

**McLean County Museum of History
Bloomington, Illinois**

**The Unconquerable: Photos and History of the Kickapoo Indians
Exhibit Opening Lecture
Museum Library / Archivist Bill Kemp
Saturday, August 16, 2008**

We are honored to have with us a delegation from the Kansas Kickapoo Nation here with us.

Image #1: This first image illustrates the fluidity of Native American history, of Native American life and death, with the appearance of the French and English empires on the North American continent. Remember, Europeans brought with them not only diseases, such as smallpox, which killed tens and tens of thousands; but iron and steel and manufactured cloth and firearms. And trade spanning the globe and ideas such as private ownership of land.

Because the historic Kickapoo were long on the move, the location of their ancestral lands—that is, pre-contact—is not known. “The movements of the Kickapoo were so frequent and extensive that this tribe cannot really be associated with a specific area,” notes a Smithsonian Institution essay. Furthermore: “Knowledge of Kickapoo culture is greatly handicapped by the lack of early source material and further impaired by years of anthropological neglect.”

European powers had upset long-established balance-of-power arrangements among Native Americans, and the Kickapoo were squeezed by the Iroquois on the East and the Sioux on the West. They turned southward into Illinois, playing no small role in the decline of the Illinois Confederacy.

When American settlers arrived on the scene in what becomes McLean County in the 1820s, they find the Kickapoo, as well as Delaware and Potawatomi. Actually, these people were relative newcomers to this area, with the Kickapoo having arrived in the first half of the 1700s. Custer, for one, mistakenly believed the Kickapoo had occupied central Illinois for generations.

So for those of us living here in central Illinois, what we have is a glimpse—and little more than a glimpse—of a brief and oftentimes chaotic period in Kickapoo history. Native American history on the Illinois frontier and early statehood period was one of punishment and ruins.

Again, we must emphasize that Native American life during these decades was anything but timeless, harmonious, stable.

All that said, when researching the Kickapoo in Illinois, one is struck time and again with one of the more underemphasized themes of the American frontier—Native Americans were not passive actors on the historical stage. In the old Northwest Territory, Native Americans wielded significant influence in their dealings with European powers—primarily the English and French, and to a lesser extent the Spanish. Whether it was through trade links, diplomacy (continually shifting alliances), and warfare, Native Americans did not go quietly in the night.

Native Americans fought against British and later American designs on their lands: There was Pontiac's Rebellion of 1763-65; Miami war chief Little Turtle's alliance and the defeat of U.S. armies in 1790 (Josiah Harmar) and 1791 (Arthur St. Clair), the latter the worst defeat of an American force by Native American in history, greater even than Custer and Little Big Horn. After that there was Tecumseh, heir to Pontiac, his brother The Prophet, and their alliance against the Americans from 1811 to 1813.

The Kickapoo are exemplars of this resistance. And I hope that this exhibit succeeds in its goal of honoring the fierce independence displayed by the Kickapoo people.

Unlike the Illinois and other "lost" tribes, the Kickapoo avoided political and cultural collapse. They consistently opposed forced removal and acculturation, and by doing helped ensure their survival into the twenty-first century.

"Almost from the beginning of European contact, this tribe exhibited a remarkably independent spirit and a studied hostility toward acculturation," stated A.M. Gibson, in his definitive one-volume history on the Kickapoo, *The Kickapoos: Lords of the Middle Border*. "They refused to accept the economic, political, and religious doctrines which the French, the British, and later the Americans sought to impose."

The one adjective that best characterized the Kickapoo, according to Gibson, is unconquerable."

Yet in the end, there were hurdles too difficult to overcome. There was, for one, the impossibility of sustaining an indefinite barrier to Euro-American settlement, given the cold hard incontrovertible demographic trends: By 1810, the population of the United States had reached 10 million; with 1 million of those living west of Appalachians. There was also the fractured nature of Native American alliances (the difficulty of sustaining diplomatic and military alliances in the face of cultural, linguistic differences and historical antagonisms). Disease and depletion of game were also weakening the most resilient of Native American tribes.

Still, one is struck by the sophistication of Native American opposition to Euro-American settlement on par with what we would call ethnic cleansing today.

Image #2: Patton Cabin. Almost 180 years ago, June 10, 1829, settlers and Native Americans gathered together to help John Patton build this one-room log cabin. The cabin raising occurred near the Kickapoo Indian settlement along the Mackinaw River, about three miles southeast of present-day Lexington.

The Patton cabin, which was subsequently moved and relocated to a park in Lexington, is the oldest building in McLean County. In fact, it's even older than McLean County, which wasn't established until Christmas Day 1830.

The cabin, like any notable old building, speaks to the history of a place and its people. It was said there were ten white settlers at the cabin-raising, as well as an undetermined number of Kickapoo and Delaware Indians, with some lending a helping hand. That means that the Patton cabin is the only surviving structure in central Illinois associated with the cultural interchange between "Euro-Americans" (that is, white settlers) and Native Americans.

In September 1965, with the blessing of owner Ruth B. Reynolds, volunteers saved the cabin by taking it apart and moving the logs into storage. Eventually, the dismantled structure was reassembled on Lexington's north side. Dedication ceremonies for the "new" old Patton cabin took place on October 12, 1969.

The Patton cabin underwent extensive restoration in the mid-1980s, which returned the structure to more of its original appearance and configuration. The historic significance of the Patton cabin is incontestable. Today, about 60 percent of the original 1829 walls remain, a remarkable fact when one considers that many of the "historic" cabins in Illinois, such as those at Lincoln's New Salem, are reconstructions dating to the 1930s and the make-work projects of the Great Depression.

Image #3: This is a painting by Florence Harris based on a painting by George Catlin. Machina is probably the independent-minded "Chief Mecina" in historian Gibson's history. According to Gibson, Mecina, based in the Lake Peoria area, stubbornly resisted overtures for over a decade to leave central Illinois.

Early McLean County settler John H.S. Rhodes, who arrived here in April 1824, "found [Native Americans] to be like their white brethren in many things; some were honest and some were dishonest." Rhodes verbally tangled with Machina, who "always denied selling the country to the whites." Rhodes told the "old chief" that he indeed signed over Kickapoo land to the whites, and that "Boss Stony" (presumably a reference to the U.S. president) held the documents. According to McLean County pioneer chronicler Etzuard Duis, Machina replied, "Damn quick putting black upon white" (Machina here is referencing signed documents).

John Benson, Sr., a veteran of Tippecanoe, the battle that helped smash the Indian alliance led by Tecumseh and his brother The Prophet, brought his family to Blooming Grove in 1823. Benson remembered Machina singing lullabies to his children.

Image #4: The Kickapoo eventually divided into two autonomous groups, or bands. The first, known as the Vermilion Band, settled along the western drainage of the Wabash River. These Vermilion Kickapoo associated with the Mascouten, which they eventually absorbed into their fold. The other group, known as the Prairie Band, occupied a stretch of central Illinois generally running from the headwaters of the Sangamon River in what becomes McLean County eastward to Lake Peoria.

Retired archeologist Ed Jelks, who reviewed this exhibit's panels for errors of fact and interpretation, says that the Grand Village of the Kickapoo north of LeRoy was less a permanent site than a grouping, or band, of Kickapoo who moved about central Illinois, and thus we emphasize the Grand Village at the expense of sites along the Mackinaw River in northern McLean County; and others in southern Livingston and north Logan County, to say nothing of Kickapoo activity in the Lake Peoria area north of present-day Peoria. Be that as it may, the Grand Village and the nearby stockade, have remained the most investigated, historically and archeologically, of area Kickapoo sites

In 1819, in the Treaty of Edwardsville, the Prairie Kickapoo ceded their lands in central Illinois in exchange for a new home on the Osage River in southwest Missouri. One month later, the Vermilion Band also agreed to move west of the Mississippi River. Yet a substantial number of Kickapoo repudiated the treaties and remained in Illinois as late as the mid-1830s. The last to go were those living in central Illinois (primarily Livingston and McLean counties).

In 1832, the Kickapoo living in Missouri relented to the U.S. government's insatiable demand for land and signed the Treaty of Castor Hill, which established a new reservation in Kansas.

The last Kickapoo to leave Illinois were not led by Machina but rather Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet. Originally from the Vermilion Band, he and his followers settled for a while in Indian Grove in southern Livingston County. Since Kenekuk preached pacifism—and was nominally Christian to boot—he enjoyed relatively warm relations with settlers, but even Kenekuk wore out his welcome with impatient settlers worried that Native Americans, even the small number with Kenekuk, would hinder, in any way, the sale and improvement of land.

Image #5: Milo Custer was born in 1879 to Samuel and Lucinda Parker Custer. His father was known as Lou and his mother Lulu. So you had Lou, Lulu, and Milo.

Milo Custer's interest in local Native American history likely dates to his youth. As he and his father worked on farms owned by several different landowners (the Custers were tenant farmers), Milo Custer began collecting what we used to call arrowheads and today projectile points. He also began making investigations into sites of apparent occupation (Native Americans settlements), such as those along Burleson Creek, a tributary of the Big Kickapoo Creek in Randolph Township.

Milo Custer never married, and spent the 1920s and 1930s living with his widowed mother on S. Low St. on the eastern edge of Bloomington's Miller Park. There he remained almost until his death, passing away on March 13, 1952 at the age of 73.

For his 1906 trip to Brown County, Kansas, Custer found a sponsor in George Perrin Davis, longtime president of the McLean County Historical Society and son of U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Davis. In 1909, Custer became a paid "custodian" (or curator) of the historical society, a position he held until 1917.

January 1917 marked the passing of both George P. Davis and John H. Burnham, another key figure in the establishment and early years of the historical society. Custer then opposed the appointment of William B. Carlock as treasurer to replace Burnham. On that basis, Custer refused to hand over subscription lists, pledges, certificates of deposit, and bank books he held as a member of the society's building fund committee.

The tussle between Custer and the historical society continued through the first few months of 1917. He eventually agreed to return financial records and other items. Custer, though, did admit to burning membership lists and tossing valuable coins from the society's collections into both the lake at Houghton Park (today State Farm Park) and the lake at Miller Park. Custer, noted a historical society report on the matter, "deeply regretted his acts and said that he could give no reasonable explanation for committing them and asked for leniency."

During this protracted legal battle, Custer established a competing organization called the Central Illinois Historical Society. Under the auspices of this new society, Custer published a series of pamphlets, including *Pioneer Portraits of Central Illinois* (1923); and *Asiatic Cholera in Central Illinois, 1834-1873* (1930).

Though the reasons for Custer's eccentricities and rash behavior are lost to time, his love of, and devotion to, McLean County history remains unquestioned. His publications still serve as valuable resources for those interested in local history and genealogy. And his two visits to the Kansas Kickapoo, evidenced in these remarkable photographs, may very well represent his most lasting legacy.

The third observation, or point of emphasis—and this is noted in the exhibit—is that Milo Custer was a product of his time.

In December 1906, the McLean County Historical Society held one of its quarterly meetings. Much of the meeting was taken up with papers on Native Americans and discussion of Native Americans. Local matriarch Sue Pike Sanders argued that Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel (Rabbi Mannheimer was there to debunk this long-held legend); Ezra M. Prince, while acknowledging that the American government had broken treaty after treaty with Native Americans, said it was merely the old story of the survival of the fittest, and that the same thing might be said of great corporations crushing the smaller ones.

Prince also said the dominant characteristics of the “race” was war making and laziness. Remember, these were some of the more enlightened, educated, and historically attuned members of the local community.

In that meeting, Custer said he was appalled by the Kickapoo’s use of alcohol and tobacco, especially by the women. To her credit, Sue Pike Sanders said Kickapoo women were no worse than the millionaire wives of New York, who spend a night on the town with diamond studded cigarette boxes.

As elucidated in the exhibit, Custer held contemporary conservative Protestant attitudes toward issues like tobacco and alcohol. The Indians of his fertile imagination were pure, mythical, conquered and extinct.

So there was Custer, during a gathering of old settlers of eastern McLean County in 1915, delivering a romantic, lengthy blank verse poem glorifying the Kickapoo. In this poem, he wrote of McLean county where “no vandal white men’s axes / Had yet marred its primal beauty” when Native Americans “Lived in ways quite close to Nature, / By no white men’s rule were burdened.”

To us today, Custer seems hypocritical or worse. But, for better or worse, he saw no hypocrisy in decrying Native American use of tobacco and celebrating their once fierce beauty and independence.

Image #6: Kickapoo Training School. Here, Kickapoo students were furnished with room, board and clothing.

Custer stayed at the teacher’s cottage near the Kickapoo School, which he described as a “fine large two-story frame building.” The school, with an average attendance around 70, was located on a 240-acre working farm. “There is also a large barn, sheds, carpenter and blacksmith shops, etc. with all modern conveniences that might be found on any well-improved farm in Illinois or elsewhere,” noted Custer. Male students helped raise crops and livestock, while the female students assisted in housework, “such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending, making beds, etc. in which they receive practical instruction from competent teachers.” Clearly, the goal of this school—as with other government-funded Indian schools of the era—was acculturation into contemporary American life.

Museum Board Member Mark Dunn came across, in the Milo Custer Collection, warrants for Kickapoo policemen to seize students from their homes and convey them to the school. These were students who, for whatever reasons, were not attending the training school. Here’s an October 20, 1892 order by the U.S. Indian Agent J.A. Scott, under the auspices of the Department of the Interior, Indian School Service, to seize and convey a female student to the school, “where she shall remain during the time of school, which closes June 30, 1893.” That eight months at the school, away from parents and elders.

Image #7: On more than one occasion, Custer visited with Onubyah, Machina's aged daughter who spoke "nothing but Kickapoo." According to the annuity roll, she was 88 in 1906. Custer recorded the following observation: "She wore a common calico dress, a black 'kerchief' over her head, a pair of deerskin moccasins on her feet, and she walked with a cane." Her "house" was a "small cabin of hewed logs about fifteen feet square."

Image #8: On the third day of his visit, October 4, Custer hired a photographer Ernest L. Hoppe, who lived in nearby Horton. In his notebook Custer described the 55-year-old photographer as a "very jovial, quick rather nervous German." At one point, Hoppe referred to the life hereafter in a discussion with Kickapoo Arthur Whitewater, who served as one of Custer's guides and translators. "Yes, we Kickapoo will go there," Whitewater told the photographer, "but you won't be there." Custer adds this postscript to the exchange: "This was said very solemnly and not at all in a joking way. This came also from one of the most enlightened Indians." In Custer's notes of the 1906 trip, you see these glimpses of Kickapoo independence and pride.

Image #9: Mkopahmah, or Bear Chief.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, a photograph is not objective truth. That is especially true when considering photographs of Native Americans. The process of cultural and social interaction that occurs both in front of and behind the camera can say as much (or even more) about the subject photographed than the subject itself. All too often, photography has served to objectify and misrepresent (either intentionally or unintentionally) Native America people and their culture.

So we must always approach photos of Native Americans carefully, critically, with an understanding of their context.

The problematic nature of ethnographic photography is evident in the work of John K. "Jack" Hillers, to cite one example with a local connection. Hillers, one of the more important photographers of the nineteenth century American West, worked for John Wesley Powell, the explorer and government scientist who began his professional career in Bloomington-Normal.

In 1873, Hillers photographed the Kaibab Paiutes in present-day Utah. Unfortunately, Hillers' Indians were a mixture of some fact and a lot of fiction. For example, he photographed the Paiutes dressed in the clothing of the Ute people of northwestern Colorado, presumably because their buckskin attire was considered more Indian-like. He also dressed them in pseudo-Indian clothing made by his John Wesley Powell's sister Ellen Thompson—hence photographs of Paiutes wearing feathered headdresses instead of their traditional close-fitting caps.

There are many other examples of such misrepresentation.

Beginning in the early 1900s, Seattle photographer Edward S. Curtis set out to capture what he called the “vanishing Indian.” Published between 1907 and 1930, his monumental 20-volume set, *The North American Indian*, included 700 pictures. Yet as one ethnologist has noted, Curtis’s subjects represent a timeless past more mythological than historical. By placing Native Americans in the past, Curtis brushed aside the triumphs and tragedies of present-day Native Americans. “The notion of Indians as ‘Nature’s children’ never had a better publicist than Curtis, and if Indians were timeless and natural there could be little doubt they would disappear before people of progress and industry.”

Curtis’s photographs, in effect, were saying: Admire these proud, soon-to-be-lost forever people. Native Americans are of the past. Not the present. And certainly not the future.

As mentioned, most of the photos in our exhibit are the work of Ernest L. Hoppe from Horton, Kansas. There is very little information on Hoppe’s life and career. In addition, Milo Custer, the man who hired Hoppe, made only passing reference to the photographic work in both his notebooks and subsequent reports. Therefore, the intentions of Custer and Hoppe as they approached their photographic subjects remain a mystery.

That said, unlike much of Curtis’s work, most of the Kickapoo are shown not as “vanished” Indians but rather contemporary figures. Most are seen wearing westernized attire or a mixture of western and traditional clothing. And although some of the photographs are obviously staged, it appears that, for the most part, Custer and Hoppe had no greater agenda than documenting the Kickapoo as they were in 1906.

Image 10: Aleck Rhodd, wife and family.

I hope this small exhibit plays some role, even the smallest role, in shedding light on the Kickapoo in both Mclean County and Illinois.