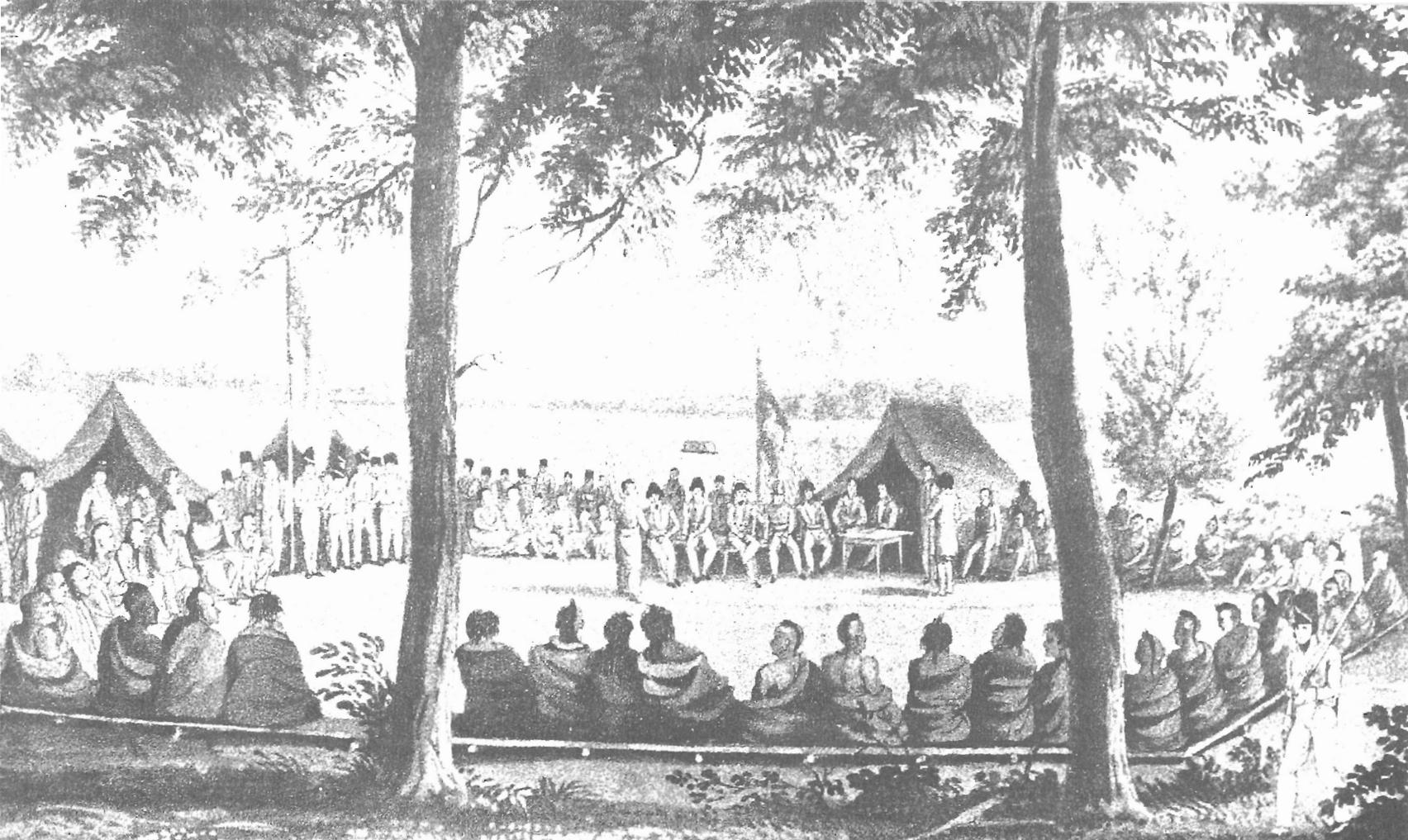
The tune he usually sings his song in, contains only three, or at most, five notes; but it is as good a song probably, and the music quite equal to the poetry and music, used by Thespis, in the infancy of tragedy, among

the Greeks. Whether these improvisatori are of Indian or European origin, I cannot certainly say; though from the circumstances of their existence among most of the Indian tribes, nearly or quite all the way to the Rocky mountains, and high on the Missouri river, I am induced to believe these improvisatori derived their profession, as they have their origin, from the natives of the country.<sup>8</sup>

Improvising of this kind, of course, can be found in every people from the day of Herodotus to our own time. Through the record and the radio, the calypso of Trinidad has lately been given great publicity, but it is only a current example of a common phenomenon. It is certainly to be regretted that the travelers in nineteenth century America and the army officers and the Indian traders, the botanists and the missionaries living so much with the Indian made no attempt to record these "frivolous" songs and that no scholar-investigator of our time has found them important enough for his attention. For a knowledge of them is just what is needed to show the red man as a human being.

#### NOTES

1. Edited by John Francis McDermott (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 43-44.
2. *The Western Journals of Washington Irving* (John Francis McDermott, ed., Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 101.
3. *Ibid.*, 103.
4. *Ibid.*, 104.
5. *A Tour on the Prairies*, 43.
6. *Astoria* (New York: Putnams, 1869), 419.
7. *Tixier's Travels on the Osage Prairies* (translated by Albert J. Salvan, edited by John Francis McDermott, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1940), 180.
8. "Remarks Made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien . . . in 1829" in Caleb Atwater, *Writings* (Columbus, Ohio, 1833), 309.



*Major Stephen Long's council with the Pawnee in eastern Nebraska was painted by Samuel Seymour.*