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CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AMONG THE KICKAPOO INDIANS OF THE SOUTHWEST

JOSEPH B. HERRING

When white explorers encountered them in their Wisconsin homeland, the Kickapoo Indians lived in separate and widely scattered bands. Although individuals referred to themselves as Kickapoos and identified with the major tribal group, over time the dispersed bands adopted additional cultural traits suitable to different regions and conditions. Environmental factors, proximity to white settlers, missionary pressure, and interaction with other tribes all produced a drift toward cultural pluralism.

Although noted for their conservatism, the Kickapoos were willing to adopt material culture traits that were to their advantage. This trend intensified after a portion of the tribe settled in Kansas in 1833 as a result of President Andrew Jackson’s Indian removal policy. A great number of the Kickapoos were discontented in their new homes, however, and after a brief and restless stay most of them journeyed south to Texas, Mexico, and the Indian Territory, where other tribal members had already settled.

An environment radically different from the green, rolling land of their Wisconsin forefathers greeted the Kickapoos as they moved south. The plains and prairies of Oklahoma and Texas were rich in buffalo and other game, but the deserts and mountains south of the Rio Grande presented formidable obstacles to those seeking economic sustenance. Comanches, Apaches, and other indigenous tribes, moreover, were not anxious to share their hunting or gathering grounds with intruders from the North. Compounding a difficult situation were the hordes of buckskin-clad whites who arrived in the Southwest in increasing numbers as the nineteenth century progressed, pushing Indians off their lands and killing the game on which they depended. Under these circumstances, the Indians of these regions found their customary ways of life disrupted and their usual sources of food disappearing. Kickapoos, however, prospered where others stagnated or failed. Gradually modifying and adapting their traditional cul-

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tural and economic practices, they took advantage of every opportunity to make their way in the Southwest.

**KICKAPOO CUSTOMS AND WAYS**

The southern Kickapoos' primary needs were to feed, clothe, and protect their families; like few others during the nineteenth century, their warriors were equal to the task. Rarely did settlers or soldiers, Comanches or Apaches keep the resolute Kickapoos—who often robbed and plundered for what they could not obtain otherwise—from achieving their aims. "There is hardly a [white] family to be found . . . who have not to mourn the loss of one or more of their members by [the] hand of those Indians," was a common refrain of the era.²

By the mid-nineteenth century various Kickapoo bands had settled along the Canadian and Washita rivers in the Indian Territory, near the Red, Sabine, Trinity, and Brazos rivers in Texas, and also in the Mexican states of Coahuila and Chihuahua. Like other Algonquian-speaking peoples, the Kickapoos were hunters, gatherers, and horticulturalists.
During the spring and summer they lived in villages, planted crops, and carried out tribal activities. The rest of the year the bands split into smaller family units to hunt buffalo, deer, and other game—sometimes ranging hundreds of miles from their semipermanent villages. Always on the move, they owned only what they could transport easily, and in emergencies they could pack and move an entire village in minutes. At least one government agent sought to decrease the Kickapoos' mobility by converting them to Euro-American materialism. If individuals acquired a desire for possessions, the agent reasoned, it would “lessen their naturally restless, nomadic propensities by surrounding them with property which they cannot readily move.” Such efforts to alter the Kickapoos' attitude toward property failed, however, during the 1800s.

Described by Arrell Gibson and other scholars as among the most culturally conservative of North American Indians, the Kickapoos often gathered around influential leaders. Bands numbered between fifty and four hundred persons, while the population of the entire tribe in 1850 has been estimated at fifteen hundred. Usually preferring to live as far as possible from frontier settlements, the Kickapoos were particularly hostile to Anglo-American intruders into their territory. Many times the various bands chose to move rather than risk confrontation with a flood of white settlers into their lands.

Chief Kishko and four hundred followers, who moved from Missouri to Kansas, were typical of the Kickapoos who refused to live near white settlers. Early in 1833, abiding by terms of their removal treaty, these people established a village on the Missouri River a short distance from Fort Leavenworth. They built bark wigwams and lived off the land, planting crops, constructing tables and chairs, and making beds out of rushes that grew along river bottoms.

One mile downriver the prophet Kenekuk and his untypically peaceful Vermillion Kickapoo followers had also recently arrived and were adapting to their new surroundings. While the prophet's people farmed and preferred to stay in their permanent village, Kishko's Indians clung to their native customs and refused to settle down to live as farmers. Proud and independent, they frequently left their villages for areas where hunting and trading were good. White visitors, noting the differences between the two groups, understandably regarded Kishko's band as less "civilized." A Presbyterian missionary observed that Kishko's Kickapoos "get drunk and gamble," while few of the prophet's band indulged in such "habbets or wickedness." Indian agent Richard Cummins, on a tour of the villages, found most of Kishko's tribesmen in a "deplorably drunken condition." Cummins decided to stay to make sure the situation did not deteriorate further. To his dismay the merriment continued. "During the night I could hear them whooping in every direction," Cummins related. He hurried to Fort Leavenworth for help to put an end to such behavior. Throughout the century, agents frequently reported that the southern bands were too drunk to function coherently. Whiskey drinking was but one of several Kickapoo amusements deplored by whites, who viewed horse racing, ball games, card games, and other forms of gambling equally with jaundiced eyes. When Arkansas newspaperman J. M. Washbourne met the Kickapoo chief Tecumseh in the Texas Cross Timbers, he carried "a most savage looking warstick." When asked what he used the stick for, Tecumseh replied that he played poker with it. "It is a long, red, crooked stick," reported Washbourne, "with a man's head carved upon it, and grim looking as a death head, and ornamented with Buffalo hair, beads, and paint." Washbourne assumed that if the chief failed to win, he scared his opponents out of their winnings. Quite likely Tecumseh simply gave a silly answer to a silly question.

In Kansas a Methodist missionary lamented that evil men "furnish them with cards," and wondered, "ought there not be some regulations prohibiting such things to the Indians?" When a steamboat docked near
Fort Leavenworth, a passenger noted that Kishko's Kickapoos who came on board enjoyed tobacco and brandy. "They played cards with great enthusiasm and even passion," the traveler related, "and remained on board very late that night; and three young Indian women remained on board all night . . . with the consent of the chief of the tribe."

Kishko and his Kickapoos soon became disenchanted with Kansas, for the new domain was "not equal to his expectations" and was less than half the size of their former range in Missouri. The Kickapoos also objected to the growing numbers of white settlers in the area and blamed the Indians' drunken condition on white traders who provided the "wicked water." Another grievance was the presence of Kenekuk's band, whose interference had caused tribal factionalism to flare. "Our young men and chiefs do not agree as they did some time ago," one Kickapoo admitted. "Some wish one thing, some another. Some would go to the prairie, where there is game. Some would stay and raise corn. We are like fish, we jump at whatever is thrown."

Their indecision did not last long. In the fall of 1833, only a few months after their arrival, a disgruntled Kishko and some of his followers packed their possessions and departed. Others followed as time passed so that by 1840 most had rejoined kinfolk who had migrated earlier to Indian Territory, Texas, and Mexico.

These people who once called the woodlands of Wisconsin home adapted with surprising ease to the prairies and deserts of the Southwest, even though the new terrain appeared harsh and uninviting to some Indians as well as to whites. Newspaperman Washbourne, for one, noted that the Texas Cross Timbers were "nothing but scattered tracts of low, scrubby oaks, with now and then an elm and knotted and knarled with briars and grapevines and crossed with thousands of ravines." Washbourne looked over the country to the west and beheld "the most unpicturesque, unenchancing prairie" that he had ever seen. Although a few "very wild" deer, horses, and a bear crossed the newsman's path during his sojourn in the area, game was scarce, making survival difficult for people who lived by hunting.

The Kickapoos prospered, nevertheless. Latecomers to regions long claimed by other Indians, Spaniards, and increasing numbers of Anglos, they strove to establish themselves. They quickly won a reputation as expert horsemen, hunters, and cunning raiders who took full advantage of their opportunities. Whites learned to fear the Kickapoos, for they frequently plundered settlements and killed those who resisted.

Attired in their beaded buckskin leggings, their blankets, breechcloths, colorfully ribboned shirts, vests, moccasins, and assorted jewelry, the Kickapoos appeared strikingly gallant to some observers. Writer John Treat Irving was fascinated by the "gaudily dressed figures with their tin trinkets glistening in the sunbeams, and their bright garments fluttering in the wind, as they galloped over the prairie." Equally impressed was Captain Randolph B. Marcy; while in the Cross Timbers, he saw a group of Kickapoo hunters who were "fine-looking, well-dressed young men, with open, frank and intelligent countenances."

Not everyone shared Irving and Marcy's view of the Kickapoos, for some men considered them "more savage" than other Indians. One government official wrote that they were "poorly clad when clad at all, and they present rather a wild and sorry appearance." They were, nevertheless, a "most remarkable curiosity" when seen in their traditional dress. A visitor to Kickapoo country wrote that "their color is reddish-brown; their face is irregular, often horribly colored with bright red paint; their hair is cut to a tuft upon the crown of the head and painted various colors." Washbourne reported from his camp on the Trinity River in 1846 that the "very dirty and very greedy" Kickapoos were "as ugly a set of men as their hunting grounds are." Washbourne, angry that his guests had devoured all of his provisions and drunk all of his coffee, was disinclined to portray them charitably. Kicka-
poo women, he added, were “hideous looking beings, nothing fair about them.” Journeying through the same region some years before, a more open-minded José María Sánchez found that the Kickapoos appeared “more fierce than other Indians, revealing in their manner a certain pride which is their characteristic.”

The Kickapoos’ proud demeanor and their superior and condescending attitude bemused and surprised whites like Washbourne and Sánchez, but others acknowledged their physical prowess and bravery. On one occasion, a chief of the Mexican Kickapoos served as guide to some American travelers. He soon tired of the party’s slow pace, walked on ahead, and reached the destination a full day before the Americans. As they straggled in, one exhausted traveler marveled at the chief’s stamina and ability to withstand “scorching sun and heated air on the open plains—such as we never before experienced.”

Many men were irked by the Kickapoos’ arrogance and refusal to be intimidated. In 1850 special government agent John N. Rollins encountered a Kickapoo band near the Llano River in Texas. When Rollins accused them of trespassing and ordered them back to their country north of the Red River, they laughed and informed him that Indian agent Robert Neighbors had “often told us the same thing, and we have never been hurt, and may be you lie.” They ignored his orders and threats. Americans trying to persuade Mexican Kickapoos to return to their reservations in the United States were met by “stupid grunts” from all but one eloquent warrior. “My heart is touched,” he said, “but as for myself god is my Captain—the world my Camping ground, and I am at liberty to go where I choose—so that I trespass not upon others.”

Cultural conservatives in comparison to other Algonquian peoples, the Kickapoos considered the preservation of their basic beliefs and customs vital. Although they borrowed useful aspects of the white man's material culture such as guns and metal implements, they consistently resisted efforts by agents and missionaries to change their ways. As one contemporary observer noted, the Kickapoos were “extremely suspicious of any change, and anything that is new, or that they are not familiar with.”

Despite the claims of several nineteenth-century commentators that the homeless Kickapoos simply roamed the countryside, turning “their attentions to the chase,” the Indians fully recognized the value of land with abundant game and rich soil. They considered certain land theirs, and they resented trespassers who usurped their resources. Preferring tribal to individual ownership of land, they also denounced the government’s insistence on allotment. Even those who had lived for years on Kansas and Oklahoma reservations refused to accept allotments. As one Kickapoo chief astutely put it, “The world was made for all to live in, and the white man has no right to encroach in the hunting-grounds of the red man, and has no right to cut the land up into little squares.”

WARFARE AND DIPLOMACY

The Kickapoos were ever ready to defend fertile and profitable territory from others, even from Indians who claimed the land. In 1841, for example, those living along the Boggy River in southeastern Oklahoma scoffed at Choctaw demands that they leave Choctaw hunting grounds. Bragging that they could easily defeat all Indian foes, the Kickapoos promised “they would make bullets whistle before they would leave.”

Soon after arriving in the Southwest in the 1830s and 1840s, these former forest dwellers had earned a reputation for fierceness. To provide game for their families, Kickapoo hunters needed to traverse a far-reaching territory. Realizing that indigenous tribes already claimed the hunting grounds in Oklahoma, Texas, and northern Mexico, they initially attempted to negotiate the hunting rights in those areas, sending messengers of peace to the Pawnees, Apaches, Lipans, Wa­coes, and other tribes. In March 1841 an army surgeon at Fort Towsen observed that Kicka-
poo emissaries had delivered “the wampum and red hatchet”—peace or war—to the Comanches and other tribes. The mighty Comanches rejected Kickapoo overtures, however, and warned them not to enter their lands. War parties prowled the countryside in search of Kickapoo trespassers. Cherokee agent P. M. Butler reported in May 1845 that Comanche and Pawnee warriors regularly “revenge themselves on all straggling parties caught out in the Prairie without regard to color other than those of their league.”

When Kickapoo hunting parties were attacked, they retaliated with a vengeance. Armed with bows and arrows, revolvers, lances, and rifles, Kickapoo war parties searched for more numerous enemies; the “intelligent, active, and brave” tribesmen had little fear of fighting, “provided the odds are not more than six to one against them.”

In 1845 an attack under Kickapoo chief Little King convinced the numerous Comanches of the futility of further violence, and they sought peace with the newcomers. An uneasy truce was concluded between the tribes, and by June 1845 agent William Armstrong reported that the Kickapoos were able to keep the peace and protect weaker tribes from Comanche attacks. The Kickapoos “generally understand the language and character of the Comanches,” wrote Armstrong, “and could negotiate with them” better than most anyone else on the frontier.

After settling affairs with the Comanches, the Kickapoos turned their attention to other foes, especially the hated Pawnees, who constantly harassed their camps and stole their livestock. Early in 1845, Kickapoo warriors and friendly Creeks began attacking parties of Pawnees on the prairies. As hostilities intensified, agent Armstrong worried that a general war would ensue, since every Kickapoo attack “resulted in the death of one or more of the Pawnees.” Armstrong wanted to call a general Indian council to settle the dispute diplomatically.

The Kickapoos undoubtedly desired a truce with their enemies, but their methods were more coercive than diplomatic. When they captured a Pawnee horse thief in March 1845, the Kickapoos tortured and killed him. The Arkansas Intelligencer reported that “the Kickapoos cut off the arm of the Pawnee Maha, and keeping the hand as trophy, ate the balance of the flesh from the shoulder down to the wrist; thereby denoting their abiding hostility to the Pawnee Mahas.” A Kickapoo delegation bore the dead man’s hand to the Pawnee villages on the Platte River to negotiate a peace settlement. Not surprisingly, the Pawnees avoided further confrontations.

White men also learned not to take Kickapoo threats lightly. A few years after Texas won independence from Mexico in 1836, officials of the new republic attempted to force all Indians in the eastern districts to move north to Indian Territory. The Kickapoos objected, and, encouraged by Mexicans eager to recover Texas, began a campaign of retaliation against the Texans that lasted into the 1880s.

Nineteenth-century records are full of reports of Kickapoo atrocities in Texas. In late October 1838, for example, the republic’s president-elect, Mirabeau B. Lamar, received word from Nacogdoches that “one of the most shocking [and] barbarous massacres” had taken place. Indians had attacked the house of a settler whose friends and relatives were gathered for a visit. In the ensuing melee, the men became separated from the women and children, each group barricaded in different parts of the house, but the invaders broke down the doors. The report to Lamar detailed the gruesome results: “Six matrons were either killed and mangled directly or wounded... the little children were thrown into the flames in which they kindled alive, or their bodies dashed out against the walls of the house.” After plundering the premises, the raiders set fire to it. When they left, they took the settler's herd of horses with them. A short time later, a large number of Kickapoos rode into an Indian camp in Houston County, bragging that they were responsible for the raid.
A punitive expedition under Commander T. J. Rusk set out after the marauders, who had gathered at a place called "the Kickapoo Town." The militia attacked and killed several Indians at the village, but the raiding party had already left. Learning of Rusk's approach, the raiders slipped out of the camp with the women, children, and loot. In November they were seen crossing the Red River into Indian Territory.²³

There among the peaceful Creeks, Choc­taws, and Chickasaws, the Kickapoos enjoyed sanctuary from their Anglo enemies. The situation was ideal for tribesmen interested in stealing horses from isolated ranches to the south. From their base camps in Indian Territory, small bands of raiders could plunder in Texas and return across the Red River before retaliatory expeditions could overtake them. Agent reports of the 1840s and 1850s blamed the Kickapoos for repeated raids. In a letter of 5 February 1841, Chickasaw agent A. M. M. Upshaw advised his superiors that the principal occupation of the Kickapoo intruders in the area was "to run into the Republic of Texas, kill and rob the inhabitants and then flee into the Choctaw nation where they kill the cattle and hogs and steal the horses" of those Indians. Upshaw added that, while he was "no alarmist," federal dragoons should be called in to prevent a possible outbreak of war.²⁴

Years later, Texas Indian agent Robert S. Neighbors made similar charges against the Kickapoos, who "exist as renegades, and are under no control." Neighbors pointed out that

years later, Governor J. W. Throckmorton beseched the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to do something about the Kickapoos living south of Eagle Pass in Mexico. "Immense herds of cattle and horses have been driven off, and our outside counties have been depopulated," the governor reported, "with great loss to the unfortunate people who had no other homes." Throckmorton warned that unless federal authorities acted soon border settlers "will cross the Rio Grande, and break up the camp of these Indian robbers." The isolated farmers and ranchers along the Texas-Mexico border were, however, no match for the Kickapoos. Descended from veterans of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the Kickapoos were hardened guerrilla fighters equally adept in contemporary field tactics. Although they preferred to avoid battle when seriously outnumbered, they fought furiously when attacked. In January 1865 a Kickapoo band crossing Texas set up camp at Dove Creek to wait out a snowstorm. Suddenly attacked by a force of four hundred Confederate soldiers, the Kickapoos took cover and returned fire. Their orderly defense soon drove the Texans into retreat. Twenty-six whites lost their lives and scores were wounded—ample indication of Kickapoo fighting ability. This defeat led to an official investigation by Confederate authorities into the conduct of the officers in command of the troops. Mecina might have exaggerated the Kickapoos' attachment to a specific territory, but their need for unhindered access to land was important. They had always supported themselves by hunting, supplementing their diet by raising corn, squash, and beans, and by gathering whatever wild plants were available near their current camps. While the Kansas Kickapoos adopted the white man's ways, the southern bands continued the traditional practices. Women planted crops, tended the fields, and harvested the beans and seeds that grew along the riverbanks; men rode the plains and prairies in search of buffalo, deer, bear, and other game. Their great skill as hunters was often acknowledged. One story tells of some travelers camping in the Cross Timbers who were startled out of their sleep by two rifle shots from the nearby woods. Tense moments passed before two peaceful Kickapoos emerged from the dense brush, "one behind the other, mounted on excellent horses, and each carrying one deer killed." In a similar testimony to
their skill, Captain Marcy remarked that Kickapoos were “well armed with good rifles, in the use of which they were very expert, and there are no better hunters or warriors upon the border. They hunt altogether on horseback, and after a party of them has passed through a section of the country, it is seldom that any game is left in their trace."29

The hunt held both economic and ceremonial importance for the tribe. Meat was the primary source of food; hides were used to make clothing and ceremonial paraphernalia. Surplus skins were traded for guns, knives, and other items at places like Fort Washita and Edward’s Trading House in Indian Territory and at Torrey’s Trading House in Texas.

In addition to swapping skins and furs at trading posts, the Kickapoos, who seemed to appear at the right place at the right time, acted as merchants and middlemen between whites and Indians in a brisk traffic that included whiskey, guns and ammunition, stolen horses, and even human captives. From Kansas to Mexico the Kickapoos proved “exceedingly sharp” traders, and it took a wily man to best them in any deal. Mounted on their swift ponies, Kickapoo raiders ran off with the children, slaves, and livestock of their Indian enemies and hapless Texas settlers. They bartered their stolen goods to the mighty Comanches or to the Mexicans south of the Rio Grande. Exchanges were consummated so quickly that authorities could rarely catch the Indians with incriminating evidence. A typical complaint of Kickapoo depredations was government agent Upshaw’s report of 13 September 1840. Upshaw charged that Kickapoos invading Chickasaw country had “stolen some fine horses, and some negroes: two negro men have been stolen from Blue River in the last ten days.”30

Captives were often sold or held for ransom, but some became members of the tribe. When frontiersman John R. Burleson visited Mexican Kickapoo camps in the early 1870s, he saw a captive German boy and an American woman. He tried to purchase the woman’s freedom, but because she had married the chief’s son, Burleson could not meet the high price set by his hosts. Joseph A. Durand, another visitor to Mexico, found the Kickapoos, Lipans, and Mescaleros working together in the plunder and captive trade. “The Kickapoos are the worst of the lot,” Durand charged. They made frequent forays across the Rio Grande at Eagle Pass, and so many women and children were kidnapped from isolated Texas ranches that “life and property are insecure,” asserted Durand. “It is worse than playing monte.” Border settler Albert Turpe was so irate when he found a blue-eyed, brown-haired girl in a Kickapoo camp that he attempted a daring rescue. He failed, and barely escaped with his life, swimming to safety across the Rio Grande “under a shower of arrows.”31

As men like Turpe learned, the Kickapoos were relatively safe south of the border. Bands near Santa Rosa were on friendly terms with Mexican citizens and merchants, who were grateful that the Kickapoos kept hostile tribes like the Apaches from attacking the town. The Mexicans resented American attempts to persuade the Kickapoos to return to their reservations in the United States.

The Kickapoos had good cause for wanting to stay in Mexico, for they sold their plunder at a good profit in Santa Rosa. This was pointed out in 1869 by the American commercial agent at Piedras Negras, William Schuchardt, who protested to U.S. Secretary of State Hamilton Fish that the Indians enjoyed the protection of the Mexican government. As long as the warriors “find a ready market for the fruits of their robberies,” wrote Schuchardt, “they will never willingly quit” harassing the Texans. The agent informed Fish that the crafty Kickapoos contracted for their plunder in advance of their raids. “They procure arms, ammunition, and all necessaries they need to conduct the forays,” Schuchardt continued, “with the assurance of a sure market on their return, or rather with the expected spoil already sold before their departure.” He went on to lament that, although Mexican laws forbade the sale of stolen goods,
they were “like all other laws relative to rights of foreigners, nearly a dead letter.”

American agent J. D. Miles, who arrived in the same area in May 1871, found the situation unchanged. Miles discovered that Kickapoo trade was vital to the local economy, and when he tried to get the Indians to return to the United States he ran into considerable opposition from town residents. Aside from economic considerations, Mexicans knew that if the Kickapoos left the Comanches and Apaches would return and the townspeople would “be exposed to all the horrors of the arrow and the scalping knife.” Miles was not surprised when, on the second day of his visit, Santa Rosa officials distributed fifty-two head of cattle and several bushels of corn to the Indians. His mission seemed doomed as “sharp words” and “bitter” feelings flared among the Kickapoos in the heat of the debate over removal. Most of them hated Anglos and disdained living in the restricted confines of a reservation. “We have ‘fearful odds’ to work against,” Miles wrote his superiors, “therefore, don’t expect too much from us.” Because Miles was not able to produce papers to prove his authority to negotiate, even those willing to leave became suspicious, and the Kickapoos decided to remain in Mexico.

In 1873, however, the Kickapoos’ secure existence was shattered. Responding to repeated pleas from victims of Kickapoo forays, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie and troops of his Fourth Cavalry Regiment crossed into Mexico and attacked the unsuspecting Indians in their sanctuary. Capturing many women and children, Mackenzie held them hostage until most of the remaining Kickapoos agreed to emigrate to Indian Territory.

Despite their defeat and forced removal to Oklahoma, the Kickapoos were not so easily tamed. By November 1874 the presence of Kickapoo families at scattered sites about thirty-five miles from the Sac and Fox agency made local officials uneasy. As one pointed out, the Kickapoos lived in an isolated region “known to be infested with outlaws and thieves.” His fears were justified. Kickapoo hunters, scouring the Oklahoma countryside in search of game, often stole cattle from Texas herds being driven north to Kansas cowtowns.

Indian agents admonished their superiors to provide the Kickapoos with food and money or they “will surely give trouble, of which they are fully capable.” In the fall of 1874, agent William Nicholson announced that “we may confidently expect raids into Texas or other mischief” if rations for the tribe did not arrive soon. Agreeing with this assessment, agent John H. Pickering warned early the following year that the Kickapoos “were a bold, smart, cunning and superstitious people, and it is imperative to a successful management” that the government appease them with annuities. Pickering noted that the new arrivals were already exercising a bad influence over the Sacs and Foxes and other tribes in the area.

Despite their notoriety, the Kickapoos caused their new neighbors less trouble during the following years. By August 1877 agent Levi Woodard reported that they had “done remarkably well, considering their restless disposition,” for they had planted crops and were raising cattle and hogs. Although they still preferred their traditional wigwams to houses, the agent predicted that they would soon begin building more permanent homes. Woodard hoped the Kickapoos would eventually abandon their “superstitious” beliefs and habits for “Christianity and civilization.” They still refused to perform manual labor and insisted on frequent visits to other tribes “for the purpose of exchanging or ‘smoking ponies,’ a practice demoralizing, expensive, and useless, as it inclines to stimulate their nomadic disposition and foster their indifference in regard to the value of property and goods, which are ostensibly gifts, but in reality doubly paid for.”

Like others before him, Woodard greatly underestimated the Indians’ acumen in economic matters. The Kickapoos realized that their independent disposition forced the government to part with money and goods. Whil
peaceful tribes had their annuities cut off, the potentially troublesome Kickapoos were handsomely rewarded. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Kickapoo leaders accepted the oxen, wagons, plows, and other items that apprehensive government officials sent them. Expressing gratitude for the offerings, the chiefs continually demanded more. Pleading poverty and threatening to return to Mexico if their requests were denied, they constantly badgered agents for handouts. They realized better than anyone that collecting annuities, hunting and selling skins and furs, and stealing horses to trade were much easier and more satisfying than the rigorous and uneventful existence of the yeoman farmer.37

CONCLUSION

Although recalcitrant, the Kickapoos realized that attacks on settlements would bring army retaliation, and such incidents diminished greatly during the 1880s. But the Kickapoos remained true to their traditions well into the twentieth century. Despite the unceasing efforts of agents and missionaries, they refused to change their ways and conform to the precepts of the dominant white society. Many eventually returned to Mexico, where they lived isolated from the outside world, except when they returned to the United States to work in harvests. Eventually the water needed to irrigate their Mexican lands was poisoned by an American corporation, and today many of them live in extreme poverty in a squatter’s camp near the international bridge at Eagle Pass, Texas. By January 1985 fund-raising efforts by Catholic and Protestant church groups enabled the tribe to purchase 125 acres of south Texas land for a new home. At a ceremony on 8 January, the Kickapoos listened as land acquisition committee chairman Rev. Jim McCloud told them: “This land will belong to you and your children and your children’s children for as long as the flowers bloom and the rivers flow.”

The Kickapoos have heard similar words before many times in their history, but they have learned to be wary of the white man’s platitudes. They have yet to move to their new lands and many of them remain skeptical; others willingly accept assistance from well-intentioned philanthropists. Most continue to exist as they have for generations—proud and independent Kickapoos—Indians who steadfastly refuse to be made over into imitation white men.

NOTES


5. Richard Cummins to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Elbert Herring, 30 September 1835, N.A., Letters Received, Fort Leavenworth Agency, M234, Roll 300.

6. For Washbourne’s report see the Arkansas Intelligencer (Van Buren), 7 February 1846.

7. Reverend N. Talbott to John C. Spencer, 28 January 1843, N.A., Letters Received, Fort Leavenworth Agency, M234, Roll 302. The steamboat passenger was a count from Milan, Italy, noted in Francesco Arese, A Trip to the Prairies and in the

9. Arkansas Intelligencer, 7 February 1846.


12. Miles to Hoag, 7 June 1871, N.A., Letters Received, Kickapoo Agency, M234, Roll 373.


14. Woodard to Hayt, 3 April 1878, N.A., Letters Received, Sac and Fox Agency, M234, Roll 742.


16. Armstrong to Crawford, 26 May 1841, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.

17. William J. Jones to H. L. Heiskell, 4 March 1841; Armstrong to Crawford, 8 June 1845; P. M. Butler to Armstrong, 18 May 1845, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.

18. Quoted in Gibson, The Kickapoos, p. 171.

19. Arkansas Intelligencer, 30 August 1845; Armstrong to Crawford, 8 June 1845, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.

20. Armstrong to Crawford, 8 June 1845.

21. Arkansas Intelligencer, 15 March 1845; Armstrong to Crawford, 30 September 1845, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.


23. T. J. Rusk to Colonel Bowles ( Cherokee Chief), 20 October 1838; Lamar Papers 255; H. McLeod to Lamar, 1 December 1838; Lamar Papers vol. 2: 309.

24. A. M. M. Upshaw to General M. Arbuckle, 5 February 1841, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.

25. Robert S. Neighbors to Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Manypenny, 16 September 1854, House Executive Documents, 33rd Congress, 2nd session, 1854, serial #777; Throckmorton to Commissioner of Indian Affairs D. M. Cooley, 5 November 1866; Texas Indian Papers 4: 125; Throckmorton to Cooley, 6 December 1866; Texas Indian Papers 4: 127.


28. Richard Graham to Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis William Clark, 15 January 1825, N.A., Letters Received, St. Louis Superintendency, M234, Roll 747.


30. William Nicholson to Commissioner of Indian Affairs E. P. Smith, 14 November 1874, N.A., Letters Received, Sac and Fox Agency, M234, Roll 740; Upshaw to Armstrong, 13 September 1840, N.A., Letters Received, Western Superintendency, M234, Roll 923.


32. William Schuchardt to Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, 1 July 1869, N.A., Letters Received, Kickapoo Agency, M234, Roll 373.

33. Miles to Hoag, 7 June 1871 and Miles to Hoag, 13 July 1871, N.A., Letters Received, Kickapoo Agency, M234, Roll 373.

34. Woodard to Nicholson, 31 March 1876, N.A., Letters Received, Sac and Fox Agency, M234, Roll 741; Gibson, The Kickapoos, p. 275.

35. Nicholson to Smith, 14 November 1874 and John H. Pickering to Smith, 5 March 1875, N.A., Letters Received, Sac and Fox Agency, M234, Roll 740.

37. Woodard to Hayt, 9 April 1879 and J. Hertford to Hayt, 10 June 1879 and John Shorb to Hayt, 2 September 1879, N.A., Letters Received, Sac and Fox Agency, M234, Roll 743; Gibson, *The Kickapoos*, pp. 274–81.