

title: The Kickapoos : Lords of the Middle Border
Civilization of the American Indian Series ; V.
70

author: Gibson, Arrell Morgan.

publisher: University of Oklahoma Press

isbn10 | asin: 0806112646

print isbn13: 9780806112640

ebook isbn13: 9780585293288

language: English

subject Kickapoo Indians--History.

publication date: 1999

lcc: E99.K4.G5 1999eb

ddc: 970.3

subject: Kickapoo Indians--History.

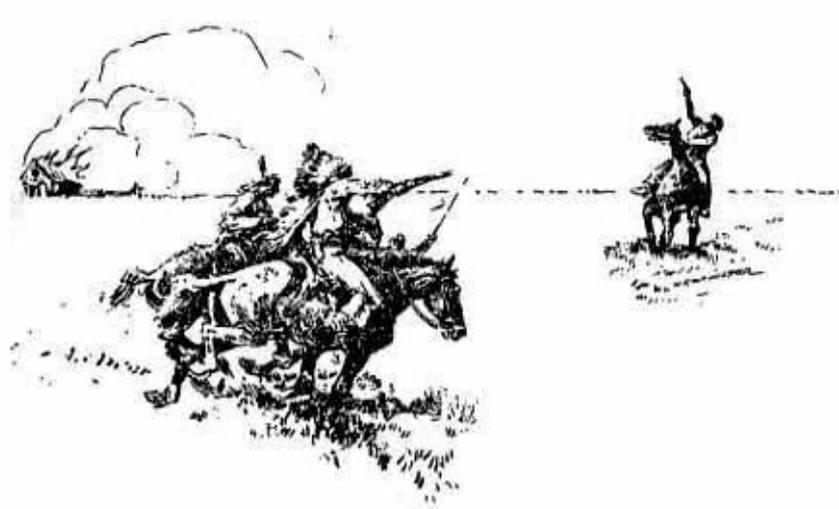
THE CIVILIZATION OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN SERIES

The Kickapoos:
Lords of the Middle Border



The Kickapoos

Lords of the Middle Border



By A.M. Gibson

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS : NORMAN

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The Kickapoos: Lords of the Middle Border

(Norman, 1963)

International Standard Book Number: 0-8061-1264-6

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 63-18071

The Kickapoos: Lords of the Middle Border is Volume 70 in *The Civilization of the American Indian Series*.

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*To the memory of
my father*
ARRELL MORGAN GIBSON

Preface

Probably no Indian tribal name has been used as often for non-Indian purposes as "Kickapoo." Because of its appealing sound, "Kickapoo" has been appropriated by geographers, border raiders, politicians, and patent-medicine makers. As one might expect, "Kickapoo" appears most commonly in place geography. These remarkable people have left a legacy of place names in at least eight of the states over which they roamed in earlier times. "Kickapoo" is a popular name for rivers, creeks, towns, and geological configurations such as Kickapoo Gap in south Texas. Fraternal orders, lodges, and even western border raiders during the Civil War, including the famed Kickapoo Rangers, used this tribe's name. Nor did "Kickapoo" escape political appropriation, for splinter parties in Oklahoma Territory often adopted this name, one example being the Kickapoo faction in early Oklahoma City politics.

"Kickapoo" became a common household word throughout America during the late nineteenth century when Healy and Bigelow of New Haven, Connecticut, organized the Kickapoo Medicine Company and peddled Kickapoo Indian Cough Cure, Kickapoo Indian Salve, and Kickapoo Indian Sagwa (a panacea guaranteed to cure symptoms of dyspepsia including neuralgia, headache, constipation, kidney disease, various stomach and liver ailments, and female disorders) through the peripatetic medicine show.

The Kickapoos were known by name only, and many features of their folklore, internal organization, and native religion remain

a deep mystery even today. A few names stand out conspicuously among the several hundred Indian tribes of North America. The Cherokees merit special note for their sophistication and remarkable advancement in the arts of western civilization; the Comanches for their barbarity; and the Delawares for friendly service as guides and interpreters. The Kickapoos deserve special recognition also and if one adjective could characterize a tribe, "unconquerable" would best fit these people.

Appropriately named Kickapoo from the Algonquian *Kiwigapawa*, which means "he moves about," and first discovered in the Great Lakes region, this restless people traveled to Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, parts of Ohio, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, eastern Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and northern Mexico. The Kickapoos ranged south of the Ohio River into Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama to the Gulf. A substantial Kickapoo community still resides in the north Mexican state of Coahuila.

The Kickapoos were extremely successful warriors. Skilled in warrior craft and inventive strategy, they were much in demand as frontier shock troops, and successively served as mercenaries for the French, Spanish, British, and Mexicans.

Few tribes can match the Kickapoos for vindictiveness. The Kickapoos regarded the United States as the epitome of evil and resisted the Anglo advance with calculated and passionate hostility. While many tribes accepted reservation life, the Kickapoos seemed to become stronger and more determined to resist with each new overture by the United States. The Kickapoos eventually came as prisoners of war from Mexico, sullen and planning new mischief for the agents assigned to watch over them.

On the reservation the Kickapoos carried on an extended cold war against the government's attempts to lead the warriors and their families along the white man's road. In this struggle they were remarkably successful, and in the twentieth century the Kickapoos remain unconquered a haughty, proud, and courageous people faithful to the ordinances of the Great Spirit.

In assembling the story of the Kickapoos, old friends were called

upon for help, and new friends were made. A special word of gratitude must be expressed to Rella Looney, Oklahoma Historical Society; Margaret Blaker, Bureau of American Ethnology; Dorothy Brockhoff, Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis); William B. Miller, Presbyterian Historical Society; Dorothy Libby, Great Lakes Indian Archives Project; and Opal Carr and Mary Webb, University of Oklahoma Library. Also a word of thanks is due the staffs of the National Archives (Washington, D.C. and regional depositories at Kansas City, Missouri, and Fort Worth, Texas), the Library of Congress, Indiana Historical Society, Kansas Historical Society, Wisconsin Historical Society, and the University of Texas Library. I am indebted to Duane Roller and the University of Oklahoma Faculty Research Committee for various grants which made possible the collection of scattered material, and to Arthur McAnally, director of the University of Oklahoma libraries, for enduring interest and encouragement.

A.M. GIBSON
NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

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1

Introducing the Kickapoos

The Indian tribes of North America possessed many common physical and cultural traits which make it difficult to distinguish one tribe from another. Language has been found to be the most reliable basis for separation and classification, yet even the language stocks are broad in their groupings and, in most cases, include a number of tribes. One of the largest language stocks is the Algonquian.

Tribes of this association were widely dispersed at the time of European contact, ranging from the Delawares and Shawnees of the Atlantic seaboard to the Cheyennes and Arapahoes of the western Great Plains. The Algonquian heartland, however, was located in the Old Northwest, and extended from the triangle point of the eastern Great Lakes westward to the Mississippi, flanked on the north by the lake chain and on the south by the Ohio River. Within this range some twenty-odd tribes of the Algonquian linguistic brotherhood were situated, all possessing a common culture.

Generally speaking, an aboriginal history for this entire Algonquian community could be written in rather specific terms, for the culture traits of one tribe were fairly common to all. Each tribe had achieved the approximate cultural level of neighboring tribes. The Algonquians were quasi-sedentary, with fixed villages where crops were planted and tribal affairs were conducted. Autumn and winter were spent in hunting, away from these fixed areas. Their weapons, their methods of raising war parties and conducting war-

fare, and their marriage and family customs were quite similar. These tribes produced the same crops, had a common method of preparing food, and their clothing and implements were fairly similar.

These Algonquians were hospitable toward visitors, worshiped the same gods, and exhibited a childish curiosity about the goods and manners of Europeans. Their dances, ceremonials, feasts, fasts, and rituals followed a common pattern. These tribes were for the most part self-sufficient, and they operated in an economic and social equilibrium which had existed for a time beyond memory and tradition.

From the seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth, the Algonquian heartland was subjected to a series of invasions which destroyed not only the indigenous culture but entire tribes as well. The French, ardent disciples of mercantilism, were the first invaders. From their St. Lawrence settlements they moved west and south by the Great Lakes and along the Fox, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Wabash rivers into the Algonquian range.

Beginning with Samuel de Champlain in 1608, an increasing number of ambitious French administrators selected strategic sites for military and commercial depots in the Algonquian heartland, and within a century the area had been marked by a complex grid of river routes, portages, and commercial highways connecting distant Quebec and Montreal with Green Bay, Detroit, Fort St. Louis, Cahokia, Kaskaskia, Fort Beauharnois, and Ouiatanon.

The native peoples and resources were gradually integrated into the commercial structure of New France. Ouiatanon, Cahokia, and Green Bay all of these posts came to serve as depots for trade goods and furs. Merchants flooded the Algonquians with French trade goods, obligated them by credit purchases, and persuaded them to liquidate their debts by ranging through the forests and prairies for furs. Tribes were encouraged to settle near the posts, abandon their historic self-sufficiency, and become fur hunters. The *coureurs de bois*, or bushrangers, developed new fur sources by trading with those tribes on the periphery of New France.

Missionaries, chiefly the Jesuits, built mission stations near the

posts and taught the Algonquians, attempting to civilize them and thereby making them more amenable to French exploitation. These emissaries political, commercial, and religious claimed authority in the name of the "Great Chief" at Quebec, and the Algonquians, emulating the Frenchmen's respect for the governor-general, called him Ononchio. Intrigued by the knives, hatchets, and guns; impressed by the blankets, fabrics, and baubles; and warmed by Ononchio's "milk" (fiery brandy dispensed by the French in council in little cups), most of the Algonquians acceded docilely to the French plan.

The Kickapoos were a notable exception. Almost from the beginning of European contact, this tribe exhibited a remarkably independent spirit and a studied hostility toward acculturation. They refused to accept the economic, political, and religious doctrines which the French, the British, and later the Americans sought to impose.

When the French became aware of this reluctance and attempted to force the tribe to accept the new order, the Kickapoos resisted only mildly. Successive mutual insults committed the Kickapoos to an unremitting offensive against French interests. Forming a confederacy with their Algonquian neighbors, the Mascoutens and the Foxes, the Kickapoos became the leaders of a combination which produced constant trouble for New France. In effect, the Kickapoos and their allies became outlaws in the western French territory, a rugged team of bandits who plundered French supply trains, shot down messengers and isolated *coureurs de bois*, massacred Indians friendly to the French, paralyzed communications in the Northwest, and, in general, seriously threatened the dream of French empire in America.

When in 1634 the Kickapoos and their confederates were brought to the attention of the French in a report by Jean Nicolet on the tribes of the Green Bay area, there was every indication that they, like other Algonquian tribes, would conform passively to the emerging French system.¹ Radisson, Groseillers, Allouez, Marquette,

¹ "Tribes and Tribal Wars about Green Bay," Wisconsin Historical Society Collections, XVI, 3-10; *Jesuit Relations*, V, 280.

Hennepin, Tonti, LaSalle, and Perrotall important figures in the development of New Francevisited the Kickapoos at various times before 1700 at their villages on the Fox River or in their hunting camps southward on the Illinois.

Although these observers were impressed by the hardiness and endurance of the tribe, they noted the Kickapoo tendency to withdraw and mistakenly attributed it to timidity and shyness, never considering that it might indicate calculated aloofness and contempt. Kickapoo opposition to French intrusion and to the projected consolidation of the Algonquian tribes was suppressed until about 1680, when two additional invasions of Algonquian territory occurred. From the West came the Sioux and from the East, the Iroquois, and the Kickapoos blamed the French for these incursions.

French merchants, in developing the fur trade among the Sioux, had swapped guns and ammunition for skins. Thus armed, the Sioux were encouraged to attempt a conquest they had often ventured but had always failed to accomplish in the pre-European era of Stone Age weapons.

The French could also be considered responsible for the Iroquois activity. Algonquian tradition related that in the early days of French settlements in the St. Lawrence valley, Samuel de Champlain undertook to clear the region of Indian hazards. In so doing he had irritated the Iroquois, and provided them with an historic grudge.

Dutch and English mercantile interests, anxious to delay French development of the Algonquian region, refreshed the Iroquois memory, armed the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, and Oneidasmember tribes of the Iroquois combinationand sent them west. These invasions halted development of the French fur empire in New France. Communications with Montreal and Quebec were cut, French fur depots in the west were abandoned, and the Indians who had been induced to settle near them were left to shift for themselves. Algonquians from the Ohio River country moved north, where they were joined by the Kickapoos and Mascoutens, who had abandoned their villages on Fox River and fled for safety to the forests around Green Bay.

As they reached this sanctuary, the Sioux overwhelmed them, and the Algonquian suffering knew no limit. It was bad enough that the self-sufficiency and self-reliance of the entire Algonquian community had been destroyed by Ononchio, his sub-chiefs, the black gowns, and the traders. Now two new furies were loosed on them, and mere survival became a clear and constant question.

The Iroquois, massively poised, seemed to augur sure destruction. The Sioux threat was so awesome it could hardly be conceived. And the subtle schemes of Ononchio threatened annihilation of the entire culture.

After cowering for three years in the dark forests of Green Bay, the Kickapoos and their Algonquian brothers petitioned the French for arms and aid in repelling the Sioux and Iroquois invaders. Thus in 1683 the French undertook a hesitant policy of reconquest. Tonti and La Salle relocated the southern tribes and organized a series of defenses on the Illinois River along the path of the Iroquois invasion. Perrot moved to the Mississippi and stationed the central and western tribes at strategic points in an attempt to thwart the Sioux.²

These were defensive measures, however, and the Algonquian pattern of warfare required revenge for the scalps and women carried off by the Iroquois and Sioux. When the Kickapoos had sought French aid, Ononchio had warned the chiefs to be on their guard against the Iroquois, but not to carry the offensive to the enemy. They were instructed rather, to "guard their cabins and repel attacks." The far-flung French defenses against the Iroquois failed, however, and for their pains in following French instructions the Kickapoos and Mascoutens were caught unaware. In a surprise Iroquois raid in 1683, sixty Kickapoos were slain. All the French could offer for this loss was sympathy, guns and tobacco intended to persuade the tribes to remain in their villages, and assurances of improved French protection.

In the west, a Kickapoo band under Pawashee was attempting to contain the Sioux. There also the Kickapoos repeatedly sought a

² Emma H. Blair (ed.), *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, I, 245-46.

direct policy of attack, but Perrot counseled caution. While stationed on the Mississippi with Perrot, defending French interests in the west and exposed to the threat of daily attack by the Sioux, Pawashee's warriors discovered that French traders were supplying firearms to the enemy. Thus, added to French hesitancy and weakness was hypocrisy.

Finally in 1684 the Kickapoos threw off the net of French control that constrained their natural impulse and began to meet the Sioux and Iroquois on their own terms. Forming an independent confederacy with the Mascoutens and the Foxes, the Kickapoos, contemptuous of French inertia, carried on their own offensive against the Iroquois, bringing in many scalps and prisoners. At the same time they succeeded in seriously harassing the Sioux.³

By 1685 the Kickapoo confederacy had become notorious throughout the Algonquian range, and soon its power equaled that of the Iroquois and Sioux. Its members "seemed to have been seized with an excess of homicidal fury. Their hand was against every man, and for twenty years or more they were the firebrands of the West, and a ceaseless peril to French interests."⁴

Kickapoo strategy involved organizing small bands under war chiefs and living in scattered villages, close enough to render mutual aid yet at a distance sufficient to prevent mass casualties in case of attack. While this pattern of group living effectively safeguarded life and property (and accounts in part for the substantial population of the tribe in the twentieth century) it also had several negative effects. Central tribal authority broke down as the various chiefs became autonomous, and by the nineteenth century the Kickapoo tribe consisted of a number of bands organized during the period of peril.

The Kickapoos, famous for their tactics and endurance, were also well known for the wide range of their depredations. During 1684, Kickapoo bands crossed the Mississippi, burned Santee Da-

³ "Perrot's Dealings with the Wisconsin Tribes," Wisconsin Historical Society *Collections*, XVI, 157.

⁴ Francis Parkman, *A Half Century of Conflict*, I, 278.