

## Photographs offer window into Kickapoo reservation life



*This photograph, taken in 1906, shows a Kickapoo couple living on the Kickapoo reservation in Brown County, Kansas.*

In the fall of 1906, McLean County resident Milo Custer spent nearly two weeks at the Kickapoo Indian reservation in northeast Kansas. His interest in the Kansas Kickapoo lay in the fact that they were the descendents of the last Native Americans to reside in central Illinois.

While there, Custer hired a local photographer whose resultant work offers an intimate portrait of a fiercely proud and independent people. Many of these photographs are currently on display at the McLean County Museum of History in downtown Bloomington.

The Kickapoo, one of the more traditional, culturally conservative tribes in North America, consistently opposed forced removal and assimilation, and by doing so helped ensure their survival into the present day.

European powers had upset long-established balance-of-power arrangements among Native Americans. In the 1700s, the Kickapoo (an Algonquin people who share linguistic and cultural ties with the Sac and Fox) found themselves in southern Wisconsin, squeezed by the Iroquois on the East and the Sioux on the West. The Kickapoo then

turned southward into Illinois, and played a significant role in the decline of the Illinois Confederacy.

The Kickapoo eventually divided into two bands. The first, known as the Vermilion Band, settled along Wabash River watershed in eastern Illinois and western Indiana. The other group, known as the Prairie Band, occupied a stretch of central Illinois running from the headwaters of the Sangamon River in modern-day McLean County eastward to Lake Peoria.

On July 30, 1819, in the Treaty of Edwardsville, the Prairie Kickapoo ceded their lands in exchange for a new home in southwest Missouri. Yet a substantial number repudiated the treaty, as well as one signed by the Vermilion Band, and remained in Illinois as late as the mid-1830s.

The history museum's exhibit details the tense but generally peaceful relations between the first Euro-American ("white") settlers to McLean County and the remaining Kickapoo. The last to go were those living in McLean and Livingston counties, and many were led by the Kickapoo Prophet Kenekuk (also spelled Kennekuk).

By 1832, the inexorable tide of American settlement was such that the Kickapoo were forced off their Missouri lands and sent to northeast Kansas. Some Kickapoo continued southward, and today there are recognized Kickapoo tribes in not only Kansas, but also Oklahoma, Texas and even the Mexican state of Coahuila.

Milo Custer, under the auspices of the McLean County Historical Society, visited the Kansas Kickapoo for twelve days. After returning home, he authored manuscripts on Kickapoo language, religious practices, genealogy, and other topics (though his observations were decidedly colored by the prejudices of the day).

Custer stayed at the teacher's cottage near the Kickapoo School, which he described as a "fine large two-story frame building with basement." The school, with an average attendance around 70, was located on a 240-acre working farm. 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.

Custer visited with Onubyah, the elderly daughter of Machina, a Kickapoo chief known to many of McLean County's earliest settlers 80 years earlier. "She was old and feeble, and her eyesight was very poor," Custer recalled. "She spoke nothing but Kickapoo which Masqueequa [one of Custer's guides] interpreted."

On the third day of his visit, October 4, Custer hired a photographer, Ernest L. Hoppe, who lived in nearby Horton, KS. In his notebook Custer described the 55-year-old Hoppe as a "very jovial, quick rather nervous German."

Many of Hoppe's photographs show individuals or small groups in Western-style clothing (typically, women wore dresses and the men pants, shirts, and black "slouch" hats), though there are some Kickapoo posing in more-traditional dress. There are also exteriors showing reservation buildings, including the training school, Kenekuk's church and the Presbyterian mission.

Hoppe's work is free from the heavy romanticism that colors a fair amount of Native American photography from this period.

Interestingly, Custer, unlike his photographer, held romanticized views of Native Americans. He longed for (and wrote poems about) the mythical Indian of the prairie. He also held conservative, Protestant attitudes towards alcohol and tobacco, and he expressed disgust at the Kickapoo use of the latter, especially by women.

Today, the Kansas Kickapoo reservation encompasses an area roughly five-by-six miles, with the Kickapoo owning about 6,000 of the 19,200 acres within the reservation boundary.

The McLean County Museum of History's exhibit, "The Unconquerable: Photos and History of the Kickapoo Indians," runs through June 6, 2009.