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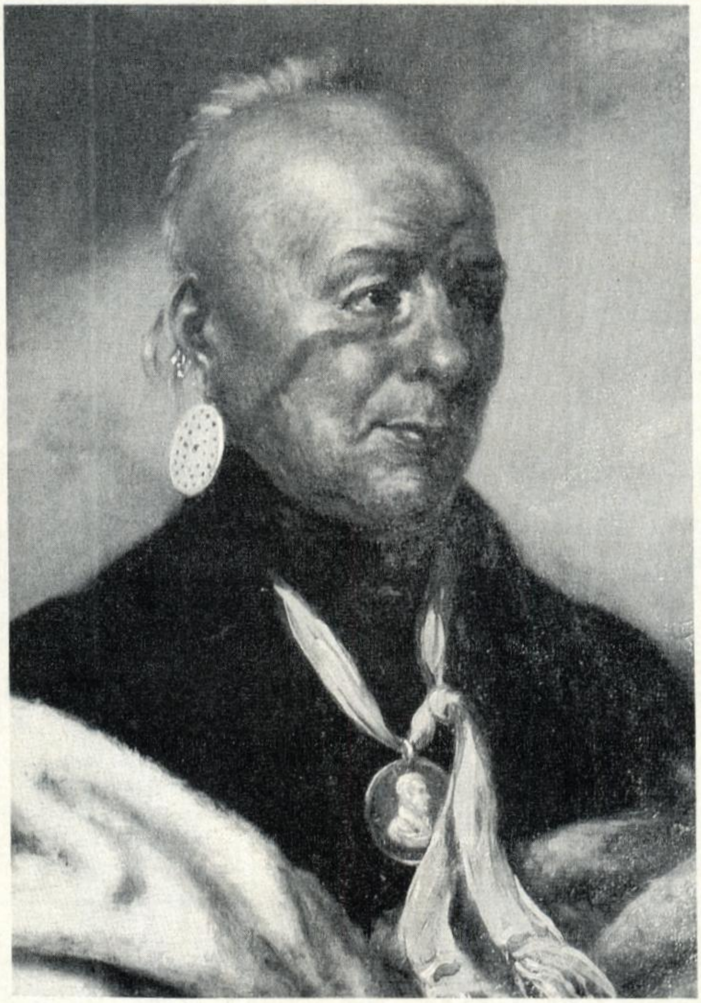
Potawatomi warrior Wabansi, or "First Light," was the last light many of his enemies saw.

By Jim Dowd



Wabansi's youthful feats were many and as gory as they were daring. Even at the time he was painted by Charles Bird King, the old Potawatomi war chief was not to be taken lightly.

To begin to understand Wabansi, or "First Light," warrior chief of the Potawatomi Indians, one must begin to understand both the period in which Wabansi lived and something of the culture of the Potawatomi. Wabansi lived in a time of immense social and cultural upheaval for the Potawatomi. White colonization along the Ohio River was burgeoning northward into Ohio and Indiana, while further inroads were being made in the area surrounding Detroit. As if that pressure was not enough, there was almost constant savage warfare with the Creek and Cherokee to the south and constant turmoil with Indian nations to the west—particularly the Osage and the Iowa.

Wabansi grew up in the midst of all that turmoil. He was described in his youth as "being raised in the strictest pure Indian manners and customs by his parents, as his demeanor and appearance promised much to his anxious parents, and no pains were spared in watching the youth's life, examining him very closely in his dreams." The boy was noted in his youth as being of quiet disposition, a youth who seldom spoke, though not ill-natured.

As he grew into adolescence, Wabansi became a noted hunter, and he became a leader of war parties at a very tender age. Parents and friends tried, in desperation, to dissuade the youth from going on the war parties, but Wabansi's only answer was, "I am as much of a man as those who are going." He first gained notoriety when a group of confederated Chippewa, Ottawa, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, Delaware, Shawnee, Menomine and Potawatomi marched against the Peoria, Wea and Piankashaw. The latter three tribes were doomed. It was decided in a grand council that they were to be extinguished from the face of the earth.

At a time and date specified, the villages of these unfortunates were surrounded. A massacre ensued in which Wabansi played a prominent part. All were massacred without regard to age or sex, until the few survivors begged for quarter. An old Potawatomi chief, Pitowgoshek ("Between the Sky"), remarked years later, "Look at them, now they are but a handful, when once the earth appeared too small for them, but by their pride, folly, and crime, they have destroyed themselves."

Potawatomi culture in the early years of Wabansi's life was very complex. Even today there is no absolutely clear understanding of its many facets. The Potawatomi were a horticultural people, and their tribal (or national) domain extended along the eastern shores of Lake Michigan, down and into the southern edge of the great lake in Indiana; in Illinois, their territory spread westward from the lake to the Rock River and south to Peoria. Their tribal domain extended all along the western shores of Lake Michigan and also into areas north of Green Bay, Wis.

The Potawatomi were loosely divided into bands. Small villages were spread throughout the Old Northwest, and these villages contained groups of families, which were further subdivided into clans. The clan was patrilineal in nature, and naming of young people followed a system of available clan names from the fathers' forebears or ancestors. Wabansi was just such a name. It was a Thunder Clan name, much the same as his father's name before him. The name can be variously translated as Early Light, A Break of Light at Dawn, A Ray of Light in the Gray (or Fog), or Eastern (or First) Light.

Personal power was the crux of ancient Potawatomi ambition. Each individual maintained a personal "guardian," or "Spirit Bundle," called Pitchkosan ("Watches Over Us"), an ancient and traditional guardian or intermediary who protected and guided the individual to Kchemanito, the Great Spirit.

Wabansi's was a life of war and savagery. In the first great battles of his life,

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WARRIORS & CHIEFS

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he showed a brutal and savage disposition. His need for danger bordered on desperation. He is known to have led at least three war parties against the Osage in Missouri. On the first foray, he is said to have captured 40 prisoners and killed and scalped a great number. He took for a son one of the Osage prisoners, Wazah, and is said to have treated him with all the tenderness he accorded his own children. Two of his known wives were also Osage. Wabansi once related the bloodcurdling tale of how he did away with one of these wives. It seems the elder wife became stubborn and contrary, and Wabansi told his youngest wife that she must kill the elder woman. In Wabansi's own words, he told his young wife, "If you do not kill her the first blow I will kill you." The young woman did as she was bid, and Wabansi's only regret was that he had been very foolish, as he had given 10 horses for the old wife.

Sometime in 1794 or 1795, First Light had his most desperate battle. He was in a war party led by his brother Black Partridge. They had gone against the Osage, who had encamped inside Fort Carondelet, in Vernon County, Mo. This fort was owned by Auguste and Pierre Chouteau. The Osage leader was described by Wabansi as a horned devil, since he had numerous protuberances on his head. The affair was to be conducted at the break of day, but a heavy fog settled in, and the warriors in the Potawatomi party became disheartened. Not so, Wabansi.

Against the entreaties of his brother and son, Wabansi decided that he would enter the fort through a porthole. He berated the warriors in the party for being fainthearted, scoffing: "I am the only brave man here. Tonight I will enter the fort." With Black Partridge at his rear, he entered the fort with some difficulty. He found a great number of the enemy sleeping and finally came upon the so-called horned devil. As Wabansi approached him, the Osage leader awoke, and as Wabansi struck forth with his tomahawk, he missed his blow. A second thrust was parried with a buffalo robe, and the horned devil bellowed in rage, awakening his fellows.

At length, Wabansi's blows began to take effect, and the chief's head began to flow with blood. A brave approached, but First Light quickly struck him and took his scalp; Wabansi then swung his tomahawk in every direction to ward off the blows now being aimed at him by furious Osage warriors. With bloody scalp in hand, he retreated toward the porthole by which he had entered. So

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WARRIORS & CHIEFS

Continued from page 24

desperate was his retreat, he left his gun behind. But he got out safely, and the Potawatomi warriors then retired.

In 1811, Tecumseh, perhaps the most renowned of all Indian leaders, had risen to prominence in the Old Northwest. Wabansi was active in the service of the great mentor. He later claimed that he had only tried to raise an army of warriors to aid the gallant Shawnee, but he had been, in fact, quite active in the various battles of Tecumseh's terrible war of independence. Prior to joining Tecumseh, Wabansi was active in other theaters. In October 1811, Wabansi and his braves ambushed a boat on the Wabash River in Indiana. War whoops rang out across the swift-flowing Wabash that day, and numerous volleys were fired. Upon seeing a number of the boatmen fall, Wabansi jumped into the river and attempted to swim to the raft and take the remaining boatmen captive. When he reached the boat, he was greeted by one of the more stalwart fellows on board with the bitter end of a bayonet. The steel blade entered his shoulder, but Wabansi managed to pull the boatman into the water and kill him. Wabansi was at the point of death when his son Wazah and a friend pulled him out of the water.

It took 10 days for his wounds to heal sufficiently, and Wabansi swore revenge against the *Chemokemons*, "white men." A short time afterward, he approached a stage station and attempted to steal some horses. Noise created by the horses alerted the owner, and he was soon in pursuit. This was a tragic mistake. The white man was soon overcome by Wabansi, who drove a large butcher knife through his heart and took his scalp.

It is probable that Wabansi really saw "the First Light" in the War of 1812. If he was at the battle of the Thames at Moraviantown on October 15, 1813, he certainly would have been enlightened as to the strength of the *Chemokemons*. With the fall of Tecumseh and the British army in full retreat, the Indian allies fell into complete disarray. It must have awed them beyond belief. Very few of the Indians who were involved in this affair ever again fought against the fledgling nation whose numbers were like the leaves on the trees in a forest.

Wabansi disappeared from view after 1813. He reappeared in historical records in 1816, when he signed a treaty of "Peace, Friendship, and Limits. . .on the Southwestern Parts of Lake Michigan." His name on the treaty appeared as "Wapunsy." In 1828, he signed another treaty, one that was well-oiled with whiskey. When Michigan Governor Lewis Cass told Wabansi that one of the chiefs would not sign the treaty unless he was given a bribe, Wabansi became indignant. "An Indian who will lie is not worthy to be called a brave," he thundered. "He is not fit to live. If he refuses to sanction what we agreed to in council, I'll cut his heart out." Cass later said that he had great difficulty in preventing Wabansi from carrying out his threat.

When the day of the actual treaty signing came about, an Indian debauched with whiskey stabbed First Light. Wabansi was cared for by Agent Thomas Tipton and survived. Upon Wabansi's recovery, Tipton, like Cass, had a serious problem on his hands. Wabansi was determined to find the Indian who had stabbed him and kill him. The warrior who had committed the deed was popular, and a tribal feud would erupt if revenge was exacted. Tipton begged First Light to forgive the injury. Wabansi replied: "A man that will run off like a dog with his tail down for fear of death, is not worth killing. I will not hurt him."

In 1832, the Black Hawk War engulfed the area of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Had Wabansi and the other Potawatomi joined with Black Hawk in this disaster, the frontiers would have been a sea of blood. Wabansi, it seems, had had his fill of problems with the *Chemokemons*, or else he realized that times had changed. He joined, instead, with the whites and served, along with Captain Billy Caldwell and Shabi ("He Has Pawed Through"), as an Indian scout throughout the campaign. He signed the famous Treaty of Chicago in the following year and left for a new home in Iowa.

Some years after he had settled in Iowa, Wabansi's remaining Osage wife left him. He returned all the way to Illinois in pursuit of her. When he entered a Sac lodge and inquired of some young men concerning his wife, the young men laughed at him. Suddenly, Wabansi stepped across the lodge and, drawing forth his tomahawk, tapped the heads of three young men. In a most haughty manner, he addressed the chiefs and the young scoffers, "Do you not know that this man who spoke to you is a great man, a brave, and a chief of the Potawatomies?" Silence reigned. An old warrior had had his say, and there was no one who would speak against him.

It was a lonesome man who returned to his people in western Iowa. Troubles would still beset him. Some Miami Indians stole his horse, and Wabansi waited in silence for an opportunity to right this loss. Hearing that the agent for the Miami was about to pay them their annuities, he took his friend Louisan and nephew Chikakose ("Little Crane") with him to the Miami agency. In an imperi-

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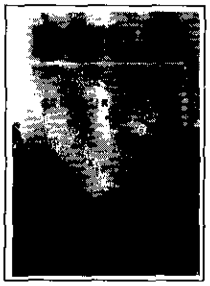

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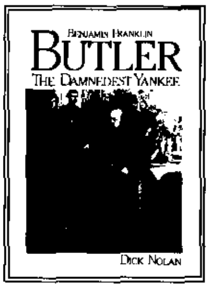

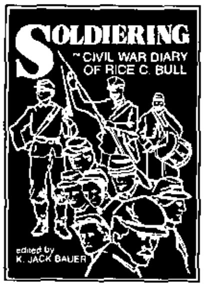

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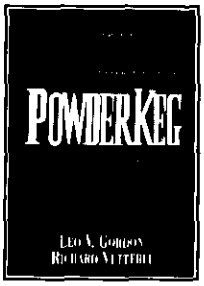

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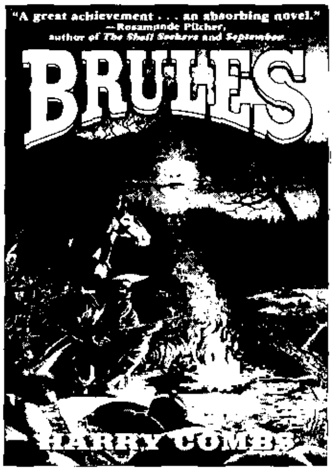

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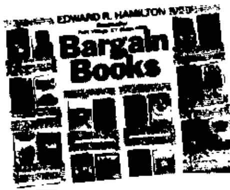

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one of the sermons I observed in the congregation the Pottawatamie interpreter seated upon his bench with his venerable old chief, Wau-bon-sa...with several of his tribe seated near; while he, in an undertone, was, with much apparent earnestness, interpreting the sermon to them. I subsequently learned that, though his earthly pilgrimage had reached nearly ninety years, he had never before heard a Gospel sermon. He listened with seemingly solemnity, and occasionally gave a nod of approval."

One year later, in 1844, Wabansi addressed Major Clifton Wharton in council. Said Wharton: "Wah-baun-sey (Day Light), a very aged Chief, so old that, contrary to custom, he sat while he made the following reply. 'My friends: we are glad to see you, to have you come and encamp with us, but this land is as much yours as ours. My friends, you have had a good deal to say to others. When the Superintendent was here he told us to make improvements, as you have told us. He said look at the White people how they live, they raise plenty to eat, and never suffer. When we exchanged land for this land we made a fair exchange and we wish always to live here. I told the Superintendent I would endeavour to do like the Whites. I would take hold of the plough and do like Whites to support Wife and children. The Superintendent told us to raise corn, and we would never suffer. That is all I have got to say on this subject. Whiskey is bad, and we know it; but, what I am going to mention is as bad as Whiskey. The Ioways are as bad as whiskey—they destroy our hogs, and I wish they could be taken out of the country. I wish they could be taken over the river—tie them round the neck and take them. We spoke to them friendly once, but wished them go over the river, but they kept saying, by and by. That is all I have got to say."

Wabansi made a final trip to Washington in November 1845. This visit laid the groundwork for the treaty of 1846 with the Potawatomi. It was to be the final journey in a long life for First Light. On the return trip, the stagecoach overturned near Cincinnati. The old man, by then, was suffering grievously from the pains of old wounds and age. A.L. Wolfe, a pioneer of Mills County, stated: "At the time of his death the Indians wrapped the Chief's body in a blanket with peeled bark outside and placed it with his personal effects consisting of a flintlock musket, a tomahawk, beads and other ornaments in a box of thick boards split or hewn from logs. This was placed in the fork of a large oak tree about twelve or fifteen feet from the ground, the box being secured to the limbs of the tree by a chain that passed round them."

First Light was at last extinguished. ◻

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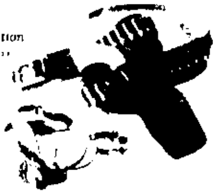

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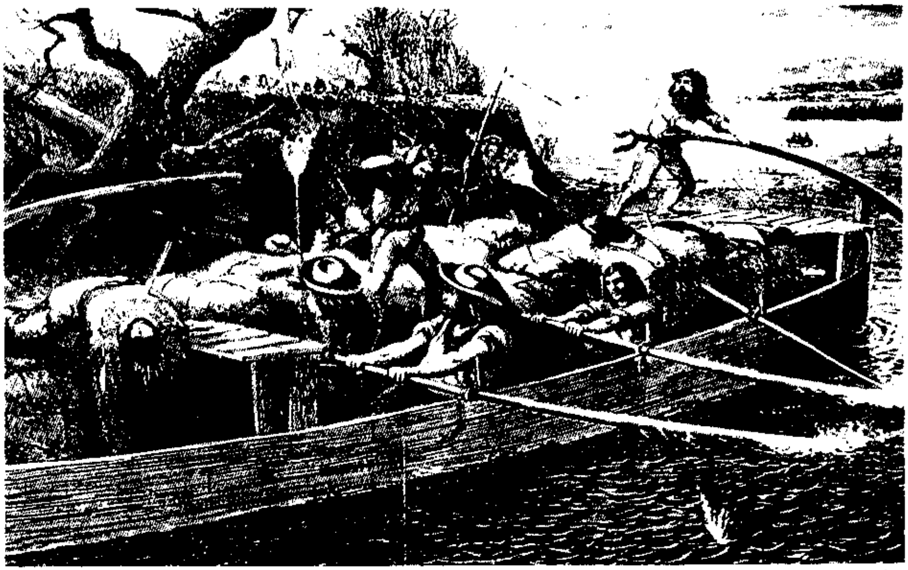
ous manner, the old Potawatomi chief approached the Miami chiefs and demanded payment for his horse. If he was not paid, he boasted that he would take six Miami horses right in front of their eyes; he dared them to stop him. This was an effrontery of no small magnitude. The Miami agent, General John Tipton, knowing the character of the man before him, advised the Miami to pay for the horse. He further told them that Wabansi might put them to more trouble than they were aware of, and it would not do to get the old man angry. Finally, after a protracted silence, a Miami chief placed $100 on the table and told Wabansi to take it. First Light refused and demanded that the money be placed in his hand. The agent intervened and placed the money in Wabansi's hand, to which the old warrior replied, "That's right; now I am well pleased. If you had not paid me you would have seen hard times."


A riverboat comes under attack by Arikara warriors. During a similar ambush on the Wabash in October 1811, Wabansi killed the boatman who very nearly killed him.

In 1835, Wabansi, then a man of 70-plus winters, traveled to Washington, D.C., for the first time. Delegations from the tribes were commonly invited to Washington by the government during this period. Wabansi had an interview with President Andrew Jackson and addressed him as "Brother-Brave" and "Warrior." Nothing of any great importance was effected by the visit. In 1837, Wabansi set his hand to a document intended for the secretary of war. It was a petition in favor of having a Catholic school and missionaries from the Missouri province attend to the Potawatomi. This document is dated September 12, 1837.

In June 1843, Wabansi was present at a great assemblage of tribes in the Indian Territory at a place called Tallequah. The Reverend William H. Goode recorded his impressions of Wabansi: "Wau-bon-sa, a Potawtamie Chief, said to be eighty-seven years of age, treated with great respect by those of his tribe present; complete Indian costume, with the skin of a cow split in the middle, through which his head was thrust, covering his shoulders and back, and the tail hanging down before." Goode went on to say: "During

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