

The Illiniwek

compiled by

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History:

"The Illinois Indians, also known as Illini or the Illiniwek, were a group of independent tribes sharing a common language and a common origin. The Illinois language belonged to the central Algonquin group, along with the Miami, whom the Illinois Indians closely resembled.

"The word 'Illinois' is the French version of the Algonquin term for 'men'. Most American Indian tribes, in their own language, referred to themselves simply as 'the men' or 'the people'.

"This group is sometimes referred to as the Illinois Confederacy. They were very loosely associated and were not politically organized into a formal confederacy like the Iroquois or Creeks. The Confederacy label was probably applied because the individual tribes were often camped in the same location when encountered by the early missionaries and explorers.

"According to the writings of the early Jesuits in the area, the Illinois tribes were believed to have occupied the area along the upper Mississippi for some time prior to contact. The Illiniwek association with the French began as early as 1667 when some of the Indians visited a trading post established along the Fox River in central Wisconsin.

"When first contacted by the Europeans, these tribes inhabited a roughly triangular area extending south and west from the Chicago River into what is now Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas. A hundred years later, their boundaries were formed approximately by the Wisconsin, Ohio, Wabash, and Mississippi rivers. This area was referred to by the French as The Illinois Country.

"In 1673, the Illinois Confederacy included about twelve tribes: Kaskaskia, Maroa, Cahokia, Peoria, Tamaroa, Tapouaro, Coiracoentanon, Espeminka, Moingwena, Chinkoa, Chepoussa, and the Michigamea.

"By 1700, all but the Cahokia, Kaskaskia, Michigamea, Peoria, and Tamaroa had disappeared from the territory, through either original misidentification (some of the groups designated as tribes may have been only subdivisions of a tribe) or absorption into other tribes. As their populations diminished, these tribes, too, merged: the Tamaroa and Michigamea joined the Kaskaskia, and the Cahokia merged with the Peoria.

"With increasing pressure from the tribes on the East, as the Iroquois were forced West pushing the Great Lakes tribes ahead of them, the Illinois tribes concentrated in the face of hostilities. After a Kaskaskian Indian killed the Ottawa chief, Pontiac, in 1769, provoking enmity of the Lake tribes, the Illinois took refuge for a period with the French at the village of Kaskaskia. It was at this time that the Sauk, Fox, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi began to move into the territory vacated by the Illiniwek.

"During the latter part of the eighteenth century, the remaining Illinois, their populations greatly diminished, inhabited an area along the Kaskaskia and Big Muddy rivers in southern Illinois, while some

members of the combined tribes were moving across the Mississippi River into reservation lands on the Missouri Territory.

"In 1832, the last of the Illinois lands were ceded to the United States government and the survivors withdrew across the Mississippi River. ONLY eight Kaskaskia warriors were included in the group that settled with the Peoria in Kansas. Two hundred Peoria and Kaskaskia were reported on the reservation in 1840. By 1851, the Indian agent reported that their tribal identification had been lost and only a few remained. By the end of the century, the Illiniwek were essentially gone except for the Peoria Indian Tribe of Oklahoma which numbered a little over 400 in 1956.

Culture:

"The Illiniwek lived by combining hunting, fishing, farming, and gathering in a yearly cycle. About the first of April they returned to their semi-permanent village sites spread along the river banks. Here, they lived in bark- or reed-mat-covered framework lodges, apparently four of five families in a single lodge, probably all part of one extended family.

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"In the fall, the whole tribe moved onto the plains on foot for the long winter buffalo hunt...

"February was the accepted time of year for war and raiding parties. These were generally small, led by a war leader, and followed strict policing rituals. Taking captives was considered more honorable than killing the enemy, and a successful raiding party returned without losses. Slaves were apparently common, and captured women and children were often adopted into families to replace lost members.

"Weapons included bows and arrows, considered superior to the gun because they could fire more rapidly, as well as clubs and hatchets (tomahawks). Metal knives and hatchets and guns were available although not plentiful. Arrowpoints and spearpoints were made of stone or of metal and glass obtained from fragments of European materials. Shields formed of several layers of buffalo hide were carried by war and raiding parties.

"Games such as lacrosse, gambling, races, and dances were a part of religious ceremonies as well as recreation. Games were played between groups within a village or tribe or between different tribes. Education of the children was treated as a game.

"Dress was kept to a bare minimum. Except for moccasins and a loincloth or skirt of some type, both sexes normally wore little clothing for everyday. Buffalo-skin robes were added during severe weather. Special occasions called for additional adornment in clothing, jewelry, body painting, and hair dressing and ornamentation.

Suggested Reading:

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