

BESHKNO
THE TRAIL OF DEATH
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This is the story of a Potawatomi Native American Indian boy named Beshkno. Potawatomi means ‘Fire Keepers’. His name means ‘Bald Eagle’.

As a boy, he grew up in the northern part of the state of Indiana. His family lived along the shores of two beautiful lakes called Twin Lakes. The lakes provided fish and good hunting. The land was rich and the forests were thick. It was a good place to live.

He loved to go fishing with his father. His father’s name was Wis-ki-gete, which means ‘Rising Smoke’. They would go into the forest to hunt for deer. It would take many days to find and kill a deer. It took a lot of patience, but the time with his father was very special for him. His father told him stories of when he was a young boy. It had been a time of war and many of the people in his tribe had been killed.

He told about how Beshkno’s grandfather had fought with the British in the War of 1812. The British promised the tribe that they would be able to keep the land, but the English lost the war so the government of the United States was not friendly toward the Potawatomi. They had not forgotten that the tribe had fought in the war against them.

The land where the Potawatomi lived was very important for the settlers who came from the east. Many white people came and built houses. They wanted to use the land for farming. The white men cut down the trees in the forest to make their farms larger.

The Potawatomi did not like this and it caused many arguments with these new

people. The settlers were making the forests smaller and it was becoming harder to find food.

In the early 1830's the American government began to make plans to move the Indians from their land. The government passed a new law, which gave the settlers the power to take the land and build their farms.

These laws and actions by the settlers caused many problems and many people were hurt, both whites and Indians. There was talk of war on both sides, but the chiefs of the tribe realized that war was not something they could win. There were just too many white soldiers. They knew they would have to do what the soldiers told them to do.

This is the story of those people and the journey away from their homeland. The year was 1838.

This is Beshkno's story

My father worked hard all his life. He was an honest man who could be trusted when he made an agreement; just like our chiefs.

Unfortunately, the white government never kept its promises. Our tribe had signed many papers that said we would be safe. We gave land to the white men and traded with them, but they always wanted more. If we disagreed, they would threaten us with the soldiers. Many people in our tribe became angry and wanted our chiefs not to make any more agreements with the white man and his government.

There was one white man who was kind and generous. He was a Catholic priest named Father Benjamin Marie Petit. He tried to help us by talking to the soldiers and representatives of the government, but they did not listen to him.

Most of us were Catholic and Father Petit treated us very well. Because we were Catholic, the white settlers liked us even less. Their religion was different from ours.

We had many arguments with the settlers. We were willing to share the land and live in peace, but we were always asked to give up more and more.

To avoid war, the leaders of our tribe agreed to sell the land, and in exchange, we

were given land in a far-off place.

The treaty said the government would pay money to our tribe over a twenty-year period. We were to receive horses, farming equipment and they were even supposed to build a mill for grinding grain where we were to live.

This treaty's name was the 'Treaty with the Potawatomi, 1832'. On October 26, 1832, it was signed by our chiefs and the white representatives of the government, even though many of my people disagreed.

Under the terms of the treaty we were to be moved to Kansas and start a new life there. Some of the chiefs and the people who were in other tribal groups had already left Indiana and had gone to Kansas to start their new lives. They had decided that it was better to live in peace. As always, when we asked for what was promised to us, they did not do as they had promised.

Even though most of our leaders did as they had agreed to in the treaty, our chief, Menominee, which means 'Wild-Rice Person', decided we would not go. He also refused to sign the 'Treaty of Yellow River, 1836'.

He wanted our tribe to stay on our land. We were supposed to leave by August 5, 1838, but we refused.

On that day, the soldiers came. They told us we had to leave our land.

Because we refused to leave, the soldiers came and burned our houses, and our crops. They kept us from rebuilding what they had destroyed. Finally, we had to move. We had no choice. The soldiers came and took us away. They put Chief Menominee, Chief Black Wolf, and Chief Pepinawa into a wagon with iron bars.

Some of our people ran and hid in the church. Father Petit did what he could to protect them, but the soldiers came and took them as well.

Finally, on September 4, 1838 we left Indiana forever. General John Tipton was in command of the soldiers who took us from our homeland.

Eight hundred fifty-nine of us left for Kansas, one thousand sixty kilometers away.

Each day we traveled about twenty-five kilometers, depending on the road and the

weather. The trip was so hard that each day some of our members died. Every day, when we stopped for the night, Father Petit gave the last rights as we buried our dead. The trip was difficult, especially for the young and the old.

We traveled along a trail called 'The Michigan Road'. We walked through many towns along the way. As we entered these towns, the people lined up on the side of the road and stared at us while we walked down the main street into their town. It was like a parade, only there was no music and no cheering. Mostly the people stood quietly and watched us as we walked past them.

After a week of continuous travel, we stopped for three days and rested. The soldiers didn't like that we had to rest and complained, but there were so many of us who had gotten sick, they had no choice.

Father Petit and Bishop Bruté came and held mass for us. They helped the sick and got a doctor to come and give us much needed medicine. The doctor estimated over three hundred of us were already ill.

Even though many of my people were weak and sick, after three days, they forced us to leave the place where we had made a camp and continue our journey. Some of the members of our tribe were too sick to travel and had to stay behind. Some of them would join us later. However, most of them died. For a few days, Father Petit stayed behind to care for the sick.

When we got to the Wabash River, they allowed us to wash our clothes and bathe. The cool water of the river felt good. It was also nice to have clean clothes to wear, and fresh water to drink.

We took a ferry across the river. It took most of a day for all of us to get to the other side.

When we got to Illinois, Father Petit joined us and never left again. He helped to take care of the sick and baptized many as they died. Children were born on the trip, but few survived the hot sun and dusty roads.

When we got to Springfield, the capitol of Illinois, the soldiers promised to give

the men tobacco and whiskey if the tribe were clean and presentable when we went through the city. The soldiers wanted to impress the governor and the leaders of the state. Chief Ioway helped to make sure we all looked our best, even though our moccasins were torn and our clothes looked dirty.

When we entered Springfield, the city streets were full of people who were curious about who we were and what we looked like. Reports of our arrival had been in the newspapers for days before we got there.

As we walked slowly through the city, at the very front of the line, was a soldier with the United States flag. Behind him came the wagon with metal bars that held our chiefs so they would not escape, followed by horses, smaller wagons and people walking. The line of our people stretched for a long distance along the road. We paraded quietly through the city. The people watching us were just as curious of us as we were of them.

If some were walking too slowly, the soldiers would yell at him or her. It was the same day after day. The soldiers were always there to make us go faster. They wanted to finish the journey, so they could return to their homes.

I had no idea when the walk to our new home would end. During the day, we could not speak. We could only spend time with our family at night when we were supposed to be sleeping. It was the only time we could talk and find out how the others were doing.

We would sleep on the ground or if we were lucky, under a wagon. The days were hot and dusty, while the cold autumn nights made sleeping difficult since we did not have enough blankets.

After the sun came up, the day would get hot again and we would get very thirsty. Each day we were given only a very small amount of food and water. When it rained we had no place to hide.

Many times, my father shared his food with the others in our family because they were becoming very weak, including me.

We traveled many days until we stopped in the town of Quincy, Illinois where we prepared to cross the Mississippi River. This was time for us to relax a little and try to get

well. We could clean our clothes and bathe in the river.

Father Petit held mass for us in St. Boniface Catholic Church there.

We crossed the Mississippi River on a steam ship. It took several trips to get all of us to the other side of the river into Missouri.

When we got to the other side, the doctor became ill with the fever and he had to go to the hospital in St. Louis. So, Father Petit did his best to help those of us who were sick.

From that time on, the soldiers began to allow us to rest on Sundays and attend mass with Father Petit.

Mr. William Polke, who became in charge of the trip after General Tipton left to return to Indiana, realized that we would behave better if we had some rest, and not as many people would die.

My mother's name was, Wapati that means 'Antelope'. She was not well. Three weeks after we left Indiana, she got the fever. We knew very few people survived the fever. My father did what he could to make her comfortable. When we reached Missouri, my little brother Sugnog, which means 'Blackbird', died. My mother died three days after my brother. We buried them in shallow unmarked graves along the path to Kansas far from each other. I have never been able to go back to visit where they had died. I wouldn't have been able to find them even if I was able to go back.

My older sister Nikan, which means 'My Friend', took care of me most of the time after that.

Some of the young men escaped during the night. We never saw them again. We found out that some of them had gone to Michigan, while others went to Canada where they knew they would be safe. My father wanted to join them, but he had to take care of our family.

Sometimes, during the night, my father and a few others went away from where we had stopped to hunt for food. My father was an excellent hunter and he always brought us some food. The soldiers would eat the best meat and then give the rest to us to divide

among our tribe. At least we had some fresh food occasionally.

The further we got from our home the harder it was to find food. The land was so different from our homeland. The open grassland stretched farther than the eye could see. There were few trees and many rocks. The road was dusty and made us cough.

Father Petit stayed with us for the whole trip even though he became sick himself. He rode in the back of a wagon, but when we stopped he would sit up and listen to people as they gave confession to him.

On November 4, 1838, we arrived at the reservation where we were to live. The land there was very different from our home in Indiana.

We had lost many people on the road to Kansas. We started with eight hundred fifty-nine and when we arrived, we were less than seven hundred fifty.

There was no lake in which to fish. There was no forest to hunt for deer. The ground was covered with grass. There were only a few trees. All we could see was open grassland.

Our lives were going to be much different than when we were in Indiana. We had to learn how to live in this place. Some members of our tribe had arrived in Kansas on their own before us. They helped us learn how to live and hunt. Other tribes of Indians who lived there before our arrival also helped us learn how to survive.

After we arrived and settled into our new home, Father Petit left our reservation and went to a hospital in St. Louis where he died of the fever. I will always remember him for his love and care of my people.

We learned how to live off the land, and we made a new life for ourselves.

The government never kept their promises to give us money, horses, tools nor the grain mill. Even so, we made a new life for ourselves in this strange land and our people still live there today.