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History of Omaha Indians

Henry Fontenelle

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The following Indian names of streams and localities, is furnished by Henry Fontenelle :

Nebraska—Name of the Platte river, meaning flat river.

Nemaha—Name of the Nemaha river, meaning Omaha's river.

Neobrara—Niobrara or Leau qui court river, meaning wide river. Leau qui court is the French name of the running or Niobrara river, meaning the "water that runs."

The letter O was always annexed or prefixed to Mahas, Omahas is proper. The early voyagers, the French, abbreviated the word or name by leaving off the O and calling them "de Maha," instead of des Omaha.

Ohio—Although not in this state is an Omaha word, meaning come along. Ohie, or Ohahe, came by.

I cannot just now think of any more Indian names of streams or localities.

HISTORY OF OMAHA INDIANS.

At request of the editor of this report the following traditional history of the Omaha Indians is furnished by Henry Fontenelle, a reliable, intelligent, educated half-blood of that tribe:

DECATUR, NEB., Aug. 18th, 1884.

Robert W. Furnas, Brownville, Neb.:

DEAR SIR—I send you a brief tradition or history of the Omahas, as you requested, but I fear it is not all you want. Like other persons of limited means I have but little leisure to study or write, and have been away from home most of the time since last spring, and have had to improve what little time I could catch while at home to write it out, as you know my education is limited, and have not as fluent use of the English language as I would wish, and consequently I make a poor out at writing history or anything else. Had I plenty of time to study and write, and make researches I might have made it longer and go more into details, and it might have been more interesting and entertaining.

I once wrote a biography of Logan for the *Burtonian* (our county paper), which you will find in the last and largest history of Nebraska published in Chicago, which should you want you can find.

I send you the slip of paper containing the death of my aunt, etc. If you need it, or should you not, or at any rate, please send back to me when done with. I had the pleasure of seeing her while in Brooklyn, N. Y., in 1873, also two of her daughters, one of whom a widow lady living now in Chicago.

Mr. Henry Allis will be at the State fair with the original manuscripts written by his father, to let you see, and hope to be there myself, if possible. I am

Very respectfully, etc.,

H. FONTENELLE.

The tradition of the Omahas handed down to this date is, that they were living at the mouth of the Missouri river in a destitute condition (no date is given), when by accident some one of them found an ear of corn in a mole hill, the kernels of which were divided among the different bands or families. From that time hence corn has been cultivated by them. The Quapaws, now of the Indian territory, go farther back. Tradition tells them that they and the Omahas were one tribe; that they emigrated down the Ohio river from its sources down to the mouth of it, where a controversy took place as to the direction they should take, when finally a part of them went down the Mississippi and called themselves "Ogoh pæ," meaning descending or going down. They settled on the west side of the Mississippi on that part of the territory now the state of Arkansas, and were there until they ceded the country to the United States, and moved westward. The other part of the tribe moved up the river and called themselves "Omaha," derived from the word "Kemoha," meaning against the current, against the wind. The Omahas, as stated, tradition takes them back only to the mouth of the Missouri river. In their migrations up the river nothing of importance is mentioned until they reached a point on the Big Sioux river, where they located their village, and lived many years in confederation with the Iowas, Otoes, and Winnebagos. In dissensions among the Omahas a part of them separated and went southward, and became independent tribes of the Kaws and Osages. After many years residence on the Sioux river, at or near the red pipe stone quarry, they went on up the Missouri with the other tribes mentioned, until they reached a point opposite the mouth of White Earth river where they crossed the Missouri to the west side and explored the country west of that point. The coun-

try being barren and soil poor they could not successfully raise corn. They lived there but a short time and moved down the west side of the Missouri river (still with the other tribes that started with them from the Sioux river), until they arrived at a place opposite the mouth of James river of Dakota, and lived there many years. The Iowas located at the mouth of Iowa creek, near the present site of Ponca, Nebraska. The Otoes went on south until they came to the mouth of the Elkhorn river where they settled on the east side of the river. No account is given of the Winnebagos after they left the Sioux river. How long the Omahas remained at their village opposite the James river we know not. When tradition tells us they moved on down the river to a place where the Omaha creek disembogues out the bluffs at the present site of Homer, Nebraska, and established a village there many years before a white man was known to them. It was at that place the Omahas first saw the white people. Some of the Indians were on the bank of the Missouri, and espied some strange beings on the opposite side building a boat, preparing to cross the river. The white people came over loaded with blankets, cloths, trinkets, and guns. It was then, and at that time, they first knew the use of fire-arms. A year or two afterwards five different traders established trading posts at the "cross timbers" (a belt of cottonwood timber stretching across the Missouri bottom about half way between Decatur and Tekama, Nebraska), where the Omahas and traders made their rendezvous semi-annually to trade.

Up to this no mention is made of any great chief until Blackbird comes into prominence with Ta-ha-zhouka, the father of "Big Elk the First." Blackbird was the first great chief known to white people, and his memory is held sacred by the Omahas for his rare intelligence and good traits. He held supreme command over his people. His words were law and obeyed as such. At the same time he is remembered as a good and gentle disposition, and loved by his subjects. Blackbird and Ta-ha-zhouka were the first Omaha chiefs that made a treaty of friendship and peace with the governor of the territory of Louisiana at St. Louis, where a recognition of his being chief of the Omahas was given him by the governor on paper, the date of which we forget. It is still kept by his descendants as a sacred relic. And at this time a portrait of Blackbird was painted, which at the present time hangs in the "Palace of the Louvre," at Paris, France. Not

many years after that time he returned from a visit to the Pawnees at their village on the south side of the Platte river opposite the present site of Schuyler, Nebraska. The Pawnees at the time were visited by that terrible scourge, the small-pox. He took the disease as soon as he arrived home, and died in a few days. His last request was, that he should be buried on a high bluff overlooking the Missouri, so that he could see the white people in their travels up and down the river, as he was very fond of them.

On account of their enemies, the Sioux, who made incessant wars upon them, and outnumbered them, they moved out to the Elkhorn river (named after Ta-ha-zhouka, meaning elk's horn), where they lived until the year 1832 or '33 when the small-pox broke out among them. In their consternation they scattered in every direction over the prairies. After a great many of them died the disease left them. They collected again, but abandoned that village and went back again to their former home on the Omaha creek, and lived there until A.D. 1845. Again, on account of their inveterate foes, the Sioux, making continual wars upon them, they moved down the river to a place four miles west of Bellevue. They lived there one year when their next great chief, Big Elk the First, died, and was given a Christian burial by the missionary at Bellevue, the Rev. Mr. McKinney, who preached the funeral sermon over the remains, and interpreted by Logan Fontenelle, U. S. interpreter. He was buried on the spot where now stands the Presbyterian College. In excavating the grounds preparatory to building the institution, no doubt the spot held sacred by the Omahas was desecrated by digging away his bones. What was done with them we know not. The memory of Big Elk is dear to the Omahas for his good traits, and is conspicuous for his executive abilities. He commanded respect among all the white people that knew him. His son and successor, "Big Elk the Second," was a man of natural abilities, but took to dissipating, and died from the effects of prolonged debauch at the foot of Blackbird hill, and was buried by the grave of Blackbird in 1852.

Contemporary with the last Big Elk was a conspicuous character by the name of White Buffalo, sometimes erroneously called "White Cow," a natural and gifted orator. For several years before he died the writer of this was U. S. interpreter, and it was with much regret I could not well enough use the English language to interpret and

convey the utterances of strong emotion in his eloquent speeches made before U. S. authorities, and upon particular occasions before assemblies. He was noted for his quaint, humorous pleasantries. It may not be amiss in this narrative to cite an incident when White Buffalo with other chiefs was in Washington in A.D. 1851, in council with the commissioner of Indian affairs. The year previous to that time the Indians of the plains had committed depredations upon emigrants traveling across the plains to California. The Omahas of course had to take the blame as well as other Indians west of the Missouri. The commissioner had occasion to speak of the depredations, and said to the Omahas that if they did not quit molesting the emigrants he would send out soldiers and big guns among them and kill them all off with one puff of his big guns. White Buffalo got up and straightened himself before the commissioner and said: "My Great Father, I fear not death. I have fought my enemies in many battles. I have courted death in the din of hot strife of battle with deadly foes, but death has thus far disdained me. Send out your soldiers, send out your big guns, and to prove to you, should I be your prisoner, I will crawl into your big gun and tell you to fire away!" The speech created some sensation among the white bystanders, but his colleagues took it as a good joke, as White Buffalo never merited the name of a "brave warrior" in any meritorious act in battle. During the winter of 1855 and 1856 agent Geo. Hepner issued provisions to the Omahas at Omaha City, at that time but an embryo city. After the provisions were all given out, the agent held a council with the chiefs. During the council, a Mr. Wm. Brown brought an account against the Omahas for hogs killed and taken by them. Sufficient evidence was given to prove that no Omahas were seen in the vicinity of Omaha City or Council Bluffs for four months previous to the time Brown lost his hogs. White Buffalo stepped up to Mr. Brown and said: "My friend, why do you charge us with a theft we did not commit. Your hogs were frozen to death." And in mock solemnity he puts his hand on Mr. Brown and pointing upwards, tells him to send his account to the Lord Almighty "who caused the snow and cold weather that froze your hogs." The jeers of the bystanders rather nonplussed Brown. He walked away and never mentioned hogs again to the agent or Omahas. White Buffalo was a great counselor to his people, and his counsels had effect by the argumentative and

convincing manner of speech he gave it. While sick, a few days before he died, he was visited by their agent in company with the U. S. interpreter, when White Buffalo made a few sensible and pertinent remarks; he was buried on a high bluff overlooking the river just above Decatur, Neb.

In September, 1853, the U. S. commissioner of Indian affairs visited the Omahas, and in council made overtures for the purchase of their country. The Omahas signified a willingness to acquiesce in the offers of the commissioner. In a council of deliberation on that occasion Logan Fontenelle by acclamation was created principal chief. All the chiefs of the Omahas were invited to Washington by the commissioner to make a treaty for their country, which was consummated and signed on the 16th day of March, A.D. 1854, the territory ceded by the Omahas embracing about one-fourth of the State of Nebraska, in the north-eastern part. The Omahas reserving for their home three hundred thousand acres where they now live, and are making rapid strides toward civilization.

In June, 1855, Logan went with the tribe as usual on their summer buffalo hunt, and as usual their enemies, the Sioux, laid in wait for the Omahas in vicinities of large herds of buffalo. The first surround they made on the buffalo the Sioux made a descent upon them in overwhelming numbers and turned the chase into battle. Four Omahas were killed and several wounded. In every attempt at getting buffalos the Sioux charged upon them. The Omahas concluded it was useless to try to get any buffalo and retreated toward home. They traveled three days and thinking they were out of danger, Logan, one morning, in company with Louis Saunsoci and another Indian, started on ahead of the moving village, and were about three miles away when they espied a herd of elk in the distance. Logan proposed chase, they started, that was the last seen of him alive. The same moment the village was surrounded by the Sioux. About ten o'clock in the morning a battle ensued and lasted until three o'clock, when they found out Logan was killed. His body was found and brought into Bellevue and buried by the side of his father. He had the advantage of a limited education and saw the advantage of it. He made it his study to promote the welfare of his people and to bring them out of their wretchedness, poverty, and ignorance. His first step to that end was to organize a parol of picked men and punish

all that came home intoxicated with bad whisky. His effort to stop whisky drinking was successful. It was his intention as soon as the Omahas were settled in their new home to ask the government to establish ample schools among them, to educate the children of the tribe by force if they would not send the children by reasonable persuasion. His calculations for the benefit of the tribe were many, but like many other human calculations his life suddenly ended in the prime, and just as he was ready to benefit his people and sacrifice a life's labor for helpless humanity. After Logan was killed the Omahas went to Bellevue instead of coming back to the reservation whence they started, and wintered along the Missouri river between Calhoun and the reservation, some of them at Bellevue. In the spring of 1856 they again went back to their reservation, where they have been since. The first years of their residence here they went on their usual summer and winter hunts and depended on the chase for subsistence. The game grew scarcer as the country settled up by the white people. When in the fall of 1870 they were obliged to go a long distance down on the Smokyhill river in Kansas, and found but few buffalo, they started homeward disheartened and in a destitute condition, and would have suffered was it not for the kindness of the commander of Fort Hayes, who liberally supplied them with bacon and flour. They arrived home satisfied that it was no longer any use to try and subsist upon the chase, as the buffalo and elk had disappeared from their usual haunts. They concluded to till the soil and emulate their neighbors, the white people, was their only alternative, from which time they have progressed rapidly, and have labored diligently in making themselves comfortable homes and take an interest in educating children. They have two flourishing schools that accommodate on an average eighty to a hundred children every year. They also have now about forty of their children at Carlisle, Pa., and Hampton, Va., schools supported by the United States government. Many of them have comfortable frame houses built by proceeds of their own earnings. They market surplus wheat and corn every fall. On the fourth of July, 1884, Ebohumbe, son of Chief Noise, died, after prolonged sickness, an exemplary and useful man for his emulative example in trying to live and labor like the white people and accumulating property. He owned at the time he died sixty head of cattle and forty or fifty head of hogs, three span of large horses, and

took to market every fall large surplus of wheat, corn, and hogs. White Horse, a descendant of the great chief Blackbird, who is living, is another among the Omahas who sets good example, by trying to live like the white people in farming and dwelling in a comfortable house, as well as by precepts given to his people at every opportunity; in turning them from their old habits to civilized ways of living; but these are only examples of many that try to better their condition; and should the Omahas progress as they have in the last ten years, another decade will see them competent citizens.

Some months after the foregoing had been handed me, Mr. Fontenelle wrote me as follows:

By invitation I was at the dedication of the Bellevue College, and the burial of the bones of the Omahas that were taken up in preparing the grounds for the building. I was entirely ignorant of what was done with the bones at the time I wrote the history of the Omahas for you, and I regret very much of having written the sentence of censure, in saying a desecration was committed in digging away the bones of "Big Elk." An apology was due Mr. Clark, the founder of the college, which I did offer. I now wish that that sentence in the History be erased, and substitute the following:

"Much credit and praise is due Hon. H. T. Clark for the kind, Christian act in carefully taking up the bones of Big Elk and others that were buried there generations ago, and put them in boxes and stored them until the appropriate and fitting time of the dedication of the College to its noble use, when they were reburied immediately in front of the building—upon which occasion eloquent and fitting expressions were given by the venerable missionary, the Rev. William Hamilton, and others."

HENRY FONTENELLE.

NOTE.—The editor of this report was, during the life-time of "White Cow," or "White Buffalo," agent for the Omaha Indians, and familiar with the peculiar characteristics referred to by Mr. Fontenelle. A reference to two instances may not be an unpleasant digression.