

EVER TOWARDS THE SETTING SUN THEY PUSH US:
AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE WRITINGS OF MARY ALICIA OWEN

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by
GREG OLSON
Dr. Susan Flader, Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Jeffrey Pasley, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, approved by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

EVER TOWARDS THE SETTING SUN THEY PUSH US:
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Presented by Greg Olson

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Susan Flader

Professor Jeffery Pasley

Professor Joanna Hearne

To Rebecca Schroeder,
who introduced me to the work of Mary Alicia Owen.

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ABSTRACT

Mary Alicia Owen (1850-1935) is best known as a folklorist who studied and wrote about the culture, legends, and folkways of Missouri's African Americans and American Indians. While she is best remembered as the author of two major works of folklore and ethnography, *Olde Rabbit, the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers* (1893) and *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America* (1904) she was also the author of several short stories and at least one novel and one play.

In her fiction Owen often portrayed American Indian people as a part of the lively ethnic melting pot that characterized her hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri in the mid nineteenth century. Yet, despite the years of contact Owen had with members of this vibrant mixed community, she ultimately resorted to many of the same stereotypical conventions that many European-Americans of the Victorian era relied on to portray native people. Many of these same stereotypes can be seen her ethnographic work as well. This thesis examines Owen's relationship with the American Indian people she studied and her use of stereotypes—most prominently the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian—in characterizing them.

INTRODUCTION

Mary Alicia Owen (1850-1935) is perhaps best known as a folklorist who studied and wrote about the culture, legends, and folkways of Missouri's African Americans. Owen's articles on the topic appeared in such scholarly publications as the *Journal of American Folklore* and *The Folk-Lorist*. Her book *Olde Rabbit, the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers*, originally published in 1893, solidified her reputation as an expert in the field. Owen also made significant contributions to the study of American Indian culture through her work with the Meskwaki, or Sac and Fox.¹ Her 1904 book *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America* is part folklore analysis, part anthropological investigation, and part catalogue of the more than one hundred artifacts Owen acquired from tribal members over several decades of contact with them.

Few, however, recall that Owen also wrote works of drama and fiction that were, in many ways, informed by her decades of contact with American Indian people. In fact, before embarking on a career as a folklorist, Owen published several short stories and poems in popular magazines. In 1896 she published a novel *The Daughters of Alouette* that tells the story of a young woman of French and American Indian ancestry living in the ethnically mixed settlement of St. Joseph, Missouri in the mid nineteenth century. One of Owen's last known published works was a play, *The Sacred Council Hills*, which she printed herself in 1909. *The Sacred Council Hills* tells the story of the love that blossoms

¹ The people Mary Alicia Owen referred to as the Musquakie (today commonly spelled Meskwaki) a century ago are now most often referred to as the Sac and Fox.

between a young Sac and Fox couple during the tribe's forced removal from the state of Missouri in 1837.

While a handful of authors have considered Owen's career and legacy since her death, these examinations have focused entirely on her long career as a folklorist. Not surprisingly, these works portray her as a feminist pioneer who excelled in the predominantly male world of academic folklorists. Jean Fahey Eberle examined the path-breaking careers of the "Owen Girls," Mary and her sisters Juliette, an ornithologist, and Luella, a geologist. Similarly, articles by William McNeil and Mary Elizabeth Allcorn defend Owen's achievements in a world that was dominated by men, and strive to define her place as an important contributor in the field of folklore.²

Only Alison K. Brown and Neil Schmitz have seriously examined Owen's role as a non-native interpreter of American Indian culture. Brown has focused specifically on Owen's collection of Sac and Fox artifacts and her motivations for saving the cultural remnants of a people she, like most people of her time, believed were doomed as a "vanishing race." Schmitz, whose portrait of Owen appears as part of a larger investigation into popular images of Sac and Fox culture, examined Owen's relationship with tribal members and explored ways in which that relationship affected her interpretation of Sac and Fox culture.³

² Jean Fahey Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls* (St. Louis: Boar's Head Press, 1977); William K. McNeil "Mary Alicia Owen, Collection of Afro-American and Indian Lore in Missouri," *Missouri Folklore Society Journal* 2 (1980): 1-14; Mary Elizabeth Allcorn, "Mary Alicia Owen: Missouri Folklorist," *Missouri Folklore Society Journal* 8-9 (1986-1987): 71-78.

³ Alison K. Brown, "Beads, Belts, and Bands: The Mesquakie Collection of Mary Alicia Owen," *Missouri Folklore Society Journal* 18-19 (1996-1997): 25-44; Alison K. Brown, "Collecting Material Folklore: Motivations and Methods in the Owen and Hasluck Collections," *Folklore* 109 (1998): 33-40; Neil



Figure 1: Mary Alicia Owen.
State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.

Schmitz, *White Robe's Dilemma: Tribal History in American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001).

Despite the fact that the bibliography of Owen's known published and unpublished manuscripts reveals that works of fiction constitute a significant portion of her output, none of the authors who have written about her work have considered the value of her literary efforts. Owen's novels and her play have receive scarcely more than a mention in existing investigations of her career and only one of her many short stories, "The Taming of Tarias," which appeared in 1889, has even been identified by title. This is an important oversight in the efforts of folklorists, literary critics, and historians to fully understand Owen's life work.

In these pages, I will endeavor to remedy this oversight by broadening the scope of study of Mary Alicia Owen's writings, especially those related to American Indians. It is my contention that these works of fiction offer us valuable insights into her work as a folklorist and ethnographer. An examination of *The Daughters of Alouette*, *The Sacred Council Hills*, and a handful of her short stories reveals that Owen understood that the St. Joseph of the 1840s and 1850s was an ethnic melting pot where American Indians, African Americans, French Creoles, and European-Americans from the eastern United States came together to work, trade, socialize, and intermarry. In much the same way that Richard White's concept of the "middle ground" explains a period of American history in which native and non-native people shared a remarkable level of cultural reciprocity, Owen's fiction shows us a dynamic world in which ethnic groups evolve through cultural exchange.⁴

⁴ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Yet Owen's fiction also reveals that her view of native people and their place in American society was quite rigid. We will see that while Owen was a serious student of Sac and Fox culture, was personally close to several Sac and Fox people, and even claimed to be an adopted member of the tribe, her portrayals of native people followed many of the same stereotypical conventions that characterized most European-American writing about Indians at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵ I will also show that many of the views of native people Owen expressed in her fiction correspond with those she posited in the *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America*.

In both her fiction and non-fiction academic writing about American Indians, Owen repeatedly employed two specific stereotypes, the "Noble Savage" and the "Vanishing Indian." As defined by historian Robert F. Berkhofer and anthropologist Ter Ellingson, the stereotypical Noble Savage is at home in the wilderness and uncorrupted by the burdens of the civilized industrial world. In literature, the Noble Savage often appeared as a character who was silent, strong and untamed while remaining pure in thought and in deed.⁶ Closely linked to the Noble Savage was the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian. Klaus Lubbers and Roy Harvey Pearce, among others, have noted that as the population of the United States expanded westward, American Indians became

⁵ Mary Alicia Owen claimed to have become an adopted member of the Sac and Fox in 1892, see McNeil, "Mary Alicia Owen," 2; Elijah J. Jacobs and Forrest E. Wolverton, *Missouri Writers: A Literary History of Missouri, 1780-1955* (St. Louis: State Publishing Company, 1955); 299; "Mary Alicia Owen, Noted Folklorist, Died This Morning," undated newspaper clipping, Rebecca and Adolph Schroeder Papers, Collection WUNP 5643, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection – Columbia.

⁶ Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

increasingly associated with the past. Many in the U.S. believed that the new nation held no place for the continent's indigenous people.⁷

I will argue that these stereotypes were widely held in the United States during Owen's lifetime because they proved to be useful tools for justifying the dominant European-American society. These stereotypes allowed Owen, and other folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists of her generation, to portray native people as marginalized figures who, on the one hand, did not fit into the mainstream American society of the late nineteenth century, and on the other hand, were unable to maintain their own cultural traditions. As such, the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian supported the American perception that native culture was disappearing forever. This perception allowed Owen to feel justified in imposing her own values on the Sac and Fox in order to preserve what she believed remained of their culture.

Owen's writings about American Indians reflect her belief in what Simon J. Bronner has called the "usable hidden past."⁸ Bronner has pointed out that the usable hidden past was based on popular nineteenth century ideals of social evolution. This theory held that cultures evolved as they accumulated knowledge and that their advancement could be plotted on a scale that began at the low state of "savagery," continued through the intermediate stage of "barbarism," and ended with the ultimate state of civilization. Bronner argues that European-Americans of Owen's generation

⁷ Klaus Lubbers, *Born for the Shade: Stereotypes of the Native American in United States Literature and the Visual Arts, 1776-1894* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994): 32; Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967): 4.

⁸ Simon J. Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986): 1-3.

relied on this construct, not in order to better understand native people, but instead to try to make sense of their own role in a rapidly changing industrial world. The scale of social evolution provided white Victorian elites with a way to compare themselves to other civilizations and allowed them to take pride in the assumed superiority of their own achievements.

The usable hidden past was especially well suited to the deep ambivalence Owen expressed over her own identity. As an affluent woman with Southern roots living in a western Missouri boomtown, Owen possessed an elitist sense of her own place in post-bellum society. However, her lifelong encounters and friendships with American Indian people also endowed her with an admiration of native culture and the profound belief that it embodied something that was pristine and authentic. The mixture of disdain and appreciation that Owen expresses for native people in the pages of *The Daughters of Alouette*, *The Sacred Council Hill*, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America* and in her short stories is an expression of this dichotomy that pervaded not only Owen's sensibilities but those of the culture in which she lived.

In order to investigate the sources of Owen's cultural ambivalence and her use of stereotypes, it is necessary to draw information from a wide variety of sources and disciplines. Chapter Two, "The Queen City of the West," examines Owen's early life in her hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri. Though the Owen family's roots reached back to Kentucky and Virginia, Mary Alicia Owen was very much a product of this western Missouri town. St. Joseph was established just four years before her birth, and both she

and the dusty trading post matured quickly amid the optimism of the boom and bust economy that characterized many western states in the 1850s. The city of St. Joseph is worth noting because its unique geographical and political history created a settlement with a highly diverse ethnic population in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In those decades, it was possible to find significant populations of African Americans, American Indians, French Creoles, and European-Americans living within a single day's horse ride of the community. To some extent, these groups came together to live, work, and trade in St. Joseph, the region's economic center. The resulting ethnically-mixed atmosphere presented Owen with the opportunity to form close associations with members of the African American and American Indian communities who worked in the Owen household first as slaves and, after emancipation, as domestic servants, and to learn first-hand their culture, legends, and folklore.

The optimism that fueled St. Joseph's early growth was interrupted, however, by nearly two decades of violence. I will examine the tragedy of the border violence, the bloody Civil War that followed, and the vigilante brutality that persisted in the region into the 1870s. This ongoing violence had a strong impact on Mary Alicia Owen's economic and personal development. Like many Southern families in St. Joseph, the Owen family suffered hardship, intimidation, and personal loss in the violence of the war years. As a result, the family became very close-knit and grew deeply suspicious of outsiders. During the war and long after, their lives centered on their home, where the girls learned to live independently and to be wary of those who did not match them in class or status.

The violence of the Border War and Civil War is relevant to a study of Owen's work because it was rooted in issues of personal identity and political loyalty that forced every citizen of the region to choose sides in the deadly conflict. Between 1857 and 1875, citizens in Missouri were jailed, robbed, and killed for no other reason than the side of the conflict to which they expressed their allegiance. Even those who refused to choose sides in the war were not immune from violence. Often their loyalty was judged solely by implication, rumor, and association. Missourians learned that violence could come from both the abolitionist Jayhawkers who crossed the border from Kansas or from pro-Southern bushwhackers who hid in the hills of Missouri. Random violence could also come at the hands of the Union soldiers who controlled the state through martial law during the war years. By its very nature, this violence endowed the citizens of St. Joseph, like those in other towns throughout Missouri and Kansas, with a heightened sense of their place in society. While the tragic events of the war years forced Owen to define her social identity, it also taught her that social order is precarious and should be vigilantly guarded.

Chapter Three, "A Literary Life," is an examination of Mary Alicia Owen's early career as a writer of popular romance fiction. After one unhappy year at Vassar College, Owen returned to St. Joseph determined to embark on a career. She chose writing in part because it was a career path that was acceptable to both Owen and her parents. It allowed her to engage her talents and intellect while she remained within the safe circle of her home and family.

Historians and folklorists who have previously written about Owen's life and career have failed to examine Owen's early stories and to consider what they tell us about Owen's view of identity and social order in post Civil War Missouri. Because Owen's early fiction has never been examined, I include a discussion about five works—one poem and four stories—that Owen published in various magazines between 1870 and 1889. These works show that she looked to her immediate surroundings for inspiration. Writing primarily for an audience of women, Owen created romantic tales that were set in St. Joseph or in western Missouri. All five works focus on the compromises women must make for marriage. Owen's female characters give up their families, career aspirations, dreams of an exhilarating life, and even aspects of their own free spirit to marry men whom they may or may not love. Much of the tension that makes Owen's stories intriguing comes from her use of cultural, regional, and economic identity in her character portrayals. Owen's fictional lovelorn couples invariably come from different places in the economic or cultural strata and struggle as they try to overcome these differences in the name of love.

Owen's stories are notable in that they portray the vibrancy of the multiethnic and economically stratified population that lived in St. Joseph, Missouri in the mid nineteenth century. Her stories are richly populated by the French trappers, Kentucky settlers, rugged frontier backwoodsmen, and affluent small town businessmen who lived in the region during her youth. In the late 1880s Owen began to include African Americans and American Indians in her mix of fictional characters. The story, "The Taming of Tarias," (1889) marks a watershed in this regard. In that story, she shows herself to be a keen

observer of the African American and American Indian people who lived on the fringe of European-American society. While Owen often portrays her fictional American Indian characters as Noble Savages or Vanishing Indians, many of them are of mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These multiethnic Indians appear to be part of an evolving culture that seems to be at odds with the culturally static Indians she writes about in her academic work.

In Chapter Four, “The People of the Red Earth, The People of the Yellow Earth,” I will focus on the Sac and Fox and Owen’s many years of interaction with them. Over a period of at least two decades Owen visited Sac and Fox settlements in Kansas, Iowa, and Oklahoma. Because of Black Hawk’s famous resistance against the United States government’s attempt to remove the Sac and Fox from present-day Wisconsin in the early 1830s, the tribe had become a powerful symbol of indigenous defiance. Black Hawk and his pro-American rival, Keokuk, became the celebrity subjects of works of art, history, and fiction. The tribe’s place in popular culture led other academics to visit the Sac and Fox villages, and it is worth comparing Owen’s observations with those of her contemporaries William Jones and Duren Ward, who studied the tribe in Iowa during the first decade of the twentieth century.

In this chapter, I examine the nature of Owen’s encounters with tribal members. Even though she was yet not a professional folklorist when she first visited the tribe, Owen established herself in the role of artifact collector and information gatherer early in her relationship with them. The fact that she approached the tribe in the role of what Renato Rosaldo has called the “Lone Ethnographer,” along with her gender, race, and

class, defined Owen's interactions with tribal members and created boundaries on her access to the cultural information she sought. Neil Schmitz has suggested that the Sac and Fox often frustrated her attempts to gather sensitive cultural information from them. The nature of these interactions is critical in forming an understanding of Owen's work because they profoundly affected the way in which she viewed the Sac and Fox, shaped her knowledge of their cultural institutions and practices, and tempered her ability to accurately understand and authentically portray their culture.⁹

Chapter Five, "A New Career," is devoted to an investigation of the disciplines of folklore, ethnology, and anthropology and their views about American Indians in the last years of the nineteenth century. Much like the frontier community in which Owen was raised, the late nineteenth century academic community was acutely aware of identity and differences between various cultural groups. Owen's interest in African American and American Indian oral literature led her to establish a fifteen-year correspondence with the American folklorist Charles Leland in 1888. Leland, in turn, is credited with introducing Owen to the academic discipline of folklore and its related fields of ethnology and anthropology. He invited her to England to present a paper at the First International Folklore Conference in 1891 and encouraged her to publish a collection of African American Voodoo tales.¹⁰

At the time Owen encountered the discipline, folklore seemed to be gaining academic credibility. Long the domain of educated amateurs, folklorists were

⁹ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993): 30; Schmitz, *White Robe's Dilemma*, 68.

¹⁰ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 42; Alcorn, "Mary Alicia Owen: Missouri Folklorist," 72.

successfully establishing peer-reviewed outlets for scholarship, securing teaching positions in universities, and admitting a significant number of women to their ranks. While these developments promised to bring great change to the field, most folklorists in both America and England were still heavily influenced by the social evolutionist theories that men like Britain's Herbert Spencer and the America ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan had refined in the 1860s and 1870s. These men, and their contemporaries Edward B. Tylor, who taught anthropology at Oxford, and John Wesley Powell, the first director of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology, believed that American Indians deserved special scholarly attention because they were representatives of an earlier, less developed state of civilized man. By studying Indians, folklorists of the period believed they could look back in time to find a version of their own primitive cultural ancestors.¹¹

The anthropologist Ter Ellingson has argued that the late nineteenth century academic community's acceptance of the theory of social evolution lent credence to stereotypes such as the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian.¹² They provided the scientific community with labels that not only proved useful in the pursuit of scientific observation and the rational categorization of nature but helped justify the domination of certain ethnic groups.

¹¹ Robert L. Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003): 21; Curtis M. Hinsley, Jr., *Savages and Scientists: The Smithsonian Institution and the Development of American Anthropology, 1846-1910* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981): 125; Stephen K. Sanderson, *Social Evolutionism: A Critical History* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990): 10-16.

¹² Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 127.

In Chapter Six, “Indians as Stereotypes,” I examine the cultural origins and symbolic potency of the stereotypes of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian. These complex cultural myths were part of the cultural and academic context from which Mary Alicia Owen sought to understand and portray American Indians. Much has been written in the last several decades about the European-American stereotypes that have dominated the popular and academic portrayal of American Indian culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early writers on the topic, Roderick Nash and Roy Harvey Pearce, believed the racial stereotypes found in American art and literature of the period were the result of the European-American fixation with the American frontier wilderness. Many European-Americans, they argued, viewed Indians not as people but as an untamed, violent, and mysterious element in that wilderness.¹³ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. recognized that many portraits of indigenous people created by European-Americans revealed far more about the biases of the portrayers than they do about the lives of the portrayed. More recently Phil Deloria has theorized that Americans have misappropriated elements of native culture in an attempt to create a unique essence of American identity. Ter Ellingson sees a darker side to the use of these stereotypes and contends that the origins of the Noble Savage were self-consciously racist. As an anthropologist, Ellingson is specifically interested in the ways that the nineteenth century founders of the discipline in both Europe and the United States used the stereotype of the

¹³ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*.

Noble Savage to pursue a racist agenda to find “evidence of animality and atavism in ‘savages’ and lower classes alike.”¹⁴

Chapter Seven, “Owen’s Indian Writings,” presents an analysis of Mary Alicia Owen’s use of the Noble Savage and Vanishing Indian stereotypes in fictional and nonfictional writings about American Indians. *The Daughters of Alouette*, *The Sacred Council Hills*, and *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America* vary significantly in style and in scope of intent and present a wide array of American Indian protagonists. Nonetheless, there are consistencies among Owen’s Indian subjects that point to the fact that, despite her long affiliation with the Sac and Fox people, she viewed them through the lens of her own cultural context and beliefs. In these works, Owen portrayed Indian people as being both out of step with contemporary European-American society and disassociated from their own cultural traditions. To varying degrees, Owen used each of these works to document ceremonies, customs, and folkways of people that she believed were vanishing.

Owen’s vision of American Indian people was interwoven with her view of her own identity and of her perception of the social order in which she lived. That her writing on American Indians supported the concept of social evolution is not surprising. Owen was very conscious of the position her family held in St. Joseph society. Her father and her mother had not only been among the city’s earliest white inhabitants, they were among St. Joseph’s most economically affluent citizens. After witnessing the ways

¹⁴ Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*; Philip J. Deloria. *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 127.

in which the social upheaval of the Civil War had jeopardized the family's status, Owen learned to carefully uphold her social position. By viewing American Indians as social outsiders, Owen was casting a favorable light on the elite European-American society in which she lived. In doing so she was justifying her position in the social order.

Furthermore, by portraying Indians as Noble Savages or Vanishing Indians, Owen was justifying her social interactions with them. Because Owen believed native people could not function in civilized society and were in danger of disappearing, Owen believed she possessed both a position of cultural authority and an affinity with native people that uniquely qualified her to document and preserve native culture and to present it to European-American society.

In my conclusion, I consider that in her fiction, Owen often portrayed American Indian people as a part of the lively ethnic melting pot that characterized her hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri in the mid nineteenth century. Yet, despite the years of contact Owen had with members of this vibrant mixed community, she ultimately resorted to many of the same stereotypical conventions that many European-Americans of the Victorian era relied on to portray native people. Many of these same stereotypes can be seen her ethnographic work as well. This thesis examines Owen's relationship with the American Indian people she studied and her use of stereotypes—most prominently the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian—in characterizing them.

Chapter Two

THE QUEEN CITY OF THE WEST

Mary Alicia Owen was born in 1850 into the affluent upper class of European-American merchants, cattlemen, and businessmen who were in the process of turning the once-dusty village of St. Joseph, Missouri into one of the West's most promising boomtowns. Her father, James Alfred Owen, moved to St. Joseph from his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, in 1847. James Owen's own father, Nelson Reid Owen, had died poor and young, leaving his wife, Nancy Baber Owen, and children to struggle on their own. When James was sixteen his mother married a widower who apparently brought little more to the marriage than his own unruly children and a bad reputation. Soon after Nancy Owen's wedding, her second husband began selling her few belongings to cover his own debts and terrorizing his stepchildren.

At age seventeen, James Owen escaped the dismal atmosphere of his mother's household and arranged to study law with Louisville judge James I. Dozier. After completing his studies, the nearly destitute Owen left Kentucky to join his uncles John Owen and Ignatius Owen in Missouri in 1846. He taught school in Platte City, Missouri for a year and on May 19, 1847, he moved to St. Joseph. There James Owen studied law with Judge Solomon L. Leonard and was admitted into the Missouri Bar in 1848. Less

than a year after settling in St. Joseph Owen established a law practice and became engaged to Agnes Jeanette Cargill, the daughter of a wealthy St. Joseph mill owner.¹⁵

Agnes Cargill's childhood appears to have been markedly different from that of her husband. Her father, James Cargill, had been a successful businessman in Pennsylvania and in Wheeling, Virginia, where he made money outfitting emigrants who were moving west to Kentucky and Tennessee. He moved to the future site of St. Joseph with his wife, Agnes Gilmore Crookes Cargill, two sons, and two daughters in 1843. By the time James Owen married his daughter in 1848, Cargill was the owner of the successful Eagle Mill and lived with his family on a showcase farm just east of St. Joseph called Burr Oak. Family lore recounted by Jean Fahey Eberle recalls that, like her father, Agnes Cargill was apparently strong willed and well educated. She had studied under a teacher with a keen interest in woman's suffrage as a girl and, like many young unmarried women of her time, had also briefly taught school before meeting her future husband. While Eberle does not reveal the nature of the attraction between Agnes Cargill and the young lawyer from Kentucky, she does assert that James Cargill was wary of his new son-in-law's impoverished childhood and meager resources.¹⁶ Though he was self-conscious about his beginnings, James Owen was said to have possessed a pride and spirit that was equal to that of any member of the Cargill family. After his marriage, he prospered as a lawyer and investor in real estate and succeeded in amassing a fortune of

¹⁵ Sheridan A. Logan, *Old Saint Jo: Gateway to the West, 1799-1932* (St. Joseph, Missouri [?]: John Sublett Logan Foundation, 1979): 367.

¹⁶ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 3, 13-15.

his own during the economic boom that led St. Joseph to grow quickly during the second half of the 1840s.

St. Joseph's rapid rise was remarkable given that, just a few years before James Owen's arrival, it had consisted of little more than a trading post run by Joseph Robidoux. Originally from St. Louis, Robidoux had been engaged in the fur trade since the beginning of the nineteenth century and opened a post in the Blacksnake Hills for the American Fur Company in the 1826. The success of the post, which catered to the many American Indian tribes that lived and traded along the lower Missouri River Valley, eventually allowed Robidoux to break his bond with the American Fur Company and become an independent trader. Robidoux's success came in no small part from his post's location at a crossroads of frontier commerce and cultures.

For more than a century the fur trade along the Missouri River had brought together traders, many of whom were French Creoles like Robidoux, with people from a variety of American Indian nations. In the years before St. Joseph was founded, the Blacksnake Hills and the surrounding countryside were home to members of the Ioway, Potawatomi, and Sac and Fox nations. Members of other tribes, such as the Omaha, Pawnee, Kansas, and Otoe-Missouria, traveled from further away to conduct business with Robidoux and his associates. Over the years, it was not uncommon for French traders to marry into Indian families. These marriages often were more than personal relationships as traders and native leaders found that the institution offered them advantageous business partnerships. The bond of family helped ensure that both sides received favorable treatment from business partners they knew and trusted. Joseph

Robidoux himself fathered several children with American Indian women and his mixed blood daughter Mary became the wife of the Ioway headman Francis White Cloud and the mother of longtime Ioway leader James White Cloud.¹⁷

A treaty signed between the U. S. Government and the Ioway and the Sac and Fox nations in 1836 allowed the state of Missouri to annex the land that makes up the present day counties of Platte, Andrew, Buchanan, Holt, Atchison, and Nodaway. The government removed the Indians to land west of the Missouri River in present day Kansas. After the removal, Robidoux platted town lots near his trading post and began to sell them in 1843. Yet even after white settlers began to move into the region, the village grew slowly until the mid 1840s. It was then that settlers navigating the Oregon Trail to the west coast discovered that they could cut 100 miles from their journey by fording the Missouri River at St. Joseph rather than at Independence, Missouri. The discovery brought thousands of travelers and an infusion of money to the sleepy river town.

This boom helped St. Joseph jump from a population of 200 in 1843 to nearly 3,500 in 1850. The community sustained another jump in population after a mill foreman named James Marshall discovered traces of gold in a stream near John Sutter's mill in California's central valley in January 1848. Just over a year later, more than 2,500 wagons crossed the Missouri River from the St. Joseph area in a ten-week period with an estimated total of 50,000 people passing through the city during all of 1849.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tanis Thorne, *The Many Hands of My Relations: French and Indians on the Lower Missouri River* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996); Roy E. Coy and Mrs. Walter Hall, "The Genealogy of the White Cloud Family," *Museum Graphic* 9 (Spring 1952): 8.

¹⁸ Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 26.

To secure the town's future growth, a group of boosters which included state senator Robert Stewart and Joseph Robidoux, led a campaign to make St. Joseph the western terminus of a proposed 200-mile trans-Missouri railroad. With Stewart's help, the Missouri general assembly chartered the Hannibal and St. Joseph Rail Road in February 1847. Though it would be twelve years before the railroad connected the city to commercial hubs like Chicago and St. Louis, enthusiasm for the project led one booster to optimistically proclaim in 1850 that it "requires no uncommon degree of sagacity to foresee the influence [St. Joseph] is one day destined to wield . . . in the future chronicles of the west."¹⁹

During its early history, St. Joseph was located at the center of a region with a highly diverse ethnic population. As European-American settlers flooded into the Platte region, they joined the French Creole and American Indian people who had lived there before the city was founded. Even after the Indians were removed from the Platte region in 1837, many continued to visit St. Joseph to trade. The Swiss-born artist Rudolph Friedrich Kurtz wrote in his journal about seeing Ioway men in the city in the late 1840s. "Even during the first month of my stay in St. Joseph I had chances every day to study Indians that came in bands from different neighboring tribes. . . . They came to St. Joseph to make their purchases, because they could supply their needs there at more reasonable rates than with the traders."²⁰

¹⁹ Colonel M. F. Tiernan, 6 May 1850, quoted in Robert J. Willoughby, *Robidoux's Town: A Nineteenth-Century History of St. Joseph, Missouri* (Westphalia, Missouri: Westphalia Printing, 1997): 1, 31-38, 55-67; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 7.

²⁰ Rudolph Friedrich Kurtz quoted in Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 39.

The region was also home to a sizable African American population. Like many counties along the Missouri River, Buchanan County, in which the city of St. Joseph is located, had been largely settled by people who, like the Owens and Cargills, had Southern roots. Many of these settlers brought the agricultural tradition of tobacco farming with them. Slaves were an important part of the tobacco economy and it is estimated that on the eve of the Civil War there were 2,000 slaves living in Buchanan County. Of those, some 600 lived in St. Joseph and accounted for nearly seven percent of the city's population. Most of these slaves who lived inside the city limits, like those in the Owen household, worked as domestics.²¹

Amid the economic growth of the following decade, the Owen and Cargill families prospered and grew. James and Agnes Owen began a family, which by 1860 would include four daughters, Mary Alicia, Luella, Florence, and Juliette, and one son, Herbert. Much of what we know about Mary Alicia Owen's early childhood comes from a biography of the Owen sisters written in the 1970s by Jean Fahey Eberle. Eberle's biography is not footnoted, nor does it include a bibliography. Eberle states that much of her information about this period in Mary Alicia Owen's life came from interviews with Owen family descendants who are no longer living. A large portion of that information is based on family oral history and is therefore not verifiable.²²

²¹ *Buchanan County and St. Joseph* (St. Joseph, Missouri: The St. Joseph Publishing Company, c. 1900): 202; Willoughby, *Robidoux's Town*, 84.

²² While Eberle hints that notes from her interviews with Owen family descendants exist, the whereabouts of these notes is unclear. Jean Fahey Eberle, phone interview with the author, 15 April 2008.

In the biography, Eberle paints a portrait of the Owen family that centers on what initially seems to have been a close knit and happy home life. Despite the business concerns that occupied much of James Owen's time, he and his wife worked tirelessly to make a secure, happy and comfortable life for their children. Family oral history recorded by Eberle recalls that occasionally the realities of the business world intruded on the tranquility of the Owen home. In the later 1840s, for example, James Owen entered into an ill-fated business partnership with his father-in-law to operate a mill. The two strong-willed men rarely saw eye-to-eye and the relationship ended badly when James Cargill charged that Owen had tried to hit him with a club during an argument in 1852. The two men reportedly never spoke again and relations between the two families remained permanently strained.²³ Nonetheless, the Owen children enjoyed a privileged childhood in the company of their family and several African American slaves who worked as domestics in their household.

The security of the Owens's family life and the robust growth of the "Queen City" of western Missouri were thrown into upheaval by the uncertainty of the nearly two decades of violence surrounding the Civil War. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act created the new territory of Kansas directly across the river from St. Joseph. The act allowed the residents of Kansas to decide the question of whether they would adopt a pro-slavery or anti-slavery constitution by popular vote. The territory immediately became a violent battleground upon which the debate over the future of slavery in the

²³ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 14.

United States was fought. Afraid that Kansas would be overrun by abolitionists, pro-slavery Missourians monitored their western border, questioning incoming settlers on where they stood on the slave issue and terrorizing those who stated their allegiance to the free-state cause. When a Kansas vote to elect members of the territorial legislature took place in March 1855, so many Missouri “border ruffians” crossed into the territory to cast ballots and to intimidate free-state supporters from voting that the election went in favor of the pro-slavery bloc. This blatant display of election fraud infuriated abolitionists such as John Brown, whose radical efforts to make Kansas a free territory led him and a small group of followers to murder five men along Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas in 1856. The bloodshed and violence that consumed the Missouri-Kansas border in those years earned the new territory the name “bleeding Kansas.”²⁴

While the border war of the 1850s brought the threat of violence to the region around St. Joseph, the outbreak of Civil War in 1861 introduced intimidation, brutality, and terror to the city’s streets. Given the large number of slaves living in St. Joseph, it is no surprise then that many residents of the city held strong pro-Southern leanings at the outbreak of the war. These sentiments occasionally led to public displays against the Union like one that occurred on the roof of the St. Joseph post office in May 1861. Postmaster John L. Bittinger, appointed by the Republican administration of newly elected President Abraham Lincoln, refused to heed requests from Southern sympathizers to remove the United States flag from its place on top of the building. Finally, a group of

²⁴ Jeremy Neely, *The Border Between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

men led by the city's former mayor M. Jeff Thompson climbed to the top of the post office, ripped the flag to pieces, and replaced it with a Confederate flag as a crowd of supporters watched from the street.²⁵

Though most Missourians preferred that the state remain in the Union, the state's pro-Southern Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson advocated secession. After attempts to reach a compromise with leaders of the federal government failed, Jackson abandoned the State Capital in Jefferson City with members of the State Guard in mid June 1861. In Jackson's absence, the federal government immediately established a pro-Union provisional government in the capital and pursued the governor and the forces under his command. Some of the very first battles of the American Civil War took place in the Missouri towns of Boonville, Carthage, and Springfield as federal armed forces, under the leadership of General Nathaniel Lyon, who died in the Battle of Wilson's Creek just south of Springfield, succeeded in pushing Jackson and his troops into Arkansas.

While Confederate regular troops were largely absent from the state by early 1862, armed guerrilla units, often known as Bushwhackers, roamed the state terrorizing, robbing, and killing Union sympathizers for the remainder of the war. In answer to this assault, Pro-Union bands of Jayhawkers crossed the Missouri border from Kansas to exact revenge on citizens they suspected of being Southern sympathizers. Jesse Stovall, a twenty-year-old man from Carroll County, Missouri joined a band of Jayhawkers in 1862. In a confession given to the Provost Marshal's office in Chillicothe in December 1863, Stovall recounted how what had started out to be a campaign against slavery and

²⁵ *Buchanan County and St. Joseph*, 203; Willoughby, *Robidoux's Town*, 98

slaveholders soon turned into a rampage of random violence. “When I joined the Red Legs in Kansas, Captain Hoyt was the man who swore me and instructed me into the society,” Stovall stated. “The general understanding among that band was to take all that rebels had from them, but the general practice was to take whatever suited them from any body living in Missouri.” In his confession, Stovall admitted to participating in at least one hanging and to burning homes and other buildings, and to stealing money, household goods and livestock.²⁶

In an effort to control this rampant violence, federal troops tightened their grip on the state by invoking a state of martial law in the fall of 1861. The Union Provost Marshal’s office carefully restricted the movements of citizens by requiring anyone who desired to travel around the state to carry a proper military pass. Only citizens who took an oath of loyalty to the federal government were eligible to receive such passes.

Under martial law, Union officials also attempted to tax Southern sympathizers, often referred to as “disloyal” citizens, for damages and death caused by rebel troops or guerrilla units. Enacted by General John Schofield, Commanding Officer of the Union Army’s Division of Missouri, “General Order No. 3” created a system whereby disloyal citizens were forced to compensate loyal citizens for damages that Confederates caused in their county. If the citizens refused to pay the charges levied against them by Union officials, their property was seized and sold. The order stipulated that disloyal citizens would be charged \$2,000 for each Union soldier or citizen killed by Confederate troops

²⁶ Willoughby, *Robidoux’s Town*, 99; Confession of Jessie C. Stovall, Jr., Livingston County, Missouri, December 1863, *Union Provost Marshals’ File of Papers Relating to Individual Citizens, 1861-1866*, National Archives Microfilm, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109.

or bushwhackers in their county. Each wounded Union soldier or citizen was to be compensated \$5,000 while the owners of materials that were destroyed or stolen in Confederate raids were to be paid the full replacement value of their losses. Though the order proved difficult to implement and ultimately failed, it showed the extent to which Union officials were willing to go to force disloyal citizens to pay for the destruction of the war.²⁷

Mary Alicia Owen's father James Owen noted in a diary that he kept during the Civil War that the Union troops that were sent to protect Missouri citizens from bushwhackers and Jayhawkers sometimes allowed their military zeal to turn into vigilante violence. Occasionally, this violence was just as destructive as that which they were charged with preventing. In 1862, Owen wrote, "[Colonel William R.] Penick's [Union Cavalry] Regiment was disbanded early in the year on account of the thieving propensities of his men. They then scattered through the counties of Andrew, Holt, and Nodaway and began to murder and burn. About thirty of the best citizens of Andrew County were murdered and as many houses burned in a few days. Robbery was universal. Stealing of horses and mules was common."²⁸

In the same entry, Owen decried the Union's failure to keep Kansas Jayhawkers from preying upon the citizens of Missouri.

Kansas was always nourished by the Republican party, and when our unhappy county fell under this control, it became the especial object of

²⁷ "Guerrillas in Missouri; An Important Order By General Schofield," *The New York Times*, 29 June 1862.

²⁸ Excerpt from James Owen's diary quoted in Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 368; The Missouri State Archives Soldiers' Records Database shows that William R. Penick's 5th Regiment Cavalry, Missouri State Volunteers were based in St. Joseph in 1862 (Internet, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/soldiers/0>).

the rulers of the nation to foster, organize and encourage an assemblage of law defying people. The War began by disarming the people of Missouri and then turning loose upon her the armed thieves and ruffians of a dozen states, but especially of Kansas, who plundered her of Eight Million Dollars worth of slaves, of horses, cattle and everything moveable, and by murdering her citizens, burning their homes, imprisoning thousands, and driving tens of thousands into exile. Hundreds of persons in Kansas became rich by plundering the helpless people of Missouri.²⁹

During this reign of terror, there was no such thing as neutrality for the people of Missouri. Aware that they could be arrested, jailed, or singled out for violence based solely on their allegiances—regardless of whether these allegiances were real or perceived—ordinary people were forced to choose one side or the other in the conflict. In this atmosphere of distrust, citizens learned to be suspicious of all but their closest friends and allies. With their Southern background the slave-holding Owen and Cargill families were among those known to ardently support the Confederate cause. Though none of the men in either family served in the military, they too were pushed into the violence of the Civil War.

Records indicate that several members of the Cargill and Owen families were caught in the blockade set up by the Provost Marshal's office. Mary Alicia Owen's uncle William Cargill was arrested while trying to move members of his family to Kentucky. He was imprisoned and held until he agreed to take an oath of loyalty. Two other uncles, John and George Cargill, were suspected of helping a local Confederate Captain named Reuben Kay escape St. Joseph for the safety of the South. Because the Cargills' were implicated in the incident, Union sympathizers burned the family business, Eagle Mill.

²⁹ Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 369.

John Cargill was jailed and the family's farm, Burr Oak, was looted of furniture and livestock. George Cargill fled St. Joseph to avoid an angry mob that wanted to hang him. Mary Alicia Owen's grandmother, Agnes Cargill, was given a military pass and allowed to move to Virginia.³⁰

James Owen wrote in his diary at the end of 1861 that he believed he too was in danger of receiving the "future favors from the Military authorities who at this time control" St. Joseph. In fact, federal officials did come to the Owen house to arrest him. When they discovered that he was not home, the officers persuaded Mary Alicia, who was twelve or thirteen years old at the time, to lead them to a church where he was found and apprehended.³¹ Though Owen was only detained for a short time, officials demanded that he too take the loyalty oath.

Even though James Owen took the oath, questions surrounding the sincerity of his loyalty shadowed him after the war. Post-bellum Missouri proved to be an unfriendly place for Southern loyalists. At the war's end, Missouri citizens elected delegates to a new constitutional convention. While the convention was ostensibly called to formalize the abolition of slavery, the convention's vice president, a St. Louis lawyer and "Radical Republican" named Charles Drake, persuaded the delegates that the 1820 constitution should be rewritten in order to help Missouri move forward from its slave-holding past. The so-called Drake Constitution, which was adopted April 8, 1865, famously included a

³⁰ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 18-19; Bond, Oath, and Parole for William S. Cargill, 17 November 1862; Letter from Albert Clark, 26 March 1864; Letter from John C. Cargill, 2 April 1864, Buchanan County, Missouri, *Union Provost Marshals' File*; Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 210.

³¹ Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 369-370; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 17-20.

provision called the “iron clad oath.” In order for Missouri men to cast ballots in elections, the constitution stipulated that they had to sign an oath swearing that not only had they had not actively helped to advance the Southern cause during the war but also had never supported the cause or even spoken in favor of it. This provision prevented large numbers of men from voting because of their alleged disloyalty to the union during the war years.³²

For a time, the oath perpetuated the power of the pro-Union Radical Republicans in Missouri politics and business while Southern Democrats like James Owen were prevented from voting and outcast from public life. Historian Sheridan Logan has noted that at the war’s end Owen “retired” from business and turned his attention “to the management of his private affairs.” Given the extent of the disenfranchisement of Southern loyalists in those years, one wonders whether James Owen was forced out of business because of his political leanings.

Jean Fahey Eberle maintains that the events of the Civil War left the Owen family with scars that they would carry for the rest of their lives. According to Eberle, members of the family came to feel that their community had betrayed them. The Owens survived those turbulent years by harboring a deep distrust of the outside world and by turning to each other for support and comfort inside their large home at the corner of Ninth and Jules Streets. Agnes Owen not only made sure that the children received a good

³² David D. March, “Charles D. Drake and the Constitutional Convention of 1865,” *The Civil War in Missouri: Essays From the Missouri Historical Review, 1906-2006* (Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 2006): 208-24.

education at home under her watchful eye, she also taught them not to trust in or rely upon others to help them through their lives.³³

While it is difficult to verify Eberle's assertion, it was not uncommon for Southern families to turn inward for support in the years during and immediately following the war. LeeAnn Whites has written about the changes in domestic life that were brought about by the Civil War, especially in Southern families. According to Whites, the violence of the war not only caused Southern sympathizers like James Owen to lose economic power and public prestige in their communities, it also caused them to lose dominance over their domestic lives. James Owen's imprisonment and the loss of his business meant that it was more difficult for him to provide for his family. Whites argues that prior to the war Southern woman had depended on the men in their families to "protect and defend" them by using their power outside the home to acquire wealth and status. With the defeat of the South and the disenchantment of Southern men, many like James Owen were forced to rely more heavily on women to manage their households and help protect the position of the family within the community. "If the war served to intensify Confederate women's commitment to their men's class interest," writes Whites, "their defeat set that commitment in concrete."³⁴

While this meant newfound influence for women within the home, this victory was tempered by the negative effect the war had on the power of Southern men.

Southern women provided critical emotional support for men by urging them "to take

³³ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 25.

³⁴ LeeAnn Whites, *Gender Matters: Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Making of the New South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 22.

solace in their own family circle, a family circle that should be more valued for that which had been lost.” As a result, the dynamics of Southern families became less stratified along gender lines, even as family members were drawn to the safety and comfort of domestic life inside the home.³⁵ Certainly, this was the case with the Owen family. Though James Owen seems to have retained much of his wealth, he lost his business near the end of the war and retreated to his home and his family.

As Southern families turned inward after the war, they become more suspicious of the rapidly changing outside world. Historian Robert H. Wiebe suggests that Civil War era perceptions of political and economic betrayal led to a level of uncertainty that left society “without a core.” This feeling of social insecurity was exacerbated by political reforms enacted by Radical Republicans and by rapid economic and population growth that came in the years following the war. In the 1870s and 1880s, cities like St. Joseph grew quickly as an influx of settlers from the eastern U.S. and immigrants from Europe moved west. These dramatic changes especially challenged economically privileged families who, like the Owens and Cargills, saw themselves as the very foundation of the communities in which they lived. Because they had been among the first to settle in St. Joseph and were members of the city’s social and economic elite, they felt that the shift in population further threatened their place in the community. Wiebe writes that prominent families considered America to be “in jeopardy from foes of extraordinary raw strength—huge devouring [economic] monopolies, swarms of sexually potent immigrants, and the like.” He continues, “Mixing contempt with fear, [established

³⁵ Whites, *Gender Matters*, 23.

citizens] pictured newcomers as dispirited breeders of poverty, crime, political corruption, and simultaneously as peculiarly powerful subversives.” In this light, the Owens’ alleged trepidation about the post-bellum America fit in with a broader attempt by Americans of their class and social position to preserve their status by maintaining their purity and unity.³⁶

As a child who came of age during the war, Mary Alicia Owen too seems to have sought solace in the comfort of her domestic surroundings. She is said to have been especially close to the slave women who worked in the family home. After emancipation these women, who had raised the Owen children and performed domestic chores for the family, apparently remained in the household as servants. According to Eberle, these domestic workers became the emotional center of the children’s lives. Eberle contends that while the strong-willed Agnes Owen pushed her daughters to become well educated, self-confident, and self-sufficient, the children often turned to the African American women in their household for affection. Mary Alicia, in particular, seemed to have been hungry for the company of these women, listening to the stories that were part of their oral culture.

Eberle places great weight on the theory that the entire Owen family was self-conscious about what was said to have been the uncommonly unattractive appearance of the eldest daughter. In fact, she quotes James Owen as proclaiming that he had “one daughter beautiful as an angle and one daughter ugly as sin but smart as the devil.”

³⁶ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995): 5, 12, 52, and 54.

Owen herself seemed to believe that she was unattractive. In 1931, when Dr. A. C. Burrill, the curator of the Missouri State Museum, asked the elderly Owen for a photograph, she refused, stating there was “no use perpetuating my kind of looks.” According to Eberle, young Mary Alicia not only found solace for her awkwardness in the company of the African American women she called her “aunties,” she found strength in their folktales, many of which portrayed powerful characters that were outwitted and defeated by those who were smaller and weaker.³⁷

While Eberle may have based at least some of her assumptions about the nature of Mary Alicia Owen’s relationship with these women on the oral histories of Owen family descendents, much of it may have come from writings Owen herself left behind. In her first book, *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, Owen created a protagonist that appears to be largely autobiographical. Tow Head is a precocious and stubborn young daughter from a well-to-do white family that their servants refer to as “the folks up at The House.” Owen tells us “Tow Head had neither dignity nor family pride. Her mother’s adherence to the precepts of Solomon she considered a joke.”³⁸ Throughout the book, the child takes every opportunity to escape the strict confines of “The House,” to keep company with Granny, a former slave of African American and Leni Lenape (Delaware) heritage, and her four elderly friends in Granny’s cabin. There, she finds comfort in the way the women cater to her demands for stories, treats, and hugs and in the manner in

³⁷ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 2-4.

³⁸ Mary Alicia Owen to Dr. A. C. Burrill, May 1931, photocopy of handwritten original, Rebecca and Adolph Schroeder Papers, Collection WUNP 5643, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection – Columbia; Mary Alicia Owen, *Old Rabbit, The Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers* (1893; reprint, North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1999): 10-11.

which they indulge her incessant questioning about details of their folkways and meanings of the tales they tell.

While Owen never explicitly stated that she based the character of young Tow Head on herself, *Old Rabbit* includes a passage in which Owen places the character in what appears to have been a factual incident. In this passage Tow Head, by then grown to adulthood, asks a conjurer to make a luck charm for a friend whom she identifies as her mentor and the book's editor Charles Godfrey Leland. Owen described in detail how the conjurer made the charm, which Leland confirms having received in a footnote to the text. While it is unwise to assume that every detail Owen provides about Tow Head is factual, this scene strongly suggests that Owen intended Tow Head largely to be an autobiographical alter ego. As such, it is likely that Owen's depiction of Tow Head's relationship with Granny and her friends is broadly autobiographical as well. It is more difficult, however, to determine to what extent Granny and her friends are based on real people.³⁹

Even as she grew into adulthood, Mary Alicia Owen remained close to the African American women who raised her. Through them she gained social access to other members of St. Joseph's African American community as she began visiting the women, their friends, and families in their own homes. As she grew more independent, Owen's natural curiosity about African American folkways drew her deeper into that community. While these visits did not escape the notice of the Owens' social peers, James and Agnes Owen are said to have permitted them, reasoning that "Mary was better

³⁹ Owen, *Old Rabbit*, 22, 169-179.

off in a Negro cabin than at parties and picnics” where, we assume, they worried that she might be consorting with whites who were beneath her social class and status.⁴⁰ While it seems odd that the Owens believed their daughter was safer with African Americans than with whites, Robert Wiebe has noted that, because their social distinctions from whites were so clearly demarcated, African Americans could have been seen as posing little or no social threat. Wiebe writes that a “diffuse society blurred hierarchies and placed inordinate importance on all visual distinctions.” Thus, African Americans, who were often visually distinctive, were considered somewhat safe because all levels of white society agreed upon their status as inferiors.⁴¹ Similarly, Eberle implies that Mary Alicia Owen’s parents permitted her contact with African American people because her relationship with them existed under a clearly defined set of boundaries and proprieties. On the other hand, Eberle notes that James and Agnes Owen worried that, should their daughter become involved with immigrants or members of the white underclass, these boundaries may not have been as clearly defined and therefore may have been more socially dangerous.

Through her connections in the African American community, Mary Alicia Owen also became acquainted with members of the region’s American Indian population. Years later, Owen stated that she made connections because many of the servants who worked for her family were related to native people by blood. Interactions between members of the two ethnic groups in the vicinity of St. Joseph have not been well

⁴⁰ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 25-26.

⁴¹ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 58.

documented, but evidence of genealogical connections in the southeastern United States between African Americans and tribes such as the Seminole, Cherokee, Muskogee, and Choctaw is plentiful. In the Antebellum South, some tribes, such as the Cherokee, allowed members to own African American slaves, while other tribes, such as the Seminole of Florida, provided safe harbor for fugitive slaves. As ethnic outsiders, the two groups often relied on each other for refuge and survival.⁴²

From the 1830s to the end of the Civil war, untold numbers of African Americans moved west of the state of Missouri to land in present-day Kansas and Oklahoma that had been set aside for Indians. Some had been forcibly removed to the region along with tribes from the southwestern U.S. on the infamous “Trail of Tears” in the late 1830s. Others crossed Missouri’s western border to escape the bonds of slavery. One historian who has written about St. Joseph, Robert J. Willoughby, has asserted that once they reached the western banks of the Missouri River, fugitive slaves found their safest refuge among the Indians who lived along what is now the Kansas-Nebraska border. Some used the reservations as a layover on their journey to the northern free state of Iowa while others apparently stayed long enough to intermarry with tribal members. There is evidence that the Ioway nation, which has occupied a reservation 40 miles northwest of St. Joseph near the town of White Cloud, Kansas since 1837, allowed African Americans

⁴² For more on African Americans and American Indians, see William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1986); Jason Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk: A Mystery of Africans and Indians* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Annie Heloise Abel, *The American Indian as Slaveholder and Secessionist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Rudi Halliburton, *Red Over Black: Black Slavery Among the Cherokee Indians* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); and Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977).

to live with them in the 1840s. At a council with the Ioway on April 14, 1846 Superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis Thomas Harvey expelled an unspecified number of African Americans from the Ioway reservation. “This is your country,” he told the Ioway leader Francis White Cloud, “you are Red Birds. Black Birds have no business among you. I will therefore send the black Birds away. You must now think how this country was reserved for Indians not Negroes. I can not permit them to associate with my red children.”⁴³

As we shall see, Owen knew the Ioway well and had some interaction with tribal members. Her primary contact, however, was with members of the Sac and Fox nation, some of whom lived adjacent to the Ioway on a reservation about 50 miles west of St. Joseph near the town of Reserve, Kansas. Owen became fascinated by Sac and Fox culture, reveled in the traditional stories tribal members told, and appreciated the intricately decorated cultural objects they produced. This fascination, which continued to develop throughout the 1870s and 1880s, helped lead Mary Alicia Owen into a new phase of her life.

⁴³ “A talk or council held with the chiefs and braves of the Iowa tribe of Indians by T. H Harvey in the chapel at the mission in the Great Nemaha sub agency on the 14th April 1846,” Great Nemaha Agency Files, National Archives Microfilm Publication M234, Roll 307, Letter Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-1881, Record Group 75; Willoughby, *Robidoux’s Town*, 86; Willard R. Johnson, “Tracing Trails of Blood on Ice: Commemorating ‘The Great Escape’ in 1861-62 of Indians and Blacks into Kansas,” *The Negro History Bulletin* 64 (2001).

Chapter Three
A LITERARY LIFE

In the fall of 1868 James and Agnes Owen sent their eldest daughter from the dusty streets of St. Joseph to pursue her higher education at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. The college, which had been chartered just seven year earlier under the guidance of Matthew Vassar, a wealthy brewer who lacked a formal education, sought to offer nineteenth century women the same education as their male peers. Unlike most female seminaries of the day, which primarily focused on preparing women for careers in teaching, Vassar provided young women with a broad liberal arts education that one of Owen's classmates likened to a "rose of sunlight breaking through the gray of women's intellectual life."⁴⁴

Given the Owens' proud Southern heritage, it seems unlikely that they would have chosen to send Mary Alicia—and later her younger sister Juliette—to attend school with the daughters of wealthy Eastern abolitionists. Indeed, they may not have sent her to New York had a liberal arts education have been more widely available to women in Missouri during the 1860s. After only a few weeks the quick-witted, self-effacing, eighteen-year-old realized that she did not fit in well with her classmates. Jean Fahey Eberle maintains that Owen believed the women of Vassar tended to be too serious in their studies and too intolerant of her Southern heritage. Furthermore, because Owen

⁴⁴ Ellen Swallow, 11 October 1968, quoted in Elizabeth Daniels, *History of Vassar College* (Internet: <http://historian.vassar.edu/chronology/1861-1870>, accessed 21 April 2009).

hailed from the Western frontier, her classmates found it easy to see her as the provincial child of a backwoods family. Despite her unhappiness, Owen persevered and completed a full year before returning home in the spring of 1869.

The experience, however, did not leave Owen unchanged. If any part of her college experience left a lasting mark on her young mind, it may have been her encounters in the East with women who were active in the cause of women's suffrage. The idea that women of her generation might aspire to do more than raise children or teach school resonated with her and she returned to St. Joseph intent on finding an avocation into which she might direct her considerable intelligence and energy.⁴⁵

Eberle suggests that Owen had to strike a delicate balance when choosing a career. While she wanted to find work that was personally meaningful, she was also mindful that her parents would find certain careers unacceptable, especially if they took her away from home. She seemed to have artfully found that balance when she began to pursue her lifelong interest in stories and storytelling into a career as a writer.⁴⁶ Before leaving for Vassar, Owen had begun to entertain friends at church socials and club meetings by performing dramatic readings. The readings seemed to be a perfect outlet for her because they kept her safely within the Owen family's social circle while allowing her the chance to perform in public before groups of people from her own social class.

The readings also allowed Owen to commit some of her own story ideas to paper. Interested in writing since her childhood, Owen decided that a literary career would allow

⁴⁵ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 28.

⁴⁶ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 27.

her intellect and imagination to roam free while she remained in the secure confines of her family's home. The Democratic *St. Joseph Gazette*, a paper that would also later employ Mary Alicia's brother Herbert, offered her the opportunity to write about local social events. These society notes eventually led to a weekly column that Owen published under the pen name Julia Scott in the *St. Joseph Saturday Democrat* around 1880.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, Owen recognized that new opportunities in the world of publishing allowed her to write for a broader regional and even national audience. After the Civil War the popular press had exploded with a new array of periodicals, many of which were looking for writers to contribute short stories. Owen soon discovered that she could produce two kinds of stories for which magazine publishers had a need. On the one hand, she was able to write stories with romantic plots that were aimed specifically at the growing audience of women readers. On the other hand, Owen discovered that she was particularly adept at writing what were known at the time as local-color stories. Owen's career coincided perfectly with a national movement among literary circles to create fiction that was uniquely American in character. According to Bernd C. Beyer, "Local-colors stories were characterized by a focus on regional settings and representations of customs, costumes, and dialects of the people living there."⁴⁸ Beginning in 1870, Mary Alicia Owen, usually writing under her pen name, Julia Scott, published stories that

⁴⁷ Logan, *Old St. Jo*, 367; Alcorn, "Mary Alicia Owen: Missouri Folklorist," 71; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*: 34.

⁴⁸ Bernd C. Peyer, *The Singing Spirit: Early Short Stories by North American Indians* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989): xi.

combined both romance and local-color in magazines such as *The Century*, *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*, *Prairie Farmer*, and *Overland Magazine*.⁴⁹

While Owen's biographers have often alluded to the works of popular fiction she wrote for the popular press, none have discussed or analyzed any of these stories in print. My own sampling of some of these works reveals that Owen not only possessed a quick wit, a flair for sentiment, and a keen eye for local flavor, but that she also focused on significant topics and themes in her fiction that she would build upon in her later academic career. Because her fiction helped to lay the groundwork for those later works, it is important to take a look at a few of the stories Mary Alicia Owen published between 1870 and 1889.

One of the young author's earliest published works, a poem called "The Bride's Farewell," appeared under her own name in *Prairie Farmer* in 1870, just a year after she had returned home from Vassar. In the poem, a new farm bride bids farewell to her childhood home and her family as she prepares to leave them for a new life with her husband.

This home I have loved, oh, fondly,
And there dear friends I know are true.
But I now leave them all dear husband,
For the love I have for you.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*: 34.

⁵⁰ Mary Alicia Owen, "The Bride's Farewell," *Prairie Farmer* 41, no. 8 (26 February 1870): 62.

Though not as sophisticated as her later works, this early poem dwells on a theme that Owen would revisit frequently over the next two decades: the personal sacrifice that women made in the name of marriage.

In a story with a similar theme, “Patty’s Literary Experiences,” which appeared in 1884, plain-looking Patty Brown endeavors to satisfy her poetic aspirations by covering society events for Colonel McFad’s local newspaper, the *Chanticleer*. However, “Higginsville’s favorite poetess” is soon inundated by petty complaints from several class-conscious women who do not care for the way she has portrayed them in print. One local matron is irate because Patty had not reported that her muslin gown was made of “surah silk,” while another was insulted that Patty had described her party dress as being “sprigged” and not “brocaded.” After a short and unsatisfactory assignment at the paper’s obituary desk, Patty resigns her post in frustration. Smitten with Patty all along, the colonel responds to her resignation by telling her that all he has left to offer her is “me, my family, my housekeeping.” With that, the would-be poet agrees to become the wife of the much older—and more socially prominent—colonel.⁵¹

The social aspirations, class-consciousness, and bourgeois ideals of the small town residents of western Missouri appear in more than one example of Owen’s early fiction. While Patty Brown ascends a step in the social ladder in exchange for her ambitions as a poet, the protagonist of “Miss Dolly’s Ideals” (1887) is not so fortunate. Dolly Meacham, the daughter of a widow and a “lovely little simpleton,” desires nothing more than to have a poetic name and to live a regal life. “I’d like to be called Dorthea or

⁵¹ Julia Scott (Mary Alicia Owen), “Patty’s Literary Experiences,” *Ballou’s Monthly Magazine* 60, no. 1 (July 1884): 83.

Theodora and marry a lord, dressed in crimson plush,” Dolly confides to her maid, who is ironically named Althea. Standing in the way of this dream, however, is Althea’s brother and Dolly’s suitor, Tom Potts. “Poor Tom!” Dolly laments, “He is not poetical enough to dream about.” Though Dolly rebuffs Tom’s interest in her, she becomes jealous when he attracts the attention of Miss Sweetser, a young woman from a nearby town whom Dolly disdains as an “underbred creature” who is not worthy of Tom’s affection. Suddenly faced with competition for Tom’s attention, Dolly realizes that “she is in love with Tom, fat, untitled, plebian-named Tom.” She agrees to be his wife and accepts the fact that she “will have a common place house, a common place husband, and be called Dolly Potts for the rest of [her] days.”⁵²

It is worth noting that while Owen’s fictional characters often marry others from outside their economic status, they do not tend to marry people from outside of their community. Outsiders, like the overly flirtatious Miss Sweetser, resemble what historian Robert Wiebe called “peculiar powerful subversives.” These outsiders are not to be trusted in part because they threaten the social order of Owen’s fictional close-knit communities.⁵³ Such is the case in the story, “Phoebus or Cupid” (1886). Professor Timotheus N. Jones, the assistant state entomologist, becomes infatuated with Rosa Allen, the “most beautiful blonde lady he had ever beheld,” while traveling on a study expedition in the country. As a man of science, Jones is unsure how to react to his own feelings and how to respond to the rapt attention with which Miss Allen favors him.

⁵² Julia Scott (Mary Alicia Owen), “Miss Dolly’s Ideals,” *Ballou’s Monthly Magazine* 65, no. 6 (June 1887): 499.

⁵³ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 54.

Over time, he convinces himself that she is in love with him and that, despite the fact that it would interrupt his research and his unfinished book, he must marry her.

On the evening that he plans to propose to Miss Allen, Jones discovers that she is actually in love with Walter Stacey, a local man who has been away during the professor's visit. While she had enjoyed the diversion of his long monologues about insects and had viewed him as a pleasant curiosity, Rosa Allen had apparently never considered Timotheus as a potential husband. As a sign that the two are clearly incompatible, the professor is surprised to find that he is only mildly disappointed by the discovery. He happily retreats to his own world, where he is quickly absorbed in his work. When he learns that Walter Stacey and Rosa Allen have married, he sends the newlyweds a valuable collection of grasshoppers as a wedding present.⁵⁴

Much of the conflict Owen creates in her early romance stories comes from the fact that the fictional couples she creates are unlikely matches. Often they came from very different economic and social backgrounds. In "The Taming of Tarias," a story Owen published under her own name in 1889, she draws for the first time on the racial diversity of her hometown to create an improbable romance. Tarias Beauvais, a twenty-year-old Métis woman, is called "the Queen" in the Blacksnake Hills because she is the daughter of a French trapper and the "descendant of the rightful lords of the soil, the Chiefs of the Sacs and Foxes." She has a reputation for being strong willed or, as one local bluntly states, "She's French quick an' Injun stubborn." While many men had tried

⁵⁴ Julia Scott (Mary Alicia Owen), "Phoebus or Cupid," *Overland Monthly* (August 1886): 129.

to woo her, conventional wisdom in the community holds that no man is her match. “It don’t pay to rile her,” one local advises. To this last remark, blond, handsome Dave Potts, a recent transplant from Kentucky, offers the opinion that “all she needs is tamin’.” To which he adds, “She ain’t mean and she ain’t cruel, she’s jist wild.”

Dave immediately sets out to introduce himself to the Queen. Through a series of coincidences, he accompanies Tarias and her brother to a country dance one evening. The crowd quickly takes note of the fact that while Tarias “ain’t never danced ‘ith *our* boys,” she remains on the floor with Dave throughout the evening. As one of Tarias’s former suitors jealously speculates that the newcomer Dave may have “be’n run outen his own State fur hoss-stealin” and is not worthy of the Queen’s attention, a drunken magistrate, prompted by some equally inebriated comrades, pronounces the two “husband and wife” on the dance floor.

“With her scepter broken in her hand by the cruel bludgeon of a practical joker,” the Queen is crushed. Terrified that marriage will enslave her, she resists her family’s attempts to talk her into acknowledging her new role as Dave’s wife. As Dave too desperately tries to persuade her of his love, Tarias literally strikes out at him, cutting him in the cheek with a knife. The six-month-long standoff that follows is broken only when Tarias discovers that a gang of men is on its way to Dave’s cabin to get even for some conflict they had with him in the past. Intent on warning Dave of the danger, the Queen makes a dramatic dash through the woods in the dark of a January evening. With wolves nipping at her heels she manages to reach his cabin ahead of the gang of men and the wolves. After reaching the cabin Tarias is relieved to find that Dave is safe. He, in turn,

is touched at her willingness to risk her life to warn him. In the light of this epiphany the couple reconciles on the spot. Tarias, it appears, has been tamed.⁵⁵

Joanna Hearne has shown that plots like those which Owen employed in “The Taming of Tarias” were not unusual among early twentieth century novels and films in the way they portrayed racial identity and interracial relationships between whites and American Indians. Hearne argues that in that era relationships between white men and Indian women often served as a metaphor. This was “one way in which the landscape and resources of the American West were represented [as being] available for sexual, economic, and sociopolitical exploitation.” With this in mind, Dave’s taming of Tarias can be seen as a blatant metaphor for the conquering of the rich natural resources of the West.⁵⁶

As with Owen’s other stories, “The Taming of Tarias” also shows us a world where people of various ethnic and economic backgrounds live together in close proximity, but rarely intermingle. Yet, of all the stories mentioned here, it offers the most detailed study of the various social identities that existed in the frontier St. Joseph of Mary Alicia Owen’s youth. In it she reveals the French traders, like Antoine Beauvais, Tarias’s father, and “Uncle” Joe Robidoux, who, as the region’s earliest non-native inhabitants are both the cultural and financial foundation of the community. She portrays the merchants, businessmen, and speculators, like her father and maternal grandfather, who helped turn the trading post into a small thriving city. Alongside these local

⁵⁵ Mary Alicia Owen, “The Taming of Tarias,” *The Century* 39, no. 2 (December 1889): 284-291.

⁵⁶ Joanna Hearne. “The Cross-Heart People: Race and Inheritance in the Silent Western,” *Journal of Popular film and Television* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 183.

magnates, Owen contrasts backwoods society, which is comprised of outsiders like Dave who threaten the prescribed social order of the community. As newcomers, they are somewhat distained by those with more money and deeper roots in the region. infrequently and cautiously.

In the “The Taming of Tarias” Owen explores the theme of social stratification by examining the ways in which race and economic class segregate members of the community. More than any other character in the stories examined in this chapter, Tarias is defined by her racial background. Her personal traits and actions are attributed to the fact that she is Métis. Readers learn that her Indian heritage exhibits itself in her stubbornness, her experience in the ways of the wild, a contentious spirit, and the air of superiority. Readers are also told that everyone in the Blacksnake Hills recognizes Tarias as an outsider and that only Dave, a fellow outsider, successfully “tames” her. In the order of Owen’s fictional world, outsiders belong together.

The world Owen constructs in these stories is one that is filled with people from various ethnic and economic backgrounds. Yet, while the western Missouri of Owen’s imagination is multicultural and multiethnic, it is not, for the most part, a melting pot. People are largely segregated by their place in the social and economic strata. While some, like the aspiring poet Patty Brown, are able to climb the social ladder, they do so by compromising their personal dreams.

In these works of fiction, Mary Alicia Owen ruminates over themes that have had resonance in her life and, as Robert Wiebe suggests, had significance in the culture at large. Trust, belonging, identity, and social order were the traits that supported the world

in which Mary Alicia Owen lived. Yet, as the violence of Civil War and the subsequent rapid growth of the West had shown, those traits were precarious. As a member of the elite upper class, Owen was largely defined by these standards. As such, she had a vested interest in upholding them. She expressed this by creating a fictional world in which the lives people lived were often prescribed by their social order and ethnic background.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 96.

Chapter Four

THE PEOPLE OF THE RED EARTH, THE PEOPLE OF THE YELLOW EARTH

“The Taming of Tarias” marked a watershed in Mary Alicia Owen’s writing career. In that story she mixed, for the first time, her creative skill as a storyteller with her longstanding interest in American Indian culture. After the publication of “Tarias,” Owen would begin to channel her observations about Sac and Fox into nonfiction and even into scholarly articles and books and her career would take a decidedly different turn.

During the two decades she had been writing for the popular press, Mary Alicia Owen had continued to cultivate relationships with people who lived in Sac and Fox villages in Kansas, Iowa, and Oklahoma and had amassed a large collection of stories and artifacts. By her own reckoning, Mary Alicia Owen made more than one hundred visits to Sac and Fox villages between 1881 and 1898.⁵⁸ In Owen’s time, as today, the three branches of the tribe lived in three separate locations. The Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma reside on a reservation near Stroud, Oklahoma. The Sac and Fox Tribe of the Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska has a reservation near Reserve, Kansas—just fifty miles west of Owen’s hometown of St. Joseph—and appear to be the tribal members with whom she had the most contact. The third branch of the tribe are the Sac and Fox of the

⁵⁸ Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 32.

Mississippi in Iowa, who own land near Tama, Iowa and are the only branch of the tribe who commonly refer to themselves as Meskwaki.

The Sac or Sauk (Thakiwa), or people of the yellow earth, and the Fox (Meskwaki), or people of the red earth, were two individual nations so closely affiliated with one another that by the 1700s outsiders considered them to be one tribe. Part of the Algonquin language group, the Sac and Fox migrated from the east coast before European contact and first encountered the French in the region of the Great Lakes in the seventeenth century. Wars with the French and the Iroquois pushed them in to northeast Missouri and northern Illinois where they lived until 1804. That year General William Henry Harrison persuaded four low level headmen to sign a treaty with the United States government in which they ceded land on both sides of the Mississippi stretching from St. Louis north into present-day Wisconsin (figure 2). The Sac and Fox leader Black Hawk was enraged over the treaty and openly contested its validity for decades.⁵⁹

During the War of 1812, the tribe divided into bands that the U. S. government labeled the Sac and Fox of the Mississippi and the Sac and Fox of the Missouri. The Mississippi branch of the tribe remained near the contested land ceded in the 1804 treaty. Armed by British traders operating from the region around Green Bay, in present-day Wisconsin, this band joined pro-British members of the Ioway and engaged in skirmishes against the United States in the War of 1812. In an effort to pull the Ioway and the Sac and Fox away from the conflict, Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark

⁵⁹ Martha Royce Blaine, *The Ioway Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995): 83-86; "Treaty With The Sauk And Foxes, 1804," in Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1904): 74-77.

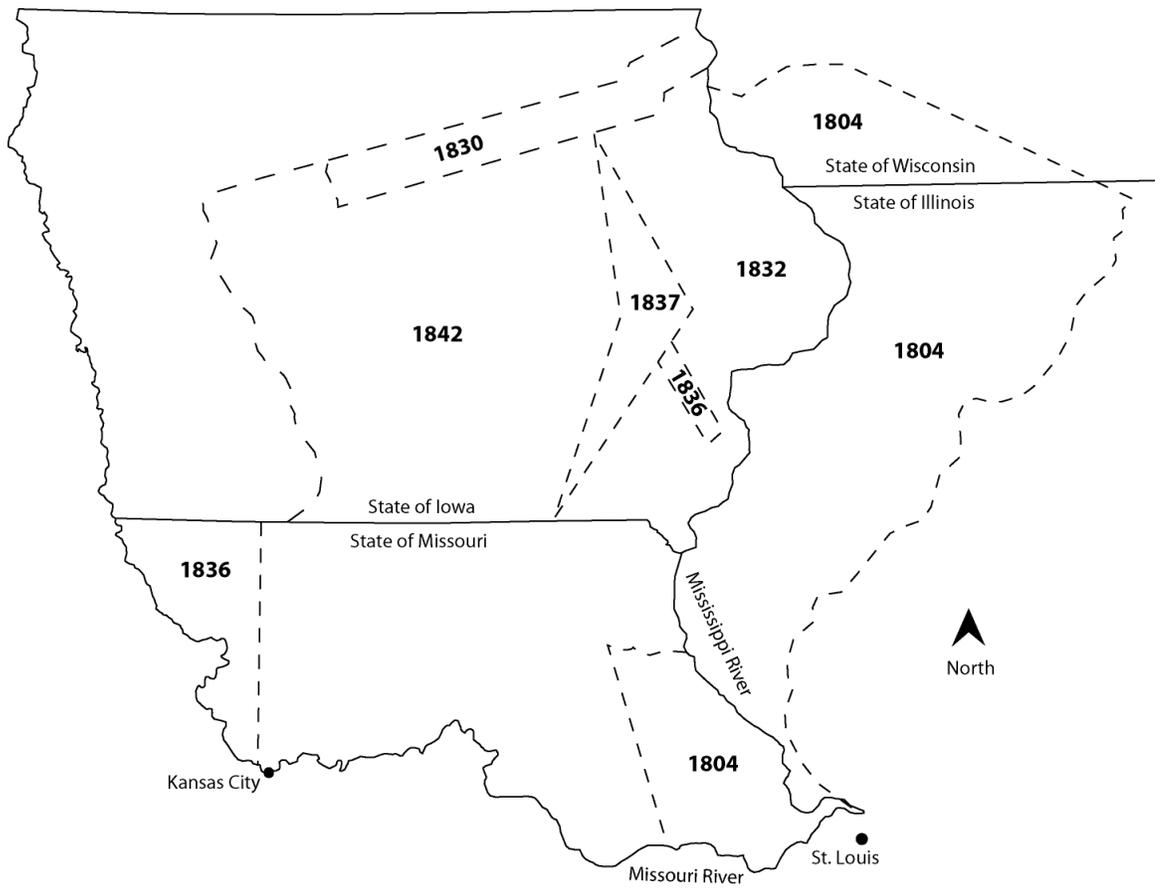


Figure 2: Sac and Fox Land Cessions, 1804-1842.
 Map by the author, 2009.

succeeded in persuading pro-American members of each tribe to settle further west near a trading post he established around the present-day town of Glasgow, Missouri. This branch of the tribe became known as the Sac and Fox of the Missouri and eventually settled further west, near the future site of Joseph Robidoux's trading post. By the late 1820s, the Sac and Fox of the Missouri became a part of the U.S. government's Ioway sub-agency, which was located on the Platte River near the present-day town of Agency, Missouri in Buchanan County.⁶⁰

About that time, the Sac and Fox of the Mississippi were living in the eastern section of present-day Iowa. In 1828, the Sac and Fox headman Black Hawk decided to return to the east side of the Mississippi River to reclaim the land that his people had lost in the treaty of 1804. Black Hawk's act of resistance resulted in an immediate military buildup of 1,800 American militiamen in the Mississippi River Valley and eventually led to an armed conflict known as the Black Hawk War in 1832.⁶¹ Though short-lived, the so-called war spread the fear of an Indian rebellion throughout American settlements in the Mississippi and Missouri River valleys. Eager to reassure settlers, the military pursued Black Hawk and his impoverished people, who by the summer of 1832 had decided to return to the west side of the Mississippi River. On August 2, 1832, Black Hawk tried to surrender to Captain Throckmorton aboard an American steamboat, the *Warrior*. Mistaking the surrender for an attack, riflemen aboard the boat killed dozens of Sac and Fox people as they tried to cross the Mississippi River while pro-American

⁶⁰ Zachary Gussow, *Sac and Fox and Iowa Indians*, vol. 1 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974).

⁶¹ Robert E. Parkin, *Tales of Black Hawk* (St. Louis: St. Louis Genealogical Society, 1974): 139.

members of the Sioux nation killed dozens more that had safely made it to the Iowa side. In all, as many as 300 Sac and Fox people died in what is now known as the Bad Axe Massacre. While Black Hawk survived the massacre, he surrendered to General Henry Atkinson at Prairie du Chien soon afterward.⁶²

The notoriety that Black Hawk gained as an “outlaw” before his surrender earned him the status of a celebrity in American popular culture. After spending the winter of 1832-1833 in Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis, the Sac and Fox leader, accompanied by a military escort, embarked on a tour of the eastern United States. In the Ohio River towns of Cincinnati and Wheeling hundreds of people turned out to catch a glimpse of the famous war chief as he sailed past aboard a steamboat. In Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, Black Hawk was treated to parties, sightseeing tours, and meetings with important government officials, including President Andrew Jackson. In 1834, he published his famous *Life of Black Hawk*. In his autobiography, which he had dictated to Antoine Leclair, an interpreter at the Sac and Fox Agency, the aging headman had the chance to tell his version of the events of his life and of the Black Hawk War. Black Hawk died in 1837 near the Sac and Fox Agency in what is now Van Buren County, Iowa. Violence followed him even in death. Thieves, hoping to cash in on the warrior’s fame, stole Black Hawk’s body and displayed his bones in a museum in Burlington, Iowa where they were eventually destroyed in a fire.⁶³

⁶² Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *Life of Black Hawk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1994), 65-69.

⁶³ Quaife, ed. *Life of Black Hawk*, 70-75.

As the state of Iowa prepared to enter the Union in the 1840s, the government again moved the Sac and Fox of the Mississippi, this time to a reservation in the southeastern section of present-day Kansas. From there, some Meskwaki returned to Iowa where they bought 80 acres of land near the town of Tama in 1857. There, they were able to maintain their language and many of their cultural traditions and to this day, they remain the last culturally intact of the tribe's three branches. The Sac and Fox who continued to live in the Kansas Territory moved in 1869 to a new reservation in the Indian Territory, now known as state of Oklahoma, where they eventually became known as the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the Sac and Fox of the Missouri also moved to a new home west of the Missouri River. In September 1836 leaders of the Sac and Fox of the Missouri and the Ioway joined their agent Andrew Hughes at Fort Leavenworth for a treaty that became known as the Platte Purchase agreement. In the agreement, the headmen of both nations ceded to the U.S. all of their rights and claims to the land between the state of Missouri's western border and the Missouri River. A short time later the State of Missouri annexed the land. In return, the tribes were given \$7,500 and received two separate land reserves of two hundred square miles on the south bank of the Grand Nemaha River near the border between present-day Kansas and Nebraska. On the

⁶⁴ Johnathan L. Buffalo, "A Collection of Observations Relating to the Meskwaki Tribe," in Mary Bennett, Johnathan Lanz Buffalo, and Dawn Suzanne Wanatee, eds., *Meskwaki History*, CD-ROM (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2004).

reservation, the Sac and Fox of the Missouri adopted a European-American agricultural lifestyle and became the most acculturated of the tribe's three branches.⁶⁵

It is unclear exactly how or when Mary Alicia Owen first made contact with members of the Sac and Fox nation. Jean Fahey Eberle briefly mentions that the African American women who raised Owen first introduced her to Sac and Fox people, who were probably their blood relatives, before the Civil War. Eberle believes that the opening of a bridge across the Missouri River at St. Joseph in 1873 allowed Owen to immediately begin making regular visits to the tribe's Kansas reservation. In a letter Owen wrote to A. C. Burrill, the curator of the Missouri State Museum, she placed the beginning of her regular visits in the year 1881. "I dare say," she wrote, "I was 100 times among the Musquakie between 1881 and 1898."⁶⁶

Predictably, the visits of an unmarried white woman to these settlements not only worried her family, they also became fodder for gossip among St. Joseph's social elite. Owen's parents found the idea of Mary Alicia's visits with the Indians even more unsettling than her visits to St. Joseph's African American neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the young writer persuaded them that the trips were a necessity that allowed her to gather material that she might use in her stories. In order to quell the indignation of St. Joseph's social elite, Owen sometimes asked members of the local chapter of the Social Science Club or her brother Herbert to accompany her on her visits. Other times, however, she

⁶⁵ Kappler, ed., "Treaty with the Iowa, Etc. 1836," *Indian Affairs*, 2: 468-470.

⁶⁶ Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 32.

made the trips alone, occasionally staying with members of the tribe for extended periods of time. In the end her parents accepted her travels, believing that as long as Mary Alicia was happy and continued to live at home with the rest of the family, they could permit her occasional visits with the Indians. Nonetheless, Agnes Owen subjected her eldest daughter to a strict cleansing ritual each time she returned home from a visit with the Sac and Fox. Jean Fahey Eberle relates a family story that tells how Agnes Owen hung sheets around one of the exterior porches of the house and Mary Alicia was ordered to bathe and dress in clean clothes before being allowed to enter.⁶⁷

Owen's relationship with tribal members was complex because, in her interactions with them, she was both an accepted guest and a curious outsider. Some members of the tribe welcomed Owen into their homes for extended periods of time and invited her to attend public dance ceremonies. Owen empathized with the Sac and Fox, once stating that she believed she possessed an "Indian spirit." She claimed to be an adopted member of the tribe and clearly took great delight in the fact that tribal members allowed her to observe ceremonies that Christian missionaries and government Indian agents disapproved of. In her 1931 letter to Dr. A. C. Burrill, Owen recounted that she had traveled—apparently on more than one occasion—with tribal members to hold ceremonies in remote locations where they would not be caught by government officials. "I went to dances (how I hate the silly agents who suppressed them!) in Iowa, Kansas,

⁶⁷ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 32-37.

and Indian Territory. . . . We were always dodging those white idiots the government sent out. They seemed to think dancing was devil worship.”⁶⁸

Yet, while Owen stayed with Sac and Fox people and attended certain public ceremonies, there is no evidence to suggest that she sought to participate in daily domestic activities such as cooking, sewing, or weaving. Certainly, she did not include accounts of participating in these chores in her book, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians*. Later generations of ethnologists, most notably the female students of the seminal anthropologist Franz Boas, sometimes sought to learn about traditional native culture by engaging in what was known as the participatory method of anthropology. Most often practitioners of this method undertook apprenticeships to learn to weave or make ceramics under highly skilled mentors.

Owen, however, did not follow this participatory method. As her book makes clear, she was a curious observer of rituals and ceremonies and a passionate collector of material culture. *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians* includes her descriptions of over one hundred artifacts that she had personally collected. Owen chose to interact with the Sac and Fox as what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has called a “lone ethnographer.” As a lone ethnographer, Owen assumed the role of collector rather than participant and she gathered the cultural information and artifacts she desired. According to Rosaldo, the lone ethnographers assumed that as the collector, they were literate while their informants

⁶⁸ Mary Alicia Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America and Catalogue of Musquakie Beadwork and Other Objects in the Collection of the Folk-Lore Society* (London: D. Nutt, 1904): 41; Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C; Mary Alicia Owen, “The Road to Paradise,” photocopy of typewritten manuscript, Women Writers Along The Rivers Collection, 1850-1950. Special Collections, Missouri Western State University Library. no date, 3.

were neither literate nor active in their encounter. In this situation informants provide raw material in the form of speech or artifacts which lone ethnographers record, process, and distribute, often in the form of museum exhibits or written books and articles.⁶⁹

There is evidence that Owen employed this method in her own fieldwork. In her 1893 book *Old Rabbit, The Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, she provides a rare view of the way in which she interacted with her informants. In one scene, her alter ego Tow Head asks the conjurer King Alexander to make a luck fetish for her friend and mentor Charles Leland. As the old man puts the bundle together, Owen carefully writes down which materials he uses and how he arranges them. When he begins to chant under his breath, she interjects, “Stop! Stop! You are not dealing fairly with me. You promised that I should hear your incantation, and you mumble so that I cannot distinguish a word.” While King Alexander humors her in the beginning by chanting out loud, he eventually simply waves his hand at her and completes the bundle while chanting under his breath.⁷⁰

This scene shows that Owen was not content to simply collect objects. She was also eager to collect the rituals, spells, and chants that were used to create the objects. As a lone ethnographer, Owen gathered the raw materials that King Oliver provided, in this case a chant and a charm, and distributed them to the public through her book and through the gift of the charm to Leland. Rosaldo argues that this type of relationship is a form of colonialism. As collectors take and appropriate the material provided by the

⁶⁹ Catherine J. Lavendar, *Scientists and Storytellers: Feminist Anthropologists and the Construction of the American Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Rosaldo. *Culture and Truth*, 30-31.

⁷⁰ Owen, *Old Rabbit*, 169-179.

informant, they become “complicit with the imperialist domination” that marked the era in which Owen worked.⁷¹

While King Oliver exhibited some resistance to providing Owen with complete access to the ritual of making the luck charm, Owen showed a great deal of tenacity in her determination to get as much information from him as she could. In *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians* Owen recounted that she sometimes had to push her informants by asking them questions repeatedly when her inquiries went unanswered. Evidence suggests that when she was prevented from getting the information or objects she desired, Owen was not above acquiring them by less than ethical means. In a letter written to a friend in 1891, Charles Leland claimed that Owen once stole a rare conjurer’s stone from an owner who refused to sell it to her and gave it to Leland as a gift.⁷² This behavior paints a portrait of Owen as a collector who was not always interested in creating and maintaining a reciprocal relationship with her informants. Such willingness to exploit her informants suggests that she placed her own work and desires above the respect she had for the people and the cultures with whom she worked.

Even if Owen had desired to participate in tribal activities, it is unclear whether she would have been allowed to do so. Many social constraints combined to frustrate Owen’s attempts to gather cultural information and artifacts from the Sac and Fox. Some

⁷¹ Rosaldo. *Culture and Truth*, 30-31.

⁷² Leland to E. R. Pennell, 11 October 1891, in Elisabeth Robins Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland: A Biography* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906): 350; Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 34, 114, 121, 138, 142.

of these restraints came from the government and religious agencies that oversaw life on the Sac and Fox settlements. In her 1931 letter to A. C. Burill, Owen wrote about the missionaries' and Indian agents' attempts to suppress traditional gatherings and ceremonies. In response to this suppression Sac and Fox people held many of their ceremonies discreetly out of the view of white observers. "This [meant] of course," Owen wrote, "that it [was] difficult for white people to see what [was] bound to go on."⁷³

Owen was also cognizant of the fact that tribal members often placed limits on the amount of information they were willing to share with her. While she was able to attend dances, Owen was most likely excluded from private tribal ceremonies. While Owen blamed her exclusion, in part, on the missionaries and Indian agents, her access to information was also shaped by the likelihood that while she was with the tribe, she spent most of her time with Sac and Fox women. Ever curious, she occupied herself by observing the daily activities and listening to the stories of her female acquaintances, and quizzed them for any nuggets of additional knowledge she could gain.⁷⁴

One of Mary Alicia Owen's informants was Mary Lasley. Lasley, who was also known as *Bee-wah-thee-wah*, or Singing Bird, lived in Reserve, Kansas, and was said to have been the daughter of Black Hawk and the granddaughter of an Ioway leader named Standing Bear. She provided Owen with information about artifacts in her collection, with cultural information, and with traditional stories. On one occasion, after Owen

⁷³ Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C; Mabel D. Thompson, "Indian Collection at the State Museum," *Missouri* 4, no. 5 (September 1931): 11.

⁷⁴ Schmitz, *White Robe's Dilemma*, 61-68. Sandra Kay Massey, email correspondence with the author, 11 February 2007; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 32.

bought a catlinite cup that the seller claimed had belonged to Black Hawk, she took it to Lasley to confirm its authenticity. Owen reported that Lasley told her she “had no good heart” for her father because he was not a “gentleman.” Lasley reportedly told Owen this was because while he claimed to have had one wife, he actually had eight—one of whom had been her Ioway mother. Furthermore, as a war chief, Black Hawk had come from a family that Lasley believed was less prestigious than that in which her mother was raised. Lasley and Owen collaborated on the publication of a collection of traditional stories and information about cultural rituals that appeared under Lasley’s name in *Journal of American Folk Lore* in 1902.⁷⁵ Practically nothing is known about the relationship between Owen and Lasley or why Owen took the unusual step of printing the article under Lasley’s name.

One Sac and Fox man did play an important role in Owen’s quest for knowledge about the tribe. Owen identified Nekon-Mackintosh, also known as John Mackintosh, as the Sac and Fox’s “head shaman.” Orphaned after the death of his Sac and Fox parents, Mackintosh was raised by the family of an Anglo-American physician. Mackintosh studied medicine and contemplated taking over his adopted father’s practice. Instead, the young man returned to the Sac and Fox where he sought to learn the secrets of traditional healers and use his mixture of native and non-native knowledge for the benefit of his people.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Thompson, “Indian Collection at the State Museum,” 12; Mary Lasley, “Sac and Fox Tales,” *Journal of American Folk Lore* 15, no. 58 (July-September 1902): 170-178.

⁷⁶ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 30-31.

Despite the assistance of these and other unnamed informants, Owen still found that on a number of occasions she was unable to find out the significance of certain details of Sac and Fox culture. Though Owen was not averse to pointedly questioning her informants, she wrote that they remained silent on some topics, even when she repeated the same question several times. At other times, her subjects provided answers that she found frustratingly evasive. Once, while observing a Green Corn dance, the Sac and Fox precursor to the powwow, she asked a girl why participants marked their faces with white paint. The girl simply replied that it was “fun.”⁷⁷

Owen was particularly vexed at her inability to get at what she perceived as the very essence of Sac and Fox culture by discovering the meaning of something she called “Mee-sham.” According to Owen, the Mee-sham was a covenant or a “mysterious something” that had been passed down from the tribe’s ancestors. She reported that all Sac and Fox men knew what the Mee-sham was, but that they had never revealed it to the women. When Owen asked her female informants what they thought it might be, some speculated that it was the hide of a black wolf, a bag filled with potent medicine, or a roll of painted skins. On another occasion, when she pressed a Sac and Fox man on the essence of Mee-sham, she reported that he answered cryptically, “What for you ask? Him all same like your Ark and Covenant.”⁷⁸

In assessing Owen’s study of the Sac and Fox, the literary critic Neil Schmitz has viewed the Mee-sham as a metaphor for the cultural information that Anglo-American

⁷⁷ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 56.

⁷⁸ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 40, 54.

folklorists and ethnographers like Mary Alicia Owen could never attain because of their status as outsiders. He labeled this phenomenon the “Mee-sham effect.” Mee-sham, writes Schmitz, represents that which “is averted from Euro-American knowledge, [and] will never be captured.” Viewed this way, the existence of the Mee-sham effect acknowledges that Sac and Fox people did in fact exercise agency in their relationship with Owen. While she initiated the exchange of stories and artifacts with her Sac and Fox acquaintances, they ultimately controlled the process of exchange by determining what they were willing to reveal to and share with her.⁷⁹

Another facet of the Mee-sham effect exhibited itself in Owen’s apparent inability to fully appreciate and comprehend some of the cultural information tribal members did share with her. Sandra Massey, an author and cultural preservation representative of the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma, has expressed concern about inaccuracies in Owen’s work. Massey believes that, as an outsider, Owen would not have been allowed to participate in all tribal ceremonies. She believes that Owen sometimes offered conjecture about these events as fact in her writing. As an example, Massey points to Owen’s belief that Sac and Fox shaman had the power to make objects sacred by “powwowing” over them. This perpetuates the belief that people have a power that, in the Sac and Fox tradition, can only come from the creator.⁸⁰

In another example of Owen’s misunderstanding of Sac and Fox information, Ioway-Otoe-Missouria linguist and scholar Jimm GoodTracks has argued that the stories

⁷⁹ Schmitz, *White Robe’s Dilemma*, 68.

⁸⁰ Massey, email correspondence with the author, 11 February 2007.

Owen collected from Mary Lasley and published as “Sac and Fox Tales” were in fact traditional Ioway stories. “Possum” was published in English and included a phonetic version that Owen apparently believed was written in the Sac language. On closer examination, GoodTracks determined that the story was written in the Báxoje, Jiwere-Nut^achi language of the Ioway and Otoe-Missouria people. GoodTracks further determined that the other stories and cultural information in the article were Báxoje and that Lasley had likely learned from Ioway relatives on her mother’s side of the family. Because the Ioway are part of the Siouan language group and the Sac and Fox are Algonquin, the differences in their cultures are significant and Owen’s misinterpretation of the origin of Lasley’s stories is critical.⁸¹

Owen was not the only Anglo American traveling to Sac and Fox settlements for the purpose of study and research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A Unitarian minister and anthropology lecturer at the University of Iowa named Duren J. H. Ward spent two months at the Meskwaki settlement near Tama, Iowa in the summer of 1905. Supported by the State Historical Society of Iowa, Ward’s research trip is noteworthy because he made audio recordings of several oral histories and photographed many of his Meskwaki informants.⁸²

While Owen’s time with the tribe was spent primarily in the company of women, Ward seems to have spent most of his visit in the company of men. As a result, his observations and writing on the Meskwaki stand in stark contrast to Owen’s in that they

⁸¹ Jimm GoodTracks to Elaine Schroeter, 3 September 1995, electronic copy, collection of the author; Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 135-139.

⁸² “Anthropologic Miscellanea: Muskaki Indians of Iowa,” *American Anthropologist* 7 (1905), 575.

tend to focus primarily on tribal politics and the tribe's relations with the U.S. government. Owen, for example, wrote that the Meskwakis' return to Iowa in the 1850s was a "revolt of the squaws." Owen's female informants had told her that a measles epidemic had killed many small children in the spring of 1831. These children were buried in Iowa, and their mothers could not bear being separated from them when they moved to Kansas in 1847. "The mother who dies far from her baby's grave loses her darling forever," Owen wrote in *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians*, but "the mother who keeps near it has two chances for happiness." According to Owen, the bereaved mothers informed their husbands that they intended to return to Iowa to be with their children and that the men could follow or stay behind. "They set out," Owen wrote, "and the men followed and overtook them."⁸³

Catherine Lavender has argued that when other early female anthropologists studied and wrote about the political power of American Indian women, they did so as a critique of the male-dominated Victorian society of European-Americans. Working a decade or more after Owen conducted her fieldwork, women like Ruth Benedict, Ruth Murray Underhill, Elsie Parsons, and Gladys Reichard, all student of Franz Boaz, focused on maternal societies and the power wielded by female leaders.⁸⁴ By asserting that the decision to move came from Sac and Fox women, Mary Alicia Owen too seems to be offering a critique of, or presenting an alternative to, the paternalistic society in which she

⁸³ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 22-23.

⁸⁴ Lavender, *Scientists And Storytellers*, 1-10.

lived. This critique is wholly consistent with Owen's own feminist struggle to succeed and excel in a world dominated by men.

In contrast, Duren Ward chronicled the Meskwakis' return to Iowa from the perspective of the tribal government and the Meskwaki men. Working from a history prepared by tribal secretary C. H. Chuck, also known as *Cha-ka-ta-ko-si*, and state land record documents, Ward cast the move as the outcome of a political decision reached by tribal leaders. Enhanced by the oral history interviews and a search of land records and legal statutes, Ward's version of the story involves a history of the land purchases and the laws passed by Iowa's Fifth General Assembly that permitted the Meskwaki to return to the state. Ward and his informants meticulously collected a list of all tribal land purchases and plotted them on a plat map, which he published in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* in 1906. Another of Ward's lasting legacies is the collection of photographic portraits of Meskwaki people he commissioned from J.S. Moore, a studio photographer from Toledo, Iowa. The photos, now in the collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa, provide a document of men, women, and children, often in their traditional clothing.⁸⁵

Ward's published articles about the Meskwaki are notable for their avoidance of religious and cultural matters. As an outsider like Owen, Duren Ward more than likely also struggled with the Mee-sham effect. However, he compensated for this by focusing

⁸⁵ Edward L. Purcell, "The Mesquakie Indian Settlement in 1905," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 85 (2004): 92-103; "The Ward-Mesquakie Photograph Collection." *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 85 (2004): 104-115; Duren Ward, "Meskwakia," *Iowa Journal of History And Politics* 4 (1906): 179-189.

much of his research on topics that he could verify with public records. When Ward did interview informants, he tended to focus on tribal politics and history.

It is worth noting that while Owen and Ward were making their investigations into Sac and Fox history and culture, at least one tribal member was also collecting tribal oral literature and artifacts. William Jones, also known as *Mekasihawa* or Black Eagle (1871-1909), was one of the first American Indians to be formally trained as an anthropologist. The son of Henry Clay Jones, whose mother was Sac and Fox, and Sarah Penny, who was English, Jones was raised by his grandfather *Katiqua*, a traditional member of the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma. While living with his grandfather, Jones learned to speak his native language fluently and participated in tribal ceremonies and activities. At age eighteen, Jones had the opportunity to study at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia. He went on to attend Harvard where he met Frederic Ward Putnam, an anthropologist who was the curator of the Peabody Museum. In 1897, Putnam sent Jones to collect traditional stories at the Meskwaki settlement in Iowa. Four years later, Jones entered Columbia University to study with Franz Boas. Under Boas's direction, he returned to the Sac and Fox settlements in 1901 and 1902 to collect more stories. In 1907 the Field Museum in Chicago employed Jones to travel once more to the Meskwaki settlement in Iowa, this time to collect artifacts. Jones published several articles about Sac and Fox ethnology and folklore in his short career, including his 1907 "Fox Texts," which presented Algonquin oral literature in the Sac and Fox language with English translations. William

Jones was killed at the age of 38 while on a Field Museum expedition in the Philippines in 1909.⁸⁶

The legacy of Jones's work is decidedly mixed. It has long been considered valuable because it was the work of a person who grew up inside the culture of the Sac and Fox and offered a rare insider's analysis of tribal oral literature and artifacts. To this day, anthropologists look to "Fox Texts" as an authentic source of Sac and Fox culture. Yet the Meskwaki writer Sophilia Keahna characterizes Jones as being "a morally judgmental scientist who often employed harsh, manipulative means to acquire the crafts, artifacts, handiwork, and information (or "plunder" as Jones himself was fond of generally terming his collections) for which he was dispatched." Keahna points out that Jones's most complete work was conducted among the Sioux and Ojibwa and that he found his experiences among the Meskwaki to be unsatisfying.

The reports he sent off to his superiors are filled with words of disappointment, frustration, and frequent complaints about the exceptionally rainy Iowa weather that greatly impaired his ability to even travel from town to the Settlement much less get around to any degree on the Settlement to collect information from no more than only a fistful of generally reluctant Meskwaki informants ... plus severely limited his opportunities to attend only a couple of traditional ceremonies. Even Jones at the time did not consider the materials or information he collected from the Meskwaki to be either authoritative or even remotely complete.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Dan L. Trapp, "William Jones," *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 744; William Jones, "Fox Texts," *Publications of the American Ethnological Society* 1 (1907); "Native, Anthropologist, and Native Anthropologist: William Jones and the Making of *Fox Texts*," The Meskwaki Education NetWork Initiative (Internet, <http://www.menwi.org/index.html>, accessed 4 February 2008).

⁸⁷ Sophilia Keahna, "William Jones," in Bennett, Buffalo, and Wanatee, eds., *Meskwaki History*.

Meskwaki historian Johnathan Buffalo has suggested that simply because Jones was Sac and Fox does not mean that his understanding of the culture was more accurate than was Owen's. Noting that Jones was from the Oklahoma branch of the Sac and Fox and had not grown up with the Meskwaki in Iowa, Buffalo states "He may have been of lineal descent from this tribe and might even have been able to speak the language but he was missing something very crucial: It wasn't *his life*. . . . He lacked the many years of time that it takes to develop a good command of complex language, a solid understanding of the many overt and subtle social skills needed to navigate within the tribe, and proper religious contexts."⁸⁸

As anthropological researchers, Duren Ward and William Jones stand in stark contrast. While Jones appears to have assumed authority because of his status as a cultural insider, Ward seemed to accept his status as an outsider and conducted his research accordingly. Armed with some formal training in history and anthropology, Ward was highly focused on methodically documenting his research during his visit.

Mary Alicia Owen, however, occupied a position that differed from that of both Ward and Jones. As a familiar figure in Sac and Fox settlements for at least two decades and as an adopted member of the tribe, Owen may well have assumed that she had achieved the same status as a tribal insider and confidant. Even so, Owen was sometimes frustrated in her attempts to acquire information and artifacts. Obstacles such as the efforts of Indian agents and missionaries to suppress ceremonies and traditional gatherings, the evasiveness of some Sac and Fox informants, and the fact that she was

⁸⁸ Johnathan Lanz Buffalo quoted in Keahna, "William Jones," in Bennett, Buffalo, and Wanatee, eds., *Meskwaki History*.

ultimately an outsider prevented Mary Alicia Owen from gathering as much knowledge and information she desired.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C; Owen, *Folk-Lore of the Musquakie*, 40, 54, 56.

Chapter Five

A NEW CAREER

Despite its intensity, Mary Alicia Owen's curiosity about the lives of African American and Sac and Fox people appears to have been largely non-professional prior to 1888. Though she justified her trips to the Sac and Fox reservation on the grounds that she was collecting material for her writing, it does not appear that she wrote about American Indian characters prior to that time. All of that changed after a friend gave her a copy of a book called *Algonquin Legends of New England* by humorist, folklorist, and fan of the occult Charles Godfrey Leland.⁹⁰ Owen immediately recognized striking similarities between the stories Leland had collected and those she had heard her African American and Sac and Fox acquaintances tell. For the first time, Owen realized that there was a worldwide network of people who took a professional interest in collecting and analyzing the same type of oral literature that she had discovered in her own backyard.

Leland's book included a note in which he asked for his readers' help in tracking down more Algonquin stories for publication.⁹¹ In a move that would change her life forever, an excited Owen wrote the author. Her correspondence with Leland, who was

⁹⁰ "Charles Godfrey Leland," in Ward & Trent, et al. *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, vol. 17 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907–21).

⁹¹ Charles Godfrey Leland, *The Algonquin Legends of New England, Or, Myths and Folk Lore of the Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Tribes* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884): 8.

living in Italy at the time, opened the door to a personal and professional relationship that lasted for fifteen years until Leland's death in 1903. More importantly, it launched the 38-year-old Owen on a new career as an amateur folklorist and ethnologist.⁹²

While we do not know the contents of Owen's letter to Charles Leland we do know that he responded enthusiastically to her on April 21, 1889. In his letter, he thanked her for a story she sent him and asked her to send more material that he hoped to use in a "Great American Dictionary" of "queer words, phrases, rhymes, [and] charms" on which he was then working. He advised her to write down as many stories as she could remember. "Never neglect to write down any story whatever, however feeble or uninteresting or petty or repeated it may seem. Some detail which may not strike you may be the missing link to a stupendous chain of discovery."⁹³

While he was duly impressed with the depth of this amateur's knowledge of African American and American Indian folklore, Leland was astonished to learn that she had collected her stories within a few miles of the western American city that had been her life-long home. She "was not only born and brought up . . . among the most 'superstitious' race conceivable," Leland marveled years later, "but had from infancy an intense desire, aided by a marvelous memory, to collect and remember all that she learned. . . . In all my experience I never met but one person so perfectly at home in the

⁹² Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 39.

⁹³ Charles Leland to Mary Alicia Owen, 21 April 1889 and 7 June 1889, in Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 314-315.

subject [of Algonquin folklore], and that was a full-blood Passamaquoddy Indian . . . who had . . . collected all the folklore . . . of his tribe.”⁹⁴

Within months of their initial contact, Leland began to mentor Owen in a career in folklore studies. He encouraged her to publish her work and offered to introduce her to the editors of such publications as *Folk-Lore Journal*. Early in their correspondence he also suggested that she write a book of folklore stories. “You can’t make much money by it,” he warned her, “but such a book gives a name now that folk-lore is all the fashion.”⁹⁵ Leland was extremely interested in various kinds of witchcraft and African voodoo and encouraged Owen to follow that line of study as well. When she wrote to him of her studies with a voodoo priest of mixed African American and American Indian heritage whom she called King Alexander, Leland wrote to her with details of his own considerable experience with voodoo and described for her the various charms he had collected. Owen reciprocated by sending Leland fetishes for his collection, including the “luck ball” which King Alexander made specifically for Leland at her request.⁹⁶ Leland was especially fond of a black conjurer’s stone, which he later claimed Owen had stolen for him. “There are altogether in all America only 5 or 6 conjurin’ stones, small black pebbles, which come from Africa,” he bragged in a letter to a relative. “Whoever owns one becomes thereby a chief Voodoo – all the years of fasting, ceremonies, etc., can be

⁹⁴ Charles Godfrey Leland, Introduction to Owen, *Old Rabbit*, viii.

⁹⁵ Leland to Owen, 7 June 1889, in Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 316.

⁹⁶ Owen, *Old Rabbit*, 171-177.

dispensed with. Miss Owen found one out and promised it. The one who had it would not sell it, so she – stole it. . . . And then gave it to me.”⁹⁷

“There is a great field in Voodoo,” Leland advised Owen, “for it is an extremely illuminated faith and admits great freedom. Cherish your old negro [King Alexander] as you would a grandfather. . .” Leland seemed fascinated by the priest and on at least one occasion he speculated about the connection of voodoo to American Indian culture. When Owen informed Leland of Alexander’s death in 1892 he replied, “I wonder . . . if he did not get his magnificent idea of cultivating the will as the true Secret of Sorcery from his Red Indian Mother.”⁹⁸

Leland invited Owen to travel to London to present a paper on the “Missouri Negro Traditions” at the first International Folk-Lore Congress in 1891.⁹⁹ Owen’s presentation was part of the meeting’s Mythological Section, which met at the Society of Antiquaries on the morning of October 5. According to an account of the meeting that appeared in the *Times* of London the following day, magic and mysticism were popular topics of discussion among the delegates who attended the session. The eminent folklorist Edward B. Tylor presented a paper on charms and instruments of sorcery, while Leland talked about his research into the practice of witchcraft, which he said had once prevailed among certain cults in Tuscany.

⁹⁷ Leland to E. R. Pennell, 11 October 1891, in Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 350.

⁹⁸ Leland to Owen, 22 July 1889 and 14 November 1892, in Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 321-322.

⁹⁹ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 42; Alcorn, “Mary Alicia Owen: Missouri Folklorist,” 72.

Owen presented a paper that was based on what she claimed to be her first-hand knowledge of “Voodoo Magic” as practiced in Missouri. The *Times* reported that Owen was “alone among white women” in having been initiated into mysteries of voodoo. She explained the details of her initiation, which had included wearing a packet of herbs under her right arm for nine days. Once the rites of her initiation were complete, she had been allowed to receive instruction in the use of incantations, herbs, charms, vegetable remedies and poisons. Owen claimed that she had been given the opportunity to learn about four degrees of charms: good charms, evil charms, charms having to do with body ailments, and those having to do with “commanded things” like earth and pieces of stick.¹⁰⁰

Leland reveled in Owen’s presentation, writing later, “There were a hundred in the Congress, and Mary Owen, and [Sir Edward] Nevill, and Professor [Alfred Cort] Haddon, and I were really *all* the people in it who knew anything about Folk-Lore at *first hand*. . . . It was funny to see how naturally we four understood one another and got together. But Mary takes the rag of all, for she was born to it in wild Missouri.”¹⁰¹ Leland was not alone in his appreciation of the woman from “wild Missouri.” The *Times* reported Owen’s presentation in considerable detail while her fellow conference delegates bestowed upon her an honorary membership in the British Folk-lore Congress and British Association for the Advancement of Science.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ “International Folk-Lore Congress,” *Times* (London), 6 October 1891, 8.

¹⁰¹ Leland to E. R. Pennell, 11 October 1891, in Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 350.

¹⁰² Leland, Introduction to *Old Rabbit*, ix; Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 48-49.

In many ways, the fact that Owen was a woman who did not come from an academic background was no obstacle to her acceptance at the conference. The fact that she had grown up, as Leland had put it, “among the most ‘superstitious’ race conceivable,” and that she “alone among white women” had been privileged to learn the dark secrets of voodoo only enhanced her status as an authority on such matters. Clearly, The fact that Owen came from Missouri and had learned firsthand from American Indian and African American informants endowed her with an air of authenticity that was unmatched by other attendees at the London conference.

At the time of the international conference in London, the related fields of folklore, anthropology, and ethnology were flourishing in both England and the United States. Practitioners on both continents were making progress in ensuring that the disciplines were gaining respectability and finding a foothold in the hallowed halls of national museums and university campuses. Henrika Kuklick has argued that in Britain, the success of folklore, anthropology, and ethnology can be directly linked to an intellectual middle class that had emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of England’s liberal economic growth. At mid century, the emergence of this class outpaced the growth of the university system. As a result, the first anthropologists and folklorists tended to be “brain workers” and “practical men” who, like doctors and lawyers of the period, learned their vocation outside the university system.¹⁰³

Kuklick adds that as the middle class gained prominence, so did the popularity of the social sciences. Public concern about Britannia’s loss of colonial dominance in the

¹⁰³ Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 7, 28-29.

nineteenth century contributed to this popularity by encouraging Britons to seek “some popular agreement about the value of knowledge about the nonindustrial world.”

Without that consensus and popular support, the study of cultures may never have gained the legitimacy that it achieved late in the century.¹⁰⁴

If members of the congress embraced Owen despite her lack of an academic background, they also accepted her as a woman. At the turn of the twentieth century women were rapidly beginning to make a significant impact in the field. While just ten percent of the members of the Folklore Society were women in 1889, their ranks would swell to constitute thirty-seven percent of its membership by 1910. By this standard, women participated more in the discipline of folklore than in most other professional or academic fields of the time.¹⁰⁵ Despite the protests of American Folklore Society President Stewart Cullin, who in 1897 warned that folklore was too “rough edged” for women, collecting stories and documenting folkways were generally deemed to be appropriate activities for ladies of the late Victorian Age. Their influence in the study of lore related to plants, animals, children, toys, games, and mythology was so significant in the 1890s that some men feared the discipline was becoming feminized.¹⁰⁶

Mary Alicia Owen, however, was participating in the sort of fieldwork that, up to that point, had largely been the domain of men. While American men like Lewis Henry Morgan, John Wesley Powell, Frank Cushing, and Washington Mathews had blazed the

¹⁰⁴ Kuklick, *The Savage Within*, 7, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Bronner, *American Folklore Studies*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, “Collecting Material Folklore,” 34; Bronner, *American Folklore Studies*, 35-36.

trail of American Indian ethnographic fieldwork in the late nineteenth century, Owen was part of a new generation of American women, which included Matilda Cox Stevenson and Natalie Curtis Burlin, who traveled to reservations in the West to conduct first hand research.

In her study of a group of women—all students of Franz Boas—who conducted ethnographic fieldwork after Owen, in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Catherine J. Lavender has suggested that women often used the disciplines of ethnography, folklore and, anthropology as a place from which to launch a feminist critique of the paternalistic confines of Victorian society. In the field, women like Ruth Benedict, Ruth Murray Underhill, Elsie Parsons, and Gladys Reichard were drawn to maternal societies and strong leaders, whom Lavender calls “executive women.” Through their study of these societies, Lavender argues that these women were exploring social issues that were important to them in their own lives. As we have seen, Owen too conducted much of her fieldwork in the company of Sac and Fox women, and even though theirs was not a particularly matriarchal culture, she did explore women’s influence on tribal decision making, especially as it related to the Meskwaki’s return to Ioway in the 1850s.¹⁰⁷

Yet, while the fields of folklore, anthropology, and ethnology appeared to be making great strides toward inclusion at the end of the nineteenth century, the fact remained that, much like the frontier community in which Owen was raised, the academic community was acutely aware of cultural differences and was actively working

¹⁰⁷ Lavender, *Scientists And Storytellers*, 1-10.

to create a hierarchy geared toward the codification of those differences through acceptance of the theory of social evolution.

Adam Smith and members of the eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment pioneered ideas about social evolution and its connection to history. They theorized that societies evolved through four stages of development. The lowest social order was the Age of Hunters, and it was followed in order by the Age of Shepherds, the Age of Agriculture, and finally the Age of Commerce. Members of the Scottish Enlightenment were not content to speculate about the less civilized stages of society, as they believed the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau had done. They believed in a conjectural historical investigation in which the stages of man were not treated as a matter of philosophy, but were held up to the scrutiny of history. By examining travel narratives, works of natural history, and historical accounts that dealt first hand with less civilized people, Smith and his contemporaries hoped to construct a more accurate account of civilization's progress through the four stages of society.¹⁰⁸

In Britain, Herbert Spencer built on the work of the Scottish Enlightenment. In writings that heavily influenced folklore, anthropology, and ethnology in the mid-nineteenth century, Spencer argued that the study of individual historical events revealed nothing about the universal laws to which he believed societies conform. By organizing the broad currents of human history, he theorized that it would be possible to determine exactly what those universal laws were. In 1862, Spencer, who was a contemporary and a rival of Charles Darwin, published *First Principles*, in which he laid out his belief that

¹⁰⁸ Aaron Garrett, "Anthropology: The Origin of Human Nature," in Alexander Brodie, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 79-80.

the sciences of sociology, psychology, biology, and morals could show that the natural world progressed through a predictable sequence of stages that were guided by universal laws.¹⁰⁹

The first anthropologist and folklorist to occupy a university faculty position was Oxford's Edward B. Tylor. Following Spencer's lead, Tylor theorized in his 1871 book *Primitive Cultures* that man's cultures began at the lowly state of primitive savagery, or "animism," and evolved slowly toward a state of civilization. Tylor believed that it was possible to chart the trajectory of that progress through the study of certain cultural remnants, which he called "survivals." Survivals were things like myths, riddles, games, and material culture, which Tylor believed were evidence of a culture's ancient, less civilized past. Survivals did not "make sense" in the modern world because they "had been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home." However, because they were relics of the past, a scientific understanding of survivals allowed nineteenth century social scientists to catch a glimpse of the ancient primitive past of modern cultures.¹¹⁰

The American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan refined the idea of social evolution in his 1877 book *Ancient Society*. Building on the work of Spencer and Tylor, Morgan stated, "all the facts of human knowledge and experience tend to show that the human race, as a whole, has steadily progressed from a lower to a higher condition."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Sanderson. *Social Evolutionism*, 10; Carneiro. *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, 2-5.

¹¹⁰ Sanderson, *Social Evolutionism*, 15; Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, 5.

¹¹¹ Lewis Henry Morgan quoted in Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, 14-16.

Morgan mapped the stages through which he believed cultures passed as they progressed from their primitive beginnings toward civilization. He divided the process of social evolution into three main stages: savagery, barbarianism, and civilization. In the state of savagery, man's lowest stage, subsistence was limited to hunting and gathering. As societies acquired the use of weapons and the ability to make pottery, they transitioned into the state of barbarianism. In this phase, man began to gain mastery over his environment by domesticating animals, designing irrigation systems, and finally, learning to work with metal. As societies developed writing, they entered the phase of civilization in which they developed civil government and the idea of individual property.¹¹²

The popularity of folklore, anthropology, and ethnology in late nineteenth century America was based on different circumstances than those that had made the disciplines flourish in England. The end of the century found the United States engaging in an introspective quest for a national identity. In their attempt to break cultural ties with Europe and formulate a deep history that was uniquely American, intellectuals were drawn to anthropology because, as Curtis Hinsley has noted, it "was . . . an exercise in self-study by Americans who sensed but were unable to confront the tragic dimension of their culture and their own lives."¹¹³

According to the folklore historian Simon J. Bronner, Victorians who were engaged in the study of folklore, history, and natural science fixated on the evolution of cultures in an attempt to construct "a past by which to measure [their] own

¹¹² Sanderson, *Social Evolutionism*, 13.

¹¹³ Hinsley, *Savages and Scientists*, 8, 20.

accomplishments.” As the industrialized society of late nineteenth century Europe and the United States transformed rapidly, scientists sought to piece together what Bronner calls a “usable hidden past.” Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, which had first appeared in 1859, had upset the Western Christian view of history. While theologians had long taught that the world was only a few thousand years old and that it had been shaped by divine guidance, Darwin opened the door to the idea that history was infinite and that humans had had a hand in molding it.

Hinsley has pointed out that in the light of this new, and in some ways more frightening paradigm of history. “Chaos [became] a major social and intellectual concern in Victorian America.” In the face of social uncertainty, Victorians found solace in the rational predictability of the theory of social evolution. “The search for order and control,” wrote Hinsley, “was the central dynamic of Victorian America.” At the same time, it allowed the middle class to construct a version of the past that helped them form a new self identity in the rapidly changing world around them. It was a past that allowed them to believe that while they had evolved from primitive ancient ancestors, their past progress allowed them to sit at the pinnacle of evolutionary scale. This, in turn, helped them feel somewhat more secure as they vaulted headlong into the uncertainty of the future.¹¹⁴

If folklore, ethnology, and anthropology and their reliance on the theory of cultural evolution had the capacity to comfort, they also had the potential to entertain. While Victorian society saw the shadow of uncertainty in the future, it also possessed a

¹¹⁴ Hinsley, *Savages and Scientists*, 7, 83; Bronner, *American Folklore Studies*, 1-3.

sense of boredom with the present. This feeling of ennui led many to seek novel forms of entertainment, study, and distraction that were satisfied by the social sciences. The anthropologist Alison K. Brown has noted that during the final decade of the nineteenth century, the popularity of folklore and ethnography was part of a larger interest in ‘exotica’ that occupied academics and the public in America. These curiosities manifest themselves in such popular cultural outlets as circus sideshows and exhibitions of curios and oddities that titillated the prurient interests of Victorian society.¹¹⁵

America’s great quest for a national identity and its interest in the exotic intersected in the study of folklore, ethnology and anthropology and the fascination those disciplines had with American Indians. When the geographer and ethnologist Henry Schoolcraft wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that America “must draw from the broad and deep quarries of its own mountains, foundation stones, and columns and capitols” to find its identity, he believed that the nation’s “indigenous mental geognosy” resided in American Indian people and their culture. Schoolcraft characterized Indians as “walking statues” that were far more worthy of study than the ruins of the Old World.¹¹⁶

Folklorists in particular were interested in Indians because they believed that, as one of what the late nineteenth century publisher Lee J. Vance called the “backward races,” they possessed ancient survivals that were easily observable. Defined by Vance as people who had “shared . . . least in the general advance” of civilization, these backward races included indigenous Americans and Australians, European peasants,

¹¹⁵ Brown, “Collecting Material Folklore,” 34; Hinsley, *Savages and Scientists*, 190.

¹¹⁶ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft quoted in Hinsley, *Savages and Scientists*, 20.

Southern African Americans, and “those who lived outside the reach of the modern communications and transportation routes.”¹¹⁷ Lewis Henry Morgan saw great promise in the study of American Indian people. “The history and the experience of the American tribes represent, more or less neatly, the history and experience of our own remote ancestors when in corresponding conditions.” Edward B. Tylor himself stated earlier in the century that these so-called backward races deserved study because, “savage life carrying on into our own day the life of the Stone Age, may be legitimately claimed as representing remotely ancient conditions of mankind.”¹¹⁸ Hoping to catch a glimpse of survivals of the ancient past, scores of ethnologists, folklorists, and anthropologists spread out over the continent to study the American Indian population at the end of the nineteenth century.

The anthropologist Ter Ellingson has argued that the late nineteenth century academic community’s interest in the “backward races” and social evolution had a dark side that can be connected to overt attempts to scientifically justify white domination of people of color. Ellingson points in particular to the British anthropologists James Hunt, who founded the Ethnographical Society of London in the 1850s, and John Crawford, who was president of the Anthropological Society of London in the 1860s. Believing in “the innate superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of other races,” Hunt and Crawford epitomized a faction of the academic community that used social evolution and the guise of the scientific method to inflate their racist ideals with credibility. Ellingson

¹¹⁷ Lee J. Vance quoted in Bronner, *American Folklore Studies*, 8.

¹¹⁸ Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward B. Tylor quoted in Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, 20, 21.

maintains that Crawford and Hunt's promotion of negative racial stereotypes was broadly accepted by nineteenth century folklorists, ethnologists, and anthropologists.¹¹⁹ These stereotypes allowed European-American academics and white society at large to justify racial inequality and, in the case of American Indians, extermination.

¹¹⁹ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 127, 267.

Chapter Six

INDIANS AS STEREOTYPES

By the late nineteenth century, when Mary Alicia Owen was most active as a writer, the Vanishing Indian and the Noble Savage already had long histories among European-Americans and were deeply entrenched in the minds of the American people. These stereotypes of American Indians achieved prominence in nineteenth century America because the nation's population harbored a generally idealized and nostalgic view of native people. This can be attributed to that fact that European-Americans viewed indigenous people as being inherently different, largely because they were perceived to reside outside the civilized world. While European-Americans found Indians to be picturesque in their dress and body adornment, and exotic in their lifestyle, they also perceived Indians to be both frighteningly wild and stoically inscrutable. As portrayed in literature and works of art, Indians were, in the words of American studies scholar Elizabeth Bird, "the quintessential Other[s]." In a quest to assign some sort of comprehensible meaning to Indian culture, white Americans searched for existing models by which to understand them. As the social psychologist Gustav Jahoda has observed, "Whenever man can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand." The result was a popular version of American Indians that

white Americans molded from what the early twentieth century poet Vachel Lindsay called “Saxon clay.”¹²⁰

Previous generations of European-Americans, especially those living on the frontier, had feared native people as a threat to their personal safety. Newcomers to the continent and those migrating west from the eastern seaboard tended to equate Indians with the wilderness and saw them as an obstacle to the nation’s westward expansion and its effort to fulfill its Manifest Destiny. As Roderick Nash has pointed out, “Wilderness not only frustrated the pioneers physically but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol.” One of the most frightening aspects of the wilderness was the way it concealed its menacing Indian denizens. “Sweeping out of the forest to strike, and then melting back into it,” Nash writes, “savages were almost always associated with wilderness.”¹²¹

A number of events that occurred throughout the nineteenth century dramatically diminished the perceived threat of American Indians in the eyes of the general public. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 resulted in a number of horrific forced marches by which the U.S. government separated tribes from their traditional homelands. Over the next forty years, dozens of tribes were forced from their lands to make room for the expanding population of the United States. The plight of the Ponca nation to recover

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Bird, *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press: 1996): 4; Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savage: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999): 9; Vachel Lindsay “Black Hawk War of the Artists,” *The Congo and Other Poems* (New York, Dover Publications, Inc, 1992): 25-26.

¹²¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 24, 29.

their land through the legal system in the late 1870s attracted nation-wide attention and became a popular cause among Eastern philanthropists and members of the clergy.

Though the Ponca lost their case, sympathy aroused by their struggle contributed to the founding of organizations like the National Indian Defense Association and the Indian rights Association in the 1880s.¹²²

In the decades following the Civil War, the military engaged in a series of bloody assaults on native people living on the Great Plains. The so-called “Indian Wars,” which opened Indian land to U.S. settlers, lasted until federal troops killed as many as 300 Lakota, including many women, children, and elderly, near Wounded Knee Creek in Western South Dakota in 1890. In a sense, the United States’s effort to eradicate indigenous people had been so successful that it aroused feelings of sympathy among many white Americans. As Elizabeth Bird has stated, “Once Indians were no longer a threat, they became colorful and quaint.”¹²³

This growing sympathy toward American Indians manifested itself in two intertwined stereotypes that were prevalent in the popular culture of Mary Alicia Owen’s time. The first was the myth of the Noble Savage. The concept of the Noble Savage is most often associated with the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s use of the concept has generally been interpreted as a description of his Romantic ideal of a natural state of man who was neither stuck in the ignorant state of complete wildness nor corrupted by the burden of life in the completely civilized world.

¹²² Peyer, *The Singing Spirit*, ix.

¹²³ Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 4.

Because Rousseau's Noble Savage existed somewhere in between these worlds, he embodied both the nobility of virtue and the innocence of living in harmony with nature. Ter Ellingson shows however that Rousseau stated clearly that this version of the Noble Savage was a "deliberate work of fiction" and that he used it to critique so-called civilized life, not to promote an ideal state of human existence.¹²⁴

As it turns out, Rousseau did not invent the concept of the Noble Savage. Ellingson has shown that the Noble Savage first appeared more than a century prior to Rousseau's birth in French lawyer and ethnographer Marc Lescarbot's 1609 *Histoire de la Nouvelle France (History of New France)*. During his visit to the New World in 1606 and 1607, Lescarbot had been astonished to observe that the Indian population appeared to live successfully in a society that did not include a legal system. Based partly on his own observations and on the accounts of others who had traveled to New France, Lescarbot's book addressed this point by introducing the Noble Savage as a legal construct that attempted, as Ellingson put it: "[to] account for the problem of societies that could exist in the absence of anything Europeans might recognize as legal codes or institutions, by projecting a model drawn from European nobility that could satisfactorily account for the absence of a wide range of European-style political and legal constructs."¹²⁵ In other words, Lescarbot's American Indians could thrive without the apparent rule of civil law because they were guided by a parallel code of conduct based on their inherent nobility.

¹²⁴ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 80-82.

¹²⁵ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 32, xv.

On the North American continent the ideal of the Noble Savage seemed to fit easily with European immigrants' view of American Indians. As early as 1694, Père Chauchetière, a Jesuit Missionary living among the Huron, reported, "We see in the savages the fine remains of human nature which are entirely corrupted among civilized people. Indeed, all . . . who have lived among the savages reckon that life is passed more sweetly among them than among us."¹²⁶

In fact, the Noble Savage became such a fixture in European writings about the New World that it remained popular in works of fiction and art as well as travel and anthropological writings well into the twentieth century. While Chauchetière's Noble Savage seemed carefree and bucolic, cultural historian Brian Dippie notes that by the nineteenth century this literary and artistic convention appeared "as a variation on the brooding, ill-starred creature of Romantic thought."¹²⁷ Silent, strong, uncomplicated, and untroubled by the trappings of contemporary culture, the Noble Savage was an exotic antidote to civilized life.

The stereotypical traits that characterized the Noble Savage can be seen in two portraits of Sac and Fox leaders that appeared at roughly the same time that Mary Alicia Owen was writing about the tribe. In 1911 the Chicago sculptor Laredo Taft, one of the foremost American sculptors of his time, completed a forty-eight foot tall concrete sculpture of Black Hawk. The native colossus, which stands on the banks of the Rock

¹²⁶ Père Chauchetière quoted in Hugh Honour, "The Noble Savage," *The European Vision of America* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975): 195.

¹²⁷ Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1982): 20.



Figure 3: Nellie Verne Walker, *Keokuk*, 1913.
Photograph by the author, 2007.

River near Oregon, Illinois, strikes a pose that appears dignified and elegant, yet emotionally distant. The figure, shrouded for the most part by a plain blanket or robe, stands erect with arms crossed. His face bears an expression that hints of both defiance and acquiescence as he gazes over the river and surrounding countryside onto land that once belonged to the Sac and Fox people.

Two years after the completion of *Black Hawk*, one of Taft's students, the Iowa-born sculptor Nellie Verne Walker, created a statue of Black Hawk's rival, the Sac and Fox headman Keokuk (figure 3).¹²⁸ Standing on an 18-foot high base, which contains Keokuk's remains, the larger-than-life figure wears a western plains-style war bonnet, an ornament the Sac and Fox traditionally did not wear. Holding a sacred pipe to signify peace and his cooperation with the U. S. government, the bronze *Keokuk*, like *Black Hawk*, is partially obscured by a robe or blanket. With an expression of stern resolve, Keokuk gazes over the Mississippi River valley from a bluff-top park in the Iowa city that bears his name.

Though both sculptures portray men in their physical prime, neither Taft's *Black Hawk* nor Walker's *Keokuk* was modeled in an active pose. The figures do not carry weapons nor do they appear physically threatening. These are not the portraits of hunters or warriors. Instead, the two noble Sac and Fox headmen stand in contemplation and reflection and are meant to project notions of picturesque beauty, strength, and elegance.

¹²⁸ Louise Noun, "Making Her Mark: Nellie Verne Walker, Sculptor," *The Palimpsest* 64, no. 4 (1987); Greg Olson, "Nellie Verne Walker," *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008): 526-527.

These two sculptures appear strikingly similar to at least one character that appears in Mary Alicia Owen's fiction. Mohosca, the young Ioway chief from the novel, *The Daughter of Alouette*, is strong and athletic while remaining dignified and stoic. As we shall see in the next chapter, Owen, like Taft and Walker, uses this character stereotype to show Indian people living geographically and culturally on the periphery of the European-American world.

Closely linked to the stereotype of the Noble Savage was that of the Vanishing Indian. By the turn of the twentieth century the sense of sympathy that many Americans felt toward American Indians had become mixed with a collective feeling of nostalgia. In the rush to fulfill its Manifest Destiny, Anglo Americans had pushed Indian nations, buffalo, and the virgin wilderness to the very edge of extinction. By 1890 United States census figures indicated that the American frontier was, for all practical purposes, gone. In response to those figures, historian Frederick Jackson Turner expressed his belief that the frontier had been the defining element of the American character. With the passing of this phase in the development of the U.S., Turner warned that the nation would be forced to contemplate what it had lost in the name of modern civilization.¹²⁹

By the time Mary Alicia Owen conducted her research on the Sac and Fox, European-Americans clung to the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian out of a sense of mourning for the demise of native people. The Vanishing Indian gained popularity as cities in the U. S. became increasingly industrialized and the lives of the urban Americans

¹²⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover, 1996): 1-38.

left them less connected to the natural world. Historians have noted that as North America's "virgin" landscape became a maze of towns, railroad tracks, and telegraph wires, European-Americans began to nostalgically identify Indians with the passing wilderness.¹³⁰ Literary critic Klaus Lubbers has noted that, in postcolonial America, "Native Americans... were overwhelmingly associated with the past." Similarly, Roy Harvey Pearce has written that "Americans . . . worked out a theory of the savage which depended on an idea of a new order in which the Indian could have no part."¹³¹ As General John Benjamin Sanborn, a member of the post Civil War Indian Peace Commission, lamented in the late 1860s, "Little can be hoped for [Indians] as a distinct people. The sun of their day is fast sinking in the western sky. It will soon go down in a night of oblivion that shall know no morning. . . . No spring time shall renew their fading glory, no future know their fame."¹³²

The novelist and essayist Thomas King points out the allure of the Vanishing Indian in the American Romantic Period.

With its emphasis on feeling, interest in nature, its fascination with exoticism, mysticism, and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification of the past, American Romanticism found in the Indian a

¹³⁰ In recent decades a number of historians have argued that that the North American continent was not the virgin or pristine wilderness that early Europeans believed it to be. Prior to European contact, American Indians had significantly modified the landscape through such activities as hunting, agriculture, and planned burning. See Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1989); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); and Colin G. Callaway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

¹³¹ Lubbers, *Born for the Shade*, 32; Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 4.

¹³² John Benjamin Sanborn quoted in Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 83-84.

symbol in which all these concerns could be united. The Romantics imagined their Indian as dying. But in that dying, in that passing away, in that disappearing from the stage of human progress, there was also a sense of nobility.¹³³

Toward the end of his life, Black Hawk had become a popular symbol of the Vanishing Indian. Travelers' accounts from 1834 claim that after he was freed from prison, the famous headman performed on a showboat on the Mississippi River in which young Sac and Fox men danced for money. After hearing about the show, a traveler named John H. B. Latrobe despondently recorded his reaction to it in a journal entry dated November 29, 1834:

How pitiable—how melancholy—the red warrior who but a few brief months ago was at the head of a brave band of his countrymen and friends, endeavoring to wage war against the white man, their invader and their curse, is now turning his warriors into buffoons to win a melancholy one—but what help is there for it. Civilization will pass on among them and they must be trampled beneath its footsteps or flee when they cannot follow them.¹³⁴

One of the most enduring icons of the Vanishing Indian is sculptor James Earle Frazier's *The End of the Trail* (figure 4), which debuted in the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Though Frazier's sculpture sought to depict a weary Indian man struggling to ride a horse over a rocky trail in a snowstorm, it embodies a blatant metaphor. The male figure, slumped and nearly lifeless, barely retains his grasp on his war lance, which is useless against the storm and points passively toward the ground. Both the rider and his horse appear exhausted and are unable to resist the strong wind that pushes them forward. Frazier's sagging figure represents native culture as it appeared at

¹³³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 33.

¹³⁴ John H. B. Latrobe, journal entry, 29 November 1834, quoted in Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 50-51.



THE END OF THE TRAIL
James Earle Fraser, Sculptor

Figure 4: James Earle Fraser, *The End of the Trail*, 1915.
Juliet James, *Descriptive Notes on the Art of the Statuary at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition San Francisco* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Company Publishers, 1915).

the time: decimated, powerless, and doomed to be pushed into extinction.

Frazier's visual allegory is reinforced by a quote from the poet Marion Manville Pope that appears next to a picture of *End of the Trail* in the official exposition catalogue: "The trail is lost, the path is hid, and winds that blow from out the ages sweep me on to that chill borderland where Time's spent sands engulf lost peoples and lost trails."¹³⁵

As we will see, Mary Alicia Owen made the Vanishing Indian the centerpiece of two of the works she wrote about native people, *The Sacred Council Hills* and *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians*. Like the subject of Frazier's iconic image, many of the native people in Owen's works are being pushed away from their land toward certain extinction.

The two closely intertwined yet contradictory images of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian symbolize White America's deep ambivalence about American Indian people. Americans both loved and despised Indian people because of who they were and how they lived. Literary historian Danielle E. Conger points out that in the minds of late nineteenth century Anglo Americans, Indians "were both admirable and alarming, noble and base, compassionate and cruel."¹³⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, writers like George Wharton James epitomized the admiration some Americans had for American Indians. A critic of the unhealthy habits of modern Americans, James wrote his 1908 book *What the White Race May Learn from the Indian* to "rail against . . . that which I deem bad . . . in its effect on the

¹³⁵ Juliet James, *Descriptive Notes on the Art of the Statuary at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition San Francisco* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Company Publishers, 1915).

¹³⁶ Danielle E. Conger, "Toward a Native American Nationalism: Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*" *The New England Quarterly* 72 (Dec 1999): 559.

bodies, minds or souls of [our] citizens.” He encouraged European-Americans to look to native people to learn to live a “simple, natural, and therefore healthy life.” James extolled the virtues of a simple diet and such native practices as outdoor living—which he maintained not only allowed “the body to remain in the open” but also permitted the mind and the soul to live there as well. He challenged his readers to “learn the meaning of low living and high thinking. Stop pampering your sensual appetites and feeding your stomachs at the expense of your minds and your souls.” Though James took pains to point out that the lives of American Indians are far from perfect, he stated, “give me ignorance (of books and schools) and health, rather than education (of books and schools) and a broken down, nervous, irritable body.”¹³⁷

Charles Eastman, a Santee Dakota who lived a traditional life in northern Minnesota and Canada until age fifteen, and who was educated at Dartmouth, was also a strong proponent of the benefits of an “Indian life.” Idealizing his childhood, which was filled with such outdoor activities as horseback riding, hunting, and swimming, Eastman relied on the self mastery he learned through these activities to help him face the challenges of living in the white world. Hoping that his experiences might benefit others, Eastman wrote books and worked with the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America to create outdoor programs. Eastman’s teachings centered on nature and the benefits that a life in the outdoors brought to European-American society. “It was not that [Eastman believed] Indians were better than white people,” writes Francis Karttunen. Eastman taught others that Indians’ “contact with nature made them somewhat less bad” than

¹³⁷ George Wharton James, *What the White Race May Learn from the Indian* (Chicago: Forbes and Company, 1908): 29, 38, 49, 124.

whites. Creating his own brand of Indian spirituality that Karttunen argues shared more with transcendentalism than with native religions, Eastman advocated oneness with nature and the value of imitating the virtue found in the behavior of animals. Eastman believed the “Great mystery” of life could be found in nature and pointed to Indian ways, or at least his own version of those ways, for the key to unlock that mystery.¹³⁸

Not all authors of the period, however, were as willing as James and Eastman to embrace American Indian life. No matter how healthy his lifestyle or how closely he lived with nature, the Noble Savage was still a savage. As such, he was stuck in the past and his existence was seen as being at odds with America’s progress towards civilization. Art historian Alan Trachtenberg writes that, because of his backward ways, the Noble Savage, much like the image of the primitive immigrant, stood in the way of America’s attempts at late nineteenth century nation building: “Both Indians and immigrants were subjected to a process called ‘Americanization,’ a set of institutional devices and regimes that operated with a prior notion of what and who an American was supposed to be, an essentialist idea of a presumed cultural nationality Indians and immigrants undercut the premise that there was a definable American nationality.”¹³⁹ In other words, as Americans codified the definition of what they would become as a people, they left no place in that vision for those who were not white, civilized, and Christian.

¹³⁸ Frances Karttunen, *Between World: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994): 157-164.

¹³⁹ Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indian, Making Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004): xxiv.

This philosophy manifests itself in a series Bureau of Indian Affairs programs that were designed to help Native Americans transition into white society. These programs were guided by what we now refer to as paternalism. According to Francis Paul Prucha, paternalism was characterized by three principles. The first principle held that because indigenous people—like European-American people—came from the hand of God, they were endowed with the same capacities as all other people. Certainly, this was the belief of the first Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Thomas L. McKenney. McKenney rejected what was then the newly emerging theory of polygenesis put forth by some American ethnographers. While nineteenth century ethnologists theorized that various races had different beginnings, McKenney believed that all humans came from a single genesis and that American Indians migrated to North America from Asia.¹⁴⁰

The second principle of Paternalism stated that while Native people were physically and mentally equal to white European-Americans, their cultural circumstance had rendered them temporarily inferior. Supporters of this idea pointed to the so-called primitive state of indigenous life as justification for this claim. While European-Americans lived in an agrarian-industrial society steeped in the tenets of Christianity, native people were viewed as being mired in the state of savagism or barbarism, living as hunter-gatherers, and worshiping pagan idols. Paternalists believed that while native people had the capacity to evolve and reach the level of civilization, they had not yet had sufficient time to do so.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Francis Paul Prucha, *The Indians in American Society: From the Revolutionary War to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

It naturally followed then that the third ideal of paternalism was the belief that it was the duty of European-Americans, as civilized people, to help speed up the process of cultural evolution by guiding native people toward civilization. In the words Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, American Indians “should be taken under our guardianship; and our opinion, not theirs, ought to prevail, in measures intended for their civilization and happiness.”¹⁴²

If typecasting Indian people allowed Americans to feel justified in attempting to take paternalistic control over the destiny of Indian people, it also helped European-Americans formulate a national identity. The notion that Indians had to vanish in order for the nation to thrive has left Phillip J. Deloria to wonder if America’s paradoxical relationship with Indians was not based on vampirism. “The self-defining pairing of American truth with American freedom,” writes Deloria, “rests on the ability to wield power against Indians—social, military, economic, and political—while simultaneously drawing power from them.”¹⁴³ Painfully aware that identities could be subverted by violence, political turmoil, and economic upheaval, Americans like Mary Alicia Owen seemed to find comfort in the clearly defined otherness of American Indians. On a national level, that awareness helped create a consensus about what an American was, and what an American was not. It also allowed those who deemed themselves to be true Americans to intervene in the lives of the others who were not. In Owen’s case, this intervention led her to visit the Sac and Fox often for the purposes of research and study

¹⁴¹ Prucha, *The Indians in American Society*, 8.

¹⁴² John C. Calhoun quoted in Prucha, *The Indians in American Society*, 9.

¹⁴³ Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 191.

and the preservation of the remaining fragments of a culture she believed was vanishing forever. That Owen's work relied so heavily on stereotypical variations of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian is testament to the potency of these images and to their usefulness in defining her identity as well as that of the United States.

Chapter Seven

OWEN'S WRITINGS ABOUT INDIANS

Mary Alicia Owen's first book *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, was published in England in 1892 and appeared the following year in the United States. Though the book is generally characterized as an examination of African American folklore, the influence of American Indians on that culture is one of its central themes. In his introduction to *Old Rabbit*, Charles Leland wrote that "there is in Missouri, as 'all along the border,' a mixed race of Negro and Indian descent, who inherited a vast stock of the traditions of both races, and combined or blended them strangely into new life." He observed that the stories Owen included in the volume exhibited a "very great predominance of red Indian." Leland seemed eager to view these stories as artifacts from the dark world of magic and voodoo that Owen had spoken of in her presentation at the 1891 Folk-Lore Congress in London. He titillated Owen's readers by asserting that, unlike the American Indian magic, which he believed to be based in fasting, contemplation and 'prayer,'" the "voodooism" from which Owen's stories sprang relied on a level of "daring that was horrible and repulsive."¹⁴⁴

Despite Leland's attempts to connect the stories to the occult, many readers apparently saw Owen's collection as a simple successor to the popular Uncle Remus tales Joel Chandler Harris had published a dozen years earlier in *Legends of the Plantation*

¹⁴⁴ Leland, Introduction to *Old Rabbit*: v-vi.

(1881). Like Harris, Owen created narrators to tell folk tales in first person dialect. Yet, while Harris had employed the persona of an elderly African American male to relay such stories as “Br'er Rabbit,” Owen created five elderly female “aunties” to give voice to the tales in *Old Rabbit*.¹⁴⁵ All but one of Owen’s narrators are of mixed African American and American Indian ancestry. Aunt Jinny, who is most often simply called Granny, is a descendant of the Lenae Lenape, who are better known as the Delaware, a tribe that the federal government had forcibly moved to the vicinity of Leavenworth, Kansas in the 1840s. Big Angy is Métis. Her father was a “famous” French hunter and her mother the daughter of an Ioway Chief. Aunt Em'ly’s father had been a member of the Sac and Fox tribe while Aunt Mary considers herself simply to be “some Injun.” Only Aunt Mymee was of purely African decent. She claimed to be the daughter of a sorceress from Guinea who, having learned to be a conjurer herself, would have “her acquaintances believe that she had the devil for a father.” Owen’s storytellers gather in Granny’s cabin each evening to smoke and tell stories, often for the benefit of little Tow Head.¹⁴⁶

The folk tales that Owen included in *Old Rabbit* bear a further resemblance to Harris’s Uncle Remus tales in that they are exclusively folk stories having to do with animal characters. Nonetheless, Leland observed that *Old Rabbit* was more than a replication of Harris’s classic collection. Though the “mere general reader, for amusement, may judge the book” to be an imitation of the Uncle Remus tales, wrote

¹⁴⁵ McNeil, “Mary Alicia Owen,” 7-8.

¹⁴⁶ Owen, *Old Rabbit*, 2-11.

Leland, “no folk-lorist can fail to see its true value. It is in this inner and true character that the value of this really remarkable work consists.”¹⁴⁷

It is difficult to know whether the elderly female characters Owen used in *Old Rabbit* are factual or fictional. However, as we have already seen, Owen clearly modeled the character of Tow Head on herself and merged fiction with reality in the scene in which she asks a conjurer to make a luck charm for Charles Leland. The scene also makes clear that “King A_____,” as the conjurer in *Old Rabbit* is referred to, is the same King Alexander that Owen mentioned in her correspondence with Leland in 1889. This leads us to question the identity of the five elderly storytellers who inhabit *Old Rabbit*. One can easily suppose that these women too are based on actual people and that their relationship with Tow Head reflects Owen’s relationship with the women she referred to as her “aunties.”¹⁴⁸

In his review of *Old Rabbit* in the journal *Folklore*, E. Sidney Hartland noted, “Usually, the setting of a work on folk-lore in a fictitious, or semi-fictitious, framework is hardly to be commended from the scientific view.” Nonetheless, Hartland believed that in Owen’s case, the format worked because the richness with which she described her main characters helped to set the context from which these stories came. Hartland also pointed out that Owen’s collection was not “confined to those with which we are familiar in *Uncle Remus* and Mr. Charles Jones’s *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast*” because many of the stories were “quite new.” He attributed this to the fact that many were

¹⁴⁷ Leland, Introduction to *Old Rabbit*: vii-viii.

¹⁴⁸ Owen, *Old Rabbit*, 169-177; Pannell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 318-320.

heavily influenced by American Indian traditions. He judged that the relationship of these stores to the traditions and practice of voodoo would only be determined “when we have a fuller and more systematic account before us.” He continued, “Miss Owen was able to only whet our appetite at the London Congress; and she is far from satisfying it on the subject of Voodoo mysteries in *Old Rabbit*.”¹⁴⁹

In the *Journal of American Folklore*, a review attributed to “J. O. D.” also touted the Indian origins of the collection, noting “this is the first indication of the existence, among Missouri negroes, of tales so closely corresponding to Indian narratives.” In fact, it was the reviewer’s belief that most of the stories found in *Old Rabbit* were deeply rooted in American Indian traditions. In support of this point, the reviewer carefully noted the similarities between the tales Owen had collected and those traditionally told by such Siouan language-speaking tribes as the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, and Ioway. The reviewer regretted that Owen had not been clearer about the specific informants who had provided her with her stories and urged her to continue her work so that in the future “the history of these variants of Indian tales may be traced with exactitude.”¹⁵⁰ Given the reviewer’s obvious familiarity with Siouan oral tradition, it seems likely that he was James Owen Dorsey, a missionary who had spent years studying Siouan language and tales and who published important articles on Siouan traditions and cults in the 1890s. Because Dorsey was particularly familiar with the Ioway, Ponca and Omaha, all Siouan

¹⁴⁹ E. Sydney Heartland, Review of *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, by Mary Alicia Owen, *Folklore* 5 (March 1894): 72-73.

¹⁵⁰ Leland, Introduction to *Old Rabbit*, v, vii; J[ames]. O[wen]. D[orsey], Review of *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, by Mary Alicia Owen, *Journal of American Folklore* 6 (October-December 1893): 322-324.

tribes that lived along Missouri's western border, it is interesting to read his assessment of Owen's collection. Where Charles Leland had seen Algonquin—specifically Sac and Fox—stories, Dorsey saw Siouan stories. The disagreement calls to mind Owen's confusion over the "Sac Tales" she had published with her Sac and Fox and Ioway informant Mary Lasley.

Following the success of *Old Rabbit*, Owen began to establish herself in academic circles by becoming active in the American Folk-Lore Congress, attending academic conferences and meetings, and publishing articles in professional journals. Owen intended to follow *Old Rabbit* with a book on African American Voodoo magic and ritual. For reasons that are unclear today, she abandoned the project. In February 1894, Charles Godfrey Leland cryptically wrote to Owen, "I am sorry that the Voodoo business is interrupted, but a strong will, ingenious trickery and a belief in you will set it all right. You must rehabilitate yourself." Jean Fahey Eberle has hinted that the dark nature of Owen's research may have frightened her to the point of dropping the book. However, the project might also have hit a dead end because Owen's primary informant in voodoo, King Alexander, died in 1892.¹⁵¹

Following her aborted voodoo project, Owen published three major works that focused on American Indians in Missouri. The first of these works was a novel, *The Daughter of Alouette*, which appeared in 1896. *The Daughter of Alouette* picks up on themes Owen first explored in her 1889 story "The Taming of Tarias." The book focuses on the social interaction that takes place between members of western Missouri's

¹⁵¹ Eberle. *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 61; Leland to Owen, February 25, 1894, in Pennel, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 372, 356.

European-American, African American, and American Indian populations during St. Joseph's early years. The year following the publication of *The Daughter of Alouette*, Mary Alicia Owen submitted a paper on the folklore of the Sac and Fox for a conference of the British Association in Toronto. Because Owen was unable to travel to the meeting, her paper was read by at the conference by a third party. Nonetheless, her work made such an impact on the delegates who heard it that the Folklore Society asked her to expand it into a book that would be her last major academic work, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America*.¹⁵² The book, which was published in London in 1904, is more a work of cultural anthropology than one of folklore. It not only combined many of the stories and customs that Owen had observed in her years of visiting the Sac and Fox, it also catalogued the collection of more than one hundred Sac and Fox artifacts that she had donated to the Folklore Society in Britain in 1901. Owen again shifted her efforts following the publication of *Folk-lore of the Musquakie* by publishing a play titled *The Sacred Council Hills* in 1909. It is a highly stylized melodrama that takes place among the Sac and Fox during their removal from the future site of St. Joseph and the Platte Country in 1838.

Mary Alicia Owen wrote these three works at a time when readers in the United States were hungry for popular literature written about Native Americans. While Owen was hardly the only European-American author attempting to satisfy the public's desire, an increasing number of native people were writing their own stories by the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of federally operated boarding schools for Indian children in

¹⁵² E. Sidney Hartland, Preface to *The Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America*, by Mary Alicia Owen (London: David Nutt, 1904): v

the 1870s had contributed to the emergence of what Bernd C. Peyer has called an Indian intellectual elite by 1900. While native people had once served as informants for European-American ethnographers and folklorists like Owen, many were beginning to set their own stories in print.¹⁵³

Along with his work as a physician and promoter of outdoor activity, Charles Eastman was the author of several books. The most famous of these, *Recollections of a Wild Life*, was an autobiographical account of his traditional Santee Dakota childhood in Minnesota and Canada and the journey that led him to his education at Dartmouth. Similarly, Francis La Flesche, who was Omaha, wrote of his early childhood and of his education at a Presbyterian boarding school in present-day Nebraska. Zitkala-Sa, a Lakota woman also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, published articles in *The Atlantic* and *Harpers* and produced two collections of American Indian folklore.¹⁵⁴ These native authors, along with others such as Oglala Lakota Luther Standing Bear and E. Pauline Johnson, who was from Canada's Six Nations confederacy, all wrote works that were deeply rooted in their native heritage. While these authors wrote in a wide range of styles, from ethnography (La Flesche) to poetry (Johnson), all functioned as what Frances Karttunen has called cultural guides who endeavor to help their European-American audiences navigate the distance between European-American and American Indian cultures. Bernd C. Peyer has observed that as guides, this generation of writers

¹⁵³ Peyer, *The Singing Spirit*, viii-x.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Luther Cary, "Recent Writings by American Indians." *The Book Buyer* (1902, Internet, University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarRece.html>, accessed 27 May 2009): 21-25.

continued to function as informants by recording details of their cultures and folkways.¹⁵⁵

While it is not known whether Mary Alicia Owen read works written by these American Indian authors, it does seem likely that she was aware of the reading public's growing interest in stories about Indian life and culture. Earlier in her career, Owen had shown a degree of marketing savvy by writing short fiction that capitalized on the popularity of local-color stories. Similarly, her books on Indians came at a time when the popularity of American Indian characters and themes was on the rise.

While Owen's three major works about Indians—one novel, one play, and one work of cultural anthropology—appear to be quite dissimilar in their focus, tone, and style, they are each the product of Owen's contemplations on the nineteenth century history of American Indians in Western Missouri. In these three works, Owen employs the image of the stereotypical Noble Savage and Vanishing Indian as she examines American Indians as both subjects of scientific study and as stylized fictional characters. These stereotypes allow Owen to show that while the native people about whom she writes wrestle with a world that is ever changing, they appear to have little or no control over their place in that world. Whether confronting the encroachment of white settlers in the 1830s or struggling to maintain their traditional lifestyle in the 1890s, Owen's Indian characters are forced to contend with a future that seems uncertain at best.

In *The Daughter of Alouette*, the Noble Savage plays a prominent role. Taminnika, the book's protagonist, is the Métis child of a French trader named Pierre Rulo and a

¹⁵⁵ Peyer, *The Singing Spirit*, vii; Karttunen, *Between Worlds*, 73-83.

Pawnee mother called Tite Alouette. After the death of her mother, the infant Taminnika is taken in by Elias Zone, a European-American Methodist minister, and his wife Alice in Robidoux Town, a thinly disguised version of St. Joseph. Though she lives a happy childhood with her adopted parents, their daughter Lily, and their two slaves, Uncle Washington and Aunt Nancy, Taminnika troubles the family with her inability to suppress a tendency toward behavior the Zones considered wild and unladylike. Taminnika's penchant for wildness ultimately leads the Zones to send her to a finishing school in Louisville, Kentucky.

Despite Taminnika's best efforts to live in the white world after her return from school, a series of encounters draws her toward her American Indian roots. At a gala party held at the home of an elite local family, a visiting St. Louis socialite rebuffs Taminnika by inquiring loudly to those around her if she "was the pretty half-breed there has been so much joking about."¹⁵⁶

When word of the party spreads through Robidoux Town, a local African American voodoo priestess, Queen Ahola, tries to lure Taminnika into becoming her protégé. During a late night meeting Ahola questions the young woman's loyalty to the whites who raised her. "Could it be pleasant, do you think, for [your Indian ancestors] to return to earth, and find you copying the life of the enemies who drove them to their death," the priestess inquires. Ahola, who is three-quarters white, despises whites because they judge her by her one-quarter African American ancestry and will not accept her as one of their own. She attempts to persuade Taminnika to share this disdain. "We are the

¹⁵⁶ Mary Alicia Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette* (London: Methuen and Company, 1896): 137.

children that should never have been born,” she tells Taminnika. “We are the mixed bloods that, while despising our mothers, pity them; and hate their fathers the more on their account.”¹⁵⁷

Though Taminnika rejects the Queen’s dark invitation, her resolve to live in white society is once again tested when she meets the noble young Ioway Chief Mohosca.¹⁵⁸ Owen endows this young Ioway man with the stoic strength and solid virtue that is common in the Noble Savage. He is clearly an outsider who, throughout the novel, appears aloof and someone morally superior to the whites with whom he has contact. In one incident Mohosca is falsely accused of stealing a white man’s horse. During a scuffle with lawmen, Taminnika comes to Mohosca’s rescue by snatching the sheriff’s revolver and handing it to him. The young Ioway, however, shows his true nobility by politely and indifferently handing the gun back to its owner. Though Mohosca is ultimately exonerated in the theft, the incident leaves him permanently smitten with Taminnika. Much to Reverend Zone’s horror, the Ioway leader courts their adopted daughter by playing a flute outside the family home for several nights.

Taminnika’s initial resistance to Mohosca’s overtures weakens when a distant Pawnee cousin asks for her help in performing a mourning ritual. As Taminnika considers the call to return to her mother’s people, she is amazed that “there awakened in

¹⁵⁷ Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette*, 178-179.

¹⁵⁸ Mohosca appears to be based on the Ioway leader Mahaska II, who was also known as Francis White Cloud (c. 1811-1859). Mahaska II was one of the headmen of the Ioway at the time the tribe moved to the Great Nemaha Reservation in 1837. He married a mixed-blood woman, Mary “Many Days’ Robidoux, the daughter of trader and founder of St. Joseph, Missouri, Joseph Robidoux. See Coy and Hill, “The Genealogy and History of the White Cloud Family”; Blaine, *The Ioway Indians*; and Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, “Young Mahaska,” *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: D. Rice and A. N. Hart, 1855).

[her] breast . . . a fierce yearning to go to the sad old relative.” She also recognizes that this event will change her life. “‘I shall be sure where my place is ever after. If I make the visit,’ she tells herself.”¹⁵⁹

In fact, Taminnika does find her place during her stay on the reservation. She attends the annual Green Corn dance where, despite her strict Methodist upbringing, Taminnika is unable to resist being drawn into the circle of dancers to clasp hands with Mohosca “as if it were the ceremonial of the married ones.” The experience becomes an epiphany for Taminnika, who sobs, “O Spirit of my mother’s race, I hear you call . . . I come! Thy people shall be my people.”¹⁶⁰

It is at this point in the story that the noble Chief Mohosca is forced to confront his own ethnic identity. When Taminnika’s father, Reverend Zone, declares that he will not give his adopted daughter away to someone who is not a Christian, Mohosca realizes that in order to win her, he must court her in the manner of the whites. He therefore dons European-American clothing and allows himself to be “cribbed, cabined and confined” in a linen suit and leather boots so that he can walk Taminnika and her parents from church services.

Despite his efforts to live in the white world, it is Mohosca’s “savage” strength that ultimately seals his engagement.¹⁶¹ His opportunity comes one evening after a would-be white suitor kidnaps Taminnika from outside the meetinghouse. While

¹⁵⁹ Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette*, 265.

¹⁶⁰ Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette*, 295-296.

¹⁶¹ Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette*, 318-319.

Reverend Zone and his male parishioners try to decide the best way to pursue the kidnappers, Mohosca strips off his “cramping boots” and “hampering coat” and runs like “never even an Iowa[y] ran before” in an effort to rescue Taminika. Muddy roads slow the progress of the kidnappers’ horses and allow Mohosca to catch them on foot. Drawing his war club “from the pocket his tailor had destined for more pacific instruments,” the stealthy warrior disables the captors and rescues Taminnika. Weeks later the two are married and return to the reservation to live among the Ioway.¹⁶²

Like “The Taming of Tarias,” *The Daughter of Alouette* is noteworthy in that it portrays a world in which people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds live and work together. As a result, Owen’s Robidoux Town is a place where ethnic identities are often mixed and ambiguous. Several of the characters, such as Taminnika and the voodoo priestess Queen Ahola, are of mixed ethnic backgrounds. Yet while Owen acknowledges the fluidity of ethnic heritage, she portrays racial identity as being largely static, especially that of American Indians. In her survey of early silent films, Joanna Hearne notes that in stories and films made in the early twentieth century, this was often the case. American Indian characters who had received European-American education and lived in the Anglo world were often shown making the choice to “return to their tribes, depicting a latent, racially based ‘call of the wild’ that could reclaim eastern-educated Indians and mixed-blood children from their new lives.” While Taminika

¹⁶² Owen, *The Daughter of Alouette*, 322-323.

valiantly attempts to fit into the white world, she is ultimately drawn “back to the blanket” and to life on the reservation.¹⁶³

Mary Alicia Owen employs the stereotype of the Noble Savage to represent American Indian identity. On the one hand, Owen uses the Noble Savage to add a romantic element to what is, on one level, a love story. Young Mohosca is strong, quiet, handsome, and athletic, yet his heart is true and his character is uncontaminated by the greed and vice that have claimed many of his European-American neighbors. He is a warrior who refuses to raise a hand to defend himself from a sheriff’s posse, but will fight to rescue the woman he loves. His nobility is his strength, yet it also makes him vulnerable to Taminnika’s charms.

On the other hand, Owen also employs the Noble Savage stereotype in order to tell us that while native people occupied Missouri’s western border in the 1830s and 1840s, they had no place in the European-American culture that was developing there. Mohosca is an outsider whose manners, culture, and lifestyle ensure that he will never find a comfortable place in Victorian society. While he attempts to assimilate by confining his wildness inside a linen suit and leather boots, he is unable to overcome his Indian identity and ultimately sheds his clothing to save Taminika from her white kidnappers. It seems fitting that when Mohosca marries Taminnika, the newlyweds follow their native hearts and choose to live with the Ioway on their reservation outside of “civilized” Missouri. Throughout the story, Owen wants us to believe that this ending is inevitable because neither of her native characters is able to fully assimilate to life in

¹⁶³ Hearne, “The Cross-Heart People,” 191.

the refined world of the whites. Though the book ends with the couple beginning a new life together, Owen endeavors to leave us with the feeling that this new beginning is ill-fated because it takes place at a time when Indian people and their culture appeared destined to disappear forever.

The destiny of the Vanishing Indian is a theme on which Mary Alicia Owen builds her 1904 *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America*. In the book, Owen attempts to thoroughly document the culture of the Sac and Fox by describing various aspects that she had observed about their religion, ceremonies, government, and folklore. She devotes the second half of the book to a catalogue listing of the artifacts she had collected during her visits to the tribe's settlements.

In his introduction to Owen's text, anthropologist E. Sidney Heartland lamented that Owen's study was especially valuable because the Sac and Fox "have been beaten; and they are now a dying people." Though they may carry on "in some measure," he continued, "their ancient beliefs and institutions are passing away for ever."¹⁶⁴ With these words, Heartland defines the Sac and Fox as a culture that exists outside the parameter of European-American civilization and which does not participate in its cultural and technical progress. Though they remained alive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Heartland firmly associates the Sac and Fox with the ancient past.

In her own text, Owen supports Heartland's theme of the dying Sac and Fox by alluding to the many ways in which the link between their twentieth century lives and

¹⁶⁴ Heartland, Preface to *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, vi.

their ancient history and beliefs is becoming increasingly precarious. For example, she describes the position of the tribal historian, the only person among the Sac and Fox who she believed has complete command of the oral literature that documents the people's official history. According to Owen, it is the historian's duty to recount the tribes' history in its entirety four times a year at government councils and anecdotally at dances and other ceremonies that take place throughout the year. It is also his job to select a young boy with a good memory to serve as his student. Over the years, the historian helps the boy commit the oral literature of the Sac and Fox people's past to memory so that when the historian dies, the history will be retained. Owen relates that this precarious method of transmitting the tribe's history had, on at least one occasion, nearly led to the history being lost altogether when the historian and his apprentice both died unexpectedly. "Then," Owen writes, "there was confusion and dismay" until a disabled boy "of low degree" revealed that he had often eavesdropped on many of the sessions during which the historian transmitted the nation's history to his student. So completely had the second boy memorized the lessons of the historian that "his grateful people broke rules for once . . . and set him on the council as historian."¹⁶⁵ By emphasizing the story of the nearly-lost history, Owen seems to suggest that, in her eyes, the Sac and Fox are unreliable stewards of their own history.

Owen reinforces the theme of the vanishing traditions of the Sac and Fox in the catalogue portion of *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*. In that section she cites the people's lost traditions as the reason for their shifting relationship with their material culture. She

¹⁶⁵ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 31-32.

tells us that objects that were once utilitarian in nature, such as bows, arrows, war clubs, and pipes are now used ceremonially in “historical drama[s] to illustrate what the tribal historian relates.” To the “wild man surrounded by civilization and making a stand against it,” she writes, “everything that relates to his free and savage past has become a ceremonial object.”¹⁶⁶

Even so, Owen portrayed tribal members as generally being uninterested or unable to care for their own material culture. She recounts stories of how this situation allowed her to buy several items from tribal members. One person sold her a Catlinite pipe because it had once been used by a “drunken chief” and was therefore tainted. Owen purchased a parfleche of painted buffalo hide “from a poor widow who had no sons to care for it,” and a treaty belt that was sold by its owners “as a revenge for the affront of the Sacs on the Nemaha Reservation, who endeavored to have a few Musquakies on that reservation expelled.” As Owen and other anthropologists and souvenir hunters sought to buy these exotic artifacts, many of the tribe’s most culturally important relics slipped out of their possession. Of the four pipes used during meetings of the tribal council, for instance, Owen informs us that only one remained, and the secret of its whereabouts is one that, by her account, the Sac and Fox guarded as carefully as that of the Mee-sham.

In the past, some of these items might have been replaced or repaired by skilled craftspeople. Owen, however, expresses the opinion that many of the secrets of these craftspeople have also been lost. Sac and Fox women, she informs her readers, no longer

¹⁶⁶ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 95, 138, 140, 143.

possess the ability to tan soft and supple hides, and few have the patience necessary to create the type of skilled beadwork that had been the hallmark of their ancestors. While it is impossible to know if Owen's assertion is accurate, it does show that she believed that the Sac and Fox were quickly losing their ability to make and care for their traditional material culture.¹⁶⁷

It is worth noting that in *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, Owen writes at length about just two Sac and Fox people. One is her informant Nikon-Mackintosh, the orphaned healer who had been raised by a European-American doctor, who Owen portrays as a variant of the Noble Savage. Owen's brief account of Mackintosh's life bears a similarity to that of Taminnika, the character she created in *The Daughter of Alouette*. Like Taminnika, Mackintosh returns to his people as an adult, but not with the intention of carrying "civilization to his people." The young doctor returns to assist the Sac and Fox by practicing "every art of ancient sorcery with such additions as his scientific knowledge may suggest." Owen infers that, despite his Anglo education and upbringing, Mackintosh, like Taminnika, has no place in the modern world because, as she says, "once an Indian, always an Indian."¹⁶⁸

It is telling, perhaps, that Owen's most detailed account of a Sac and Fox individual in *Folk-lore of the Musquakie* is devoted to No-chu-ning, who is literally a Vanishing Indian. When Owen introduces the young man, he is about to die of tuberculosis. In his last moments, No-Chu-ning's mother begs him to sing his death

¹⁶⁷ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 34, 114, 121, 138, 142.

¹⁶⁸ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 29.

song. In traditional times, warriors who faced death in battle would sing of the good deeds they had accomplished in warfare and in life. But No-Chu-ning refused to sing a death song because, as Owen surmises, “no one raises his death song now.” Owen surmises that this is because there is no point in wasting one’s last breath to “tell of a few horse races won, or quickened to defy the tribe’s relentless enemy, consumption?”¹⁶⁹ It is Owen’s belief, in other words, that because the young man had apparently accomplished little in life and had been felled by sickness rather than by a battlefield opponent, he had nothing of note to sing about. Owen devotes ten pages to a detailed description of No-Chu-ning’s death, burial, and the sending off of his spirit. This last ceremony seems to have had some potency for Owen. In *The Daughter of Alouette*, it was the plea of a Pawnee relative for assistance with the mourning ceremony that drew Taminnika back to the reservation and initiated her return to her people. As we shall see, rituals related to death and mourning become the central metaphor in Owen’s the final work about Indians.

Owen extensively relied upon the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian in her 1909 play, *The Sacred Council Hills*. According to Jean Fahey Eberle, Owen originally published *The Sacred Council Hills* in prose form in England in 1907. Bowing to local requests that she create something for the students of St. Joseph High School to perform on stage, Owen rewrote *The Sacred Council Hills* as a play that she published herself two

¹⁶⁹ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 78.

years later.¹⁷⁰ Written for adolescents to perform on stage in an era in which theatric melodramas were popular, the action and dialogue in *The Sacred Council Hills* is highly stylized. The work is characterized by overwrought emotions, overly dramatic language, and Indian characters who sometimes deliver lines in rhyming couplet.

The play opens as the Sac and Fox of the Missouri arrive in the Sacred Council Hills, the place on which present-day St. Joseph now stands. In the opening scene, Owen's Sac and Fox characters express gratitude to Manitou, the creator, for having arrived at a site that has special significance to them as the first step on the "Road to Paradise." The leader of the Sac and Fox, a headman named Mohosca, reminds his people that in this "delicious land," "if we are sorrowful [we] feel comforted, if ill become healed, if already breaking from the bonds of flesh set out at once on the way to paradise instead of waiting."¹⁷¹ Owen had elsewhere elaborated on the importance of the Sacred Hills as a place of refuge and as an important burial place. "It was good to die here," she wrote in an undated and unpublished manuscript. "The Indian of any tribe drew his last sigh here beside the Missouri in as happy confidence in his beatitude as the East Indian has today on the banks of the Ganges." She continued, "I have enough of the Indian spirit myself to feel that heaven is a little nearer and a little surer here than elsewhere."¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Eberle, *The Incredible Owen Girls*, 66.

¹⁷¹ Mary Alicia Owen, *The Sacred Council Hills* (St. Joseph: self-published, 1909): 6.

¹⁷² Mary Alicia Owen, "The Road to Paradise," WHMC-C, 3.

Quickly, however, it becomes clear that the Sac and Foxes' joy over their arrival at this sacred site is threatened by an unknown menace that one old woman speculates could possibly be a demon, a maligned ghost, or the dreaded paleface. Clearly, this impending threat has cast such a dark shadow over the tribe that it has thrown all aspects of Sac and Fox life out of balance. The tribal council despairs because the bright prophetic visions that the shaman Nana-by-yeh hoped to receive in the Sacred Hills have not appeared. Likewise, Kah-mee, the river god, has not spoken to the people as he had in previous years, perhaps, they reason, because the palefaces' puffing fireboats have forced him to move deeper in the Missouri River or farther upstream. Despite the darkness that hangs over the people, Mohosca encourages them to proceed with the celebration of the annual Green Corn feast. "A gloomy green-corn feast would be more terrible than anything that has heretofore befallen us," he tells his council.¹⁷³

Against this bleak backdrop, love blossoms between two of the play's main characters, Talinka, a young Sac and Fox woman, and the tribe's war chief Cahaquas. As the two declare their affections for each other, they contemplate the uncertainty of the future that lay before them. They learn that the state of Missouri plans to annex the Platte country, a strip of land on which the Sacred Council Hills stand. As part of the treaty they signed with the U.S. government, the Sac and Fox must move across the river and leave the Sacred Hills forever. "Ever towards the setting sun they push us," Talinka

¹⁷³ Owen, *The Sacred Council Hills*, 18.

laments. To this the love-struck Cahaquas replies, “Welcome banishment, welcome privation, the strange new life in the strange new land, if only we’re together.”¹⁷⁴

The Sacred Council Hills ends as it began, with the Sac and Fox people on the move. This time, however, their hearts are heavy and they chant as they march off stage, away from the sacred hills:

Farewell, farewell, oh, beautiful Hills farewell!
With ax and with brand will [the palefaces] torture the land,
Your groves, once so sacred no longer may stand . . .
The paleface comes hither in blindness to dwell.
Oh, beautiful Hills farewell.¹⁷⁵

As the chant subsides, Owen’s stage directions call for the strains of *Gloria in Excelsis* to rise in its wake.

Though European-American characters do not appear in *The Sacred Council Hills*, their presence weighs heavily on the play’s plot and in the hearts of its native characters. Likewise, the specter of death, though unseen, plays a central role in the melodrama. By consistently referring to whites as *palefaces* and equating them with demons and ghosts, Owen’s Sac and Fox characters see whites as grim reapers that bring death to native people and destroy their land.

Curiously, though they are pursued by death, the Sac and Fox in Owen’s play seem unable to defend themselves. Defeated and resigned, their only response to the threat that stalks them is to move, as Talinka says, “ever towards the setting sun.” In fact, as the play opens, we sense that the Sac and Fox have already been moving for some

¹⁷⁴ Owen, *The Sacred Council Hills*, 26, 29.

¹⁷⁵ Owen, *The Sacred Council Hills*, 34.

time. By portraying their relief and gratitude at reaching the Sacred Hills, Owen leads us to believe that they have traveled a great distance. Though they had hoped to find rest, refuge, or even a dignified place to die in the hills that had comforted them in the past, they can not. Like the weary horseback rider in James Earle Frazier's *The End of the Trail*, the Sac and Fox are pushed by an irresistible force toward their new homes on the Great Nemaha Agency.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to view Mary Alicia Owen's use of the stereotypes of the Noble Savage and Vanishing Indian as being wholly inconsistent with her personal experience and observations. During most of her life, Owen had extensive personal contact with and first-hand knowledge of the Sac and Fox people. Having been born and raised in St. Joseph during its frontier period, she had been aware of Indian people from an early age. Through the African American domestics who lived in her home, she was introduced to people of mixed American Indian and African American ancestry while still a child and she grew up interacting with them, watching them at work, and listening to their stories. As an adult, Owen initiated a great deal of personal contact with the Indian people who lived near her hometown, even in the years before she became a professional folklorist. By her own account, Owen had interacted with and observed the Sac and Fox in their own villages on more than one hundred occasions over a period of at least seventeen years.

Through her extensive contact with Indian people, Owen came to identify with them on a personal level. This is evident in the fact that she proudly claimed to be an adopted member of the Sac and Fox tribe. Similarly, some of her written comments indicate that she took great pleasure in the fact that she was allowed to view dances and ceremonies that government Indian agents and Christian missionaries disapproved of on the grounds that they were "uncivilized." These comments suggest that she considered

herself to be a tribal confidant and a coconspirator in their resistance to European-American attempt to suppress the dances.¹⁷⁶ Owen's perceived complicity with native people is further supported by the fact that Owen believed she had "enough of an Indian spirit" to have insight into their worldview and to empathize with their condition. As such, Owen may have perceived that she was uniquely qualified to be the keeper the traditions of what she believed was a dying culture.¹⁷⁷

Yet, equipped with decades of personal interaction with native people and a self-professed empathy toward them, Owen was not able to get beyond the stereotypes that were prevalent in her era. Owen's writing affirmed the sort of usable hidden past described by Simon J. Bronner. According to Bronner, intellectuals of Owen's time believed that the past was the place from which cultures moved forward, from savagery toward civilization.¹⁷⁸ If some cultures, like those of American Indians, did not share in the advantages of progress, it was not because they had been mistreated or exploited; it was simply because their progress had been slowed.

This point is critical because, as Bronner has argued, the affluent society of which Owen was a part needed a social foil against which to measure all that they had accomplished in the way of technology, commerce, wealth and knowledge. In this way, aboriginal societies, with their so-called uncivilized cultures, served a useful purpose in helping European-Americans create a useable version of their own past. Native people

¹⁷⁶ Owen, *Folk-lore of the Musquakie*, 41; Owen to Burrill, May 1931, WHMC-C.

¹⁷⁷ Owen, "The Road to Paradise," 3.

¹⁷⁸ Bronner, *American Folklore Studies*, 2-3.

served as a social benchmark against which Victorians could measure the degree to which their hard work and ingenuity had earned them a place at the pinnacle of human social and cultural evolution. For this reason, the scientific community was extremely interested in studying the culture and the history of Indians, not because it taught them more about Indians, but because it helped them construct a master narrative of their own past and their place in the present.

As we have seen, Mary Alicia Owen was highly conscious of her social place and protected that place by adding to the master narrative of her time. By using stereotypes of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian in her fictional and academic writings, she placed Indian people on the periphery of American society. As the daughter of an affluent Southern family who grew up in a rapidly growing Western boomtown, Owen was raised to be vigilant about protecting her identity as a member of St. Joseph's elite strata of society. Maintaining that social identity meant conforming to strict protocols about social relationships. These protocols were severely challenged by the Civil War and by St. Joseph's rapid growth in the years immediately prior to and following the war. As Southern sympathizers, the Owens saw their good standing in the community suddenly compromised by their newfound status as enemies of the Union during the war years. Because their loyalty was suspect, the Owens were both labeled as outlaws and victimized by vigilante violence and stood in danger of losing their social status.

Even after the violence of the war ended, the Owens family's status was challenged by the influx of immigrants from the east coast and from Europe and by the rapid growth of the community they had helped to build. In response to these threats

from the outside, the Owen family turned inward. Careful to maintain ties with proper families and social organizations, the Owens protected their fortune and their status by living a sheltered existence within the walls of their large home on Jules Street.

As Mary Alicia Owen was drawn into the world of African Americans and American Indians, she always remained conscious of her own social status and that of the people whose homes and camps she visited. Because the social standing of white immigrants and newcomers to St. Joseph was sometimes vague, contact with them left someone of Owen's status vulnerable to social compromise. Owen's contact with African Americans and American Indians, while questionable by the standards of her time, could be seen as safe because there was no doubt where these racial groups stood in the constructed Victorian social hierarchy of her time.

That hierarchy, along with Owen's self image, dictated that her relationship with the Sac and Fox was one in which both parties played prescribed roles. Owen's role was that of outside observer. To justify her trips to the Sac and Fox villages, Owen had to place herself in that position from the start. In the early years she viewed her excursions as opportunities to gather materials for her writing. Once she entered the academic profession of folklore, she was able to place her position as observer in the realm of science.

In Owen's work, she cast her Sac and Fox acquaintances in the stereotypical roles of Noble Savage and Vanishing Indian. By perpetuating the paradigm of the Noble Savage, Owen portrayed native people as being inherently less civilized and socially evolved than were European-Americans and as occupying a place outside mainstream

American culture. This allowed Owen and her contemporaries to treat Indian people as exotic others who were remnants of an ancient past.

Similarly, the image of the Vanishing Indian allowed Owen to justify her meticulous documentation of the details of Sac and Fox culture and collection of Sac and Fox artifacts. By believing that Indian people could not survive in the modern world and that they were moving ever closer toward certain extinction, Owen, and many of her European-American contemporaries, believed that it was their duty to intervene in order to preserve the remnants of indigenous culture. As they saw it, the savage and primitive ways of Indian people prevented them from serving as worthy stewards of their own culture and history. In an article she wrote about Owen's Sac and Fox artifact collection, anthropologist Allison K. Brown has speculated that Owen felt it was her duty to remove artifacts from the Sac and Fox people because she feared they would either discard them or sell them to people who did not appreciate their value. As we have seen, Owen had a great hunger for artifacts and cultural information and may have occasionally been less than ethical in her acquisition of them. The artifacts "can never be duplicated," she once wrote, "as they belong to the past that even the red men are forgetting."¹⁷⁹

As we have seen, Mary Alicia Owen perceived herself as a person with dual citizenship as both a white woman of privilege and an indigenous insider with an Indian spirit. Assured by the confidence of her social status and armed with the authority of the usable Victorian past, she felt justified in collecting stories, folkways, and artifacts that belonged to Sac and Fox people. She also felt empowered to present these items to her

¹⁷⁹ Brown, "Collecting Material Culture," 38. Owen quoted in Thompson, "Indian Collection at the State Museum," 8.

European-American and British contemporaries in the form of lectures, books, and articles. That Owen's presentations were sometimes incomplete or partially inaccurate was likely less important to her than the fact that she had set down in writing the details of a culture that she believed was vanishing into the purple mists of the past.

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VITA

Greg Olson was born in Storm Lake, Iowa and raised on a century-old farm near the town of Marathon, Iowa. He currently lives with his wife and daughter in Columbia, Missouri.

Olson earned a Bachelor's degree in Art Education from Buena Vista College in 1981 and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of South Dakota in 1985.

He has fabricated and designed museum exhibits for the Field Museum of Natural History, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and The University of Missouri's Museum of Art and Archaeology. He has designed exhibits about the Osage and Sac and Fox people for the Missouri Humanities Council and is currently the Curator of Exhibits and Special Projects at the Missouri State Archives.

Olson is the author of several articles about the history of American Indians in Iowa and Missouri. His article "Navigating the White Road: White Cloud's Struggle to Lead the Ioway Along the Path to Acculturation," won the State Historical Society of Missouri's Best Article Award in 2005. Olson is the author of one book, *The Ioway in Missouri*, which was published by the University of Missouri Press in 2008.