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"Kansas, Canada, or Starvation"
(Robert F. Bauman)

THE UNITED STATES PROPER HAS AN INDIAN POPULATION of approximately four hundred thousand,¹ and the Indian population of Canada is in the vicinity of one hundred twenty-five thousand.² Just as many of the Indians now living in Oklahoma and Kansas were originally from lands east of the Mississippi, so was a considerable portion of the Indians now living in southern Canada originally residents of the United States. The actual migrations causing these American Indians to establish homes west of the Mississippi and in Canada took place during the same period; however, the results of the migrations to Canada and those to westward United States are as different as is night and day.

For two years I carried on researches in relation to many of the tribes which were forcibly removed to Oklahoma and Kansas; and, previous to that time I studied the migration of Ottawas, Chippewas and Potawatomes from Ohio and Michigan to Canada. As a result of such researches I have gained a fairly clear picture of the factors causing the movements; one west and one north, I have learned about these tactics used to bring about the removals; and, most important, I have obtained some knowledge of the results of this action by the government. Tonight my talk will be concerned with just one of the numerous tribes which were caught in this unjust current of affairs—the Ottawas of northern Ohio and southern Michigan.

The Ottawa story is practically identical to that of most other tribes affected by the 1830 Removal Act,³ in that they tried in vain to withstand and ignore the inevitable, they suddenly found themselves without land or means of sustenance, they had to make extremely quick decisions about where their next council fire would be lighted, and they all suffered similar fates of mistreatment, starvation, and

¹This paper is an expansion of a talk given by Mr. Bauman at a meeting of the Algonquin Club on Friday, April 4, 1952, in Windsor, Ontario. Ed. ²Annual Report of the Department of Mines and Resources 205 (Ottawa, 1948); Department of the Interior, United States Indian Service, *Questions on Indian Culture*, 1 (Washington, D.C., 1950). ³United States Statutes 411.

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death. During the 1830's the Ottawas of Michigan and Ohio had to face the complex problem of either removing to the barren Kansas plains; fleeing to their friends, the British, in Canada; or remaining at their beloved homelands and facing ultimate starvation and death.

The Ottawas, as tradition has it, were once a part of the famous Lake Confederacy consisting of the Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomie. The three tribes formerly occupied a great expanse of land in Canada north of the Great Lakes. This confederacy was a very loose one politically, and was often referred to by the Indians themselves only as the Three Fires. As indication that such a confederacy did once exist, one need only mention the fact that even today these peoples are able to understand one another's language; they are all of the Algonquin family.⁴

The Ottawas were first noted living along the north and south shore of Georgian Bay, at Manitoulin Island, and around the Lake Huron area. In the early days they were better traders and merchants than they were warriors, and their name indicates this fact—Ottawa meaning "to buy and sell" or "to trade." With the arrival of the French and English to this continent, the Ottawas were not long in putting their long swift canoes to good use, and they became the middlemen in a very lucrative trade between the Canadian lake tribes and the French, and at times, even with the English. In this the Iroquois were extremely jealous, and tried time and time again to drive the Ottawas and their trade-related tribes out of the territory. Finally after the Iroquois drove several of the small tribes connected with the Ottawa trading system out of that area, the Ottawas were forced to follow to the west in order to continue the profitable trade.⁵

By the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century the Ottawa nation seems to have split into several separate bands, each having its own political and civil organizations, yet linked together by family and social ties. One of these groups remained in Canada and around the western and southern shores of Lake Superior; another settled in the northern section of the lower peninsula of Michigan, centering at Manitoulin, St. Ignace, Cross Village, Grand

⁴Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, 390 (Department of Mines, National Museum of Canada, *Bulletin* 65) (Ottawa, 1923).

⁵Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 1:617-20; 2:167-72 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 30) (Washington, D.C., 1912).

River, and Saginaw Bay. A third group of Ottawas settled in southern Michigan and northern Ohio, having their two main centers at Detroit and Toledo. It is with the last group that we will be concerned at this time. These Ottawas had the approximate boundaries in Ohio as follows: just east of the Cuyahoga River, south to the St. Mary's River, and west to a point near the present Indiana border. In Michigan their holdings were more vague, since they mixed quite frequently with the Ottawas of Grand River, and because of the fact that the Potawatomie, Chippewa, and Wyandotte Indians were also living in and amongst the Ottawas. However, for clarity we may say that the Ottawas' holdings in this area extended just north of Detroit. These Indians mixed with and were closely associated with the Indians just across the Detroit River in Canada.

This is the picture of the Ottawas of northern Ohio and southern Michigan by the latter part of the eighteenth century. They seemed to have had a particular allegiance to the British, yet fought for either side according to the spoils offered to them for such services. During these years it became the practice of the Ottawas to make annual treks to the Canadian shore in order to take part in the issues of presents then made to Indians, a long and well-known practice of the British.⁶

By this time the Ottawas were known more as warriors than as traders. They had produced and were producing great chiefs and leaders. Pontiac, born on the Maumee River in Ohio in 1720, is excellent proof of this. Most of the Ottawa chiefs saw the inevitable coming. Since they were fighting on their own ground, since it was their fields and game that were being eliminated, and since they were continually fighting against opponents who were superior both in equipment and in manpower, they knew that they were fighting a losing battle. Regardless of which side they fought for, these Indians knew that their ultimate outcome would be the loss of their homeland or destruction, for they knew too well that the white man was not fighting for this land in order to give it back to the Indian.⁷

⁶*Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, Session 1847*, 6:5-7 (Ottawa, 1847).

⁷Gerard Fowke, *Archaeological History of Ohio: The Mound Builders and Later Indians*, 487 (Columbus, 1902).

remove to the strange lands in the west, they could remain in their homeland and face starvation and brutal treatment by the whites; or, they could try to escape to their friends in Canada where they were always welcome. In this year Governor George B. Porter tried to negotiate with the Ottawas to have them removed. He wrote to Washington that:

I have no hesitation in saying that this tribe are desirous of selling their land, but from all I can learn, they do not wish to remove west of the Mississippi. They are rather inclined to go to Canada, or somewhere in our vicinity. . . . It would be difficult, if not entirely out of the question, to persuade them to go west of the Mississippi.¹⁵

Their plight in their homeland is described by Colonel Howard.

The Ottawas are now leading a wandering life among white men, who have no sympathy for them. The whites now have all their lands here and are ploughing up the graves of their dead, and to stay here and witness that is more to the Indians than to meet death on the plains in Kansas.¹⁶

Lieutenant J. P. Simonton, another government official sent to help remove the Ottawas, reported that they were rapidly becoming pressed for subsistence, that game in the area was growing scarce; and, that the traders had ceased to supply the Ottawas with food and goods. With these sources of food cut off, said Simonton, these beggardly Indians will soon beg to be removed.¹⁷

I have already mentioned that the Ottawas were welcomed in Canada and well treated by the British, who gave them presents annually. So it is not difficult to understand why the tribe wrote to the Canadian government:

Father, environed as we are now by the Americans, we would seek again the remote and secluded cover of the forest. As the white American advances, we would retire; we would retire to hunt in those reclude woods, whither his erring foot dares not ramble. Father, the Americans propose to us lands, west of the Mississippi, instead of those we now occupy within their territory. Here, Father, they betray the usual craftiness of their nation. . . . Father, our inclination leads us to your shores. Say, Father, will you accept our proposal, or will you spurn the extended

¹⁵"Correspondence on the Subject of the Emigration of the Indians between the 30th November, 1831, and 27th December, 1833, . . ." 401.

¹⁶Dresden W. H. Howard, Wauseon or Wa-se-on and Otokee or Ot-to-kee, in the Howard Papers.

¹⁷J. P. Simonton to George Gibson, February 18, 1835, in the Records of the Office of Indian Affairs.

hand of your children and drive them into closer compact with the Americans?¹⁸

Thus, the Ottawas were seriously thinking of emigrating to Canada. There were several reasons for this: first of all, the Indian policy then existing in the United States; secondly, the opportunity of remaining in an environment similar to that to which they were accustomed; and, thirdly, the fact that they felt they had an ancient claim to lands in southern Canada. All of these reasons caused them to cast their eyes toward the Canadian shore.¹⁹ Then, just at this time, the Canadian government instituted a drastic change in her Indian policy which caused the American Indians to flock to that country. By the middle 1830's the Canadians were faced with the problem of issuing more presents to "visiting" or "American" Indians each year than they were actually giving to their own tribes. This was getting to be quite a costly undertaking. Also, since the presents were not only clothing, but guns, powder, and ball, the relations were beginning to become strained between the American and British governments.²⁰ In order to correct this situation, the Canadian government issued a proclamation in 1837 in which they informed all American Indians that presents would be issued to resident Indians only. Thus at the time when removal was inevitable, the Canadian government offered our Indians protection, land, and presents each year if they lived in that country.²¹

These are the problems that the American agents appointed to remove the Ottawas were faced with. In 1837, 1838, and 1839 the last of the Michigan Ottawas were removed to Kansas lands. During these removals, however, the agents often turned their heads and allowed the Ottawa families to escape to Canadian shores, and a great many were saved from the brutal removal in this way.²²

¹⁸Memorial of the Ottawas Respecting the Amherstburg Reservation to Sir John Colborn, September, 1829, in the Walpole Island Papers in the Department of Mines and Resources, Indian Affairs Branch, Ottawa, Canada.

¹⁹Memorandum Concerning Potawatomies' Claim to Walpole Island, date unknown, prepared for and in the possession of Mr. A. E. St. Louis, archivist, Department of Mines and Resources, Indian Affairs Branch, Ottawa.

²⁰Memorandum Concerning Indian Presents, September 23, 1943, a mimeograph circular from the Department of Mines and Resources, Ottawa.

²¹Letter of Sir F. B. Head to Lord Glenelg, November 20, 1836, in the Walpole Island Papers; Memorandum Concerning Indian Presents in the Walpole Island Papers.

²²The Removal of the Indians from the Maumee Valley, in the Howard Papers.