

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF A  
WINNEBAGO INDIAN**

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The autobiography of a Winnebago Indian by Sam Blowsnake & Paul Radin

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**SAM BLOWSNAKE & PAUL RADIN**

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INDIANBY  
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## INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest drawbacks in the study of primitive peoples is the difficulty, one might almost say the impossibility, of obtaining an inside view of their culture from their own lips and by their own initiative. A native informant is, at best, interested merely in satisfying the demands of the investigator. The limitations thus imposed as regards the nature and extent of the knowledge furnished are further increased by the circumstances under which the knowledge is usually imparted, circumstances of a nature tending to destroy practically all the subjective values associated with the particular ritual, myth, or what not, that is being narrated.

Many of these defects could possibly be obviated if the investigator became a member of the tribe, but this is generally out of the question. It would mean spending a good portion of one's life in a primitive community, and that no well-qualified ethnologist is prepared to do, even were funds available for the purpose. As a result individuals but partially qualified to describe accurately the life of a primitive community—for example, missionaries, soldiers, and ethnological adventurers—are the only ones who ever spend large portions of their lives among aboriginal tribes. Even when such investigators are conscientious and strive to be open-minded and fair, it is only on rare occasions that they succeed in presenting the facts in an emotional setting, and when they do make such an attempt, the result is generally so completely tinged with the investigator's own emotional tone as to be quite unsafe to follow.

For a long time most ethnologists have realized that the lack of "atmosphere" in their descriptions is a very serious and fundamental defect, and that this defect could only be properly remedied by having a native himself give an account of his particular culture. Unfortunately, however, natives never spend much time trying to get a general idea of their culture and are consequently unable to describe it when pressed. The only possibility of obtaining any direct expression has therefore to be sought in another way. Unprepared as primitive man is to give a well-rounded and complete account of his culture,

he has always been willing to narrate snatches of autobiography. Such personal reminiscences and impressions, inadequate as they are, are likely to throw more light on the workings of the mind and emotions of primitive man than any amount of speculation from a sophisticated ethnologist or ethnological theorist.

Such an autobiography was obtained by the author from a Winnebago Indian and published in volume xxvi of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1913. The reception given this first autobiography led to further effort in this direction, the aim being, not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up. A series of fortunate circumstances enabled the author to secure a rather lengthy autobiography from a member of a very prominent Winnebago family. This is the account here published. The Indian in question was a brother of the Winnebago who had written the earlier autobiography referred to above. The writer is referred to throughout the notes as S. B. No attempt of any kind was made to influence him in the selection of the particular facts of his life which he chose to present. So far as could be ascertained the Indian wrote the autobiography in two consecutive sessions in a syllabary now commonly used among the Winnebago. The translation was made by the author on the basis of a rendition from his interpreter, Mr. Oliver Lamere, of Winnebago, Nebraska.

The autobiography proper closes with Part I. Part II embodies the system of instruction used among the Winnebago and forms a unit by itself. The Indian regarded it as part of his autobiography inasmuch as it represents what he remembered to have heard from his father when he was a young boy.

The various headings have been added by the author. All explanatory matter is included in the notes.



## PART I. THE STORY OF MY LIFE

## I. EARLY CHILDHOOD

Father and mother had four children and after that I was born, it is said.<sup>1</sup> An uncle of mother's who was named White-Cloud, said to her, "You are to give birth to a child who will not be an ordinary person." Thus he spoke to her. It was then my mother gave birth to me. As soon as I was born and was being washed—as my neck was being washed—I laughed out loudly.

I was a good-tempered boy, it is said. At boyhood my father told me to fast and I obeyed. In the winter every morning I would crush charcoal and blacken my face with it.<sup>2</sup> I would arise very early and do it. As soon as the sun rose I would go outside and sit looking at the sun and I would cry to the spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Thus I acted until I became conscious.<sup>4</sup>

Then there were not as many white people around as there are now. My father always hunted. Our lodge was covered with rush mattings and we had reed mattings spread over the floor. After my father had hunted for a considerable time in one place we would move away. My father, mother, older sisters, and older brothers all carried packs on their backs, in which they carried many things. Thus we would pass the time until the spring of the year, and then in the spring we used to move away to live near some stream where father could hunt muskrats, mink, otter, and beaver.

In the summer we would go back to Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

The Indians all returned to that place after they had given their feasts. We then picked berries. When we picked berries my father used to buy me gum, so that I would not eat many berries when I

<sup>1</sup> He uses the phrase "it is said" for all statements relating to that period of his life of which he has no clear recollection.

<sup>2</sup> i.e., fast.

<sup>3</sup> i.e., make the ceremonial prayer uttered during the puberty fast.

<sup>4</sup> i.e., from that time on he recollects his childhood. However the term *conscious* is not to be taken in any metaphorical sense. To the Winnebago mind anything not remembered is grouped together with non-existent phenomena. An individual is only *conscious* of what manifests its existence to him by means of some inward stirring, be it emotional, intellectual, or physical. For these things that have happened to him in infancy no such manifestation exists and he consequently predicates no consciousness for himself at that period. I do not doubt for a moment that he thinks of these early years of his life as being identical with any unconscious condition occurring in mature life.

was picking.<sup>5</sup> However, I soon managed to eat berries and chew gum at the same time. After a while I learned to chew tobacco and then I did not eat any berries (while picking them). Later on I got to like tobacco very much and I probably used up more value (in tobacco) than I would have done had I eaten the berries.

In the fall of the year we would pick cranberries and after that, when the hunting season was open, I would begin to fast again.

I did this every year for a number of years.

After a while we got a pony on which we used to pack all our belongings when we moved camp. And in addition about three of us would ride on top of the pack. Sometimes my mother rode and father drove the pony when we moved from one place to another.

After I had grown a little older and taller and was about the size of one of my older brothers, all of us would fast together. My father used repeatedly to urge us to fast. "Do not be afraid of the burnt remains of the lodge center-pole,"<sup>6</sup> he would say to us. "Those which are the true possessions of men, the apparel of men,<sup>7</sup> and also the gift of doctoring—these powers that are spread out before you—do try and obtain one of them," he was accustomed to say to us.

I would then take a piece of charcoal, crush it, and blacken my face, and he would express his gratitude to me.

At first I broke my fast at noon and then, after a while, I fasted all night. From the fall of the year until spring I fasted throughout the day until nightfall, when I would eat.<sup>8</sup> After a while I was able to pass the night without eating and after a while I was able to go through two nights (and days) without eating any food. Then my mother went out in the wilderness and built a small lodge. This, she told me, she built for me to fast in, for my elder brother and myself, whenever we had to fast through the night.

There we used to play around. However, before we were able to spend a night at that particular place, we moved away.

<sup>5</sup> Cranberry-picking is one of the principal means of support of the Winnebago.

<sup>6</sup> i.e., charcoal with which to blacken one's face while fasting.

<sup>7</sup> i.e., both material and immaterial. He refers mainly to that knowledge which will make a man honored and respected by his fellow men.

"Apparel of men" does not mean clothes, but power and ability; success on the warpath, membership in the Medicine Dance, ability to cure the sick, etc.

"Spread out before you" means "within your power to obtain from the spirits."

<sup>8</sup> No person attempted to fast for twenty-four hours at once without a break.

2. PUBERTY<sup>9</sup>

After a time I passed from this stage of boyhood into another. I began to use a bow and arrow and I spent my time at play, shooting arrows.

Then I found out that my mother had been told, just before I was born, that she would give birth to no ordinary being, and from that time on I felt that I must be an uncommon person.

At about this time my oldest sister married a holy man. My parents gave her in marriage to him. He was a shaman and he thought a great deal of me.

At this stage of life also I secretly got the desire to make myself pleasing to the opposite sex.

Now at that time the Indians all lived in their lodges and the women were always placed in lodges of their own whenever they had their menses. There the young men would court them at night when their parents were asleep. They would then enter these lodges to court them. I used to go along with the men on such occasions for even although I did not enter the lodge but merely accompanied them, I enjoyed it.

At that time my parents greatly feared that I might come in contact with women who were having their menses, so I went out secretly. My parents were even afraid to have me cross the path over which a woman in such a condition had passed.<sup>10</sup> The reason they worried so much about it at that particular time was because I was to fast as soon as autumn came;<sup>11</sup> and it was for that reason they did not wish me to be near menstruating women, for were I to grow up in the midst of such women I would assuredly be weak and of little account. Such was their reason.

After some time I started to fast again throughout the day and night, together with an older brother of mine. It was at the time of the fall moving and there were several lodges of people living with us. There it was that my elder brother and I fasted. Among the people in these lodges there were four girls who always carried the

<sup>9</sup> The physiological and other changes at puberty are definitely noted by the Winnebago and a special word is used to cover the years from approximately twelve to twenty.

<sup>10</sup> A very general belief among the Winnebago. Any contact with menstruating women, or even with objects in any way connected with them, will, it is believed, destroy the power of sacred objects or individuals temporarily sacred. Fasting youths were regarded as such.

<sup>11</sup> Fasting always commenced in autumn and never lasted longer than early spring, or until the snakes appeared above ground.