

Little Axe Indian History Class
February 26, 1969

SHAWNEE TRIBAL GOVERNMENT

(This description is taken from Thomas Wildcat Alford's book, Civilization.)

There were originally five clans or divisions of the Shawnee tribe. The two principal clans were the Tha-we-gi-la and the Cha-lah-kaw-tha. The principal chief of the tribe was supposed to come from one of these divisions. The other three divisions were the Pec-ku-we, the Kis-pu-go, and the May-ku-jay. Each division had its own chief who was subordinate to the principal chief in national matters, but independent in matters pertaining to the duties of his own clan.

Each division performed a duty for the whole tribe. The Pec-ku-we chief had charge of the maintenance of order and looked after the celebration of things pertaining to religion or faith. The Kis-pu-go clan had charge of matters pertaining to war and the preparation and training of warriors; the May-ku-jay clan had charge of things relating to health and medicine and food for the whole tribe. The Tha-we-gi-la and the Cha-lah-kaw-tha had charge of political affairs and all matters that affected the tribe as a whole. The principal chief came to his office by heritage and held his office for life--as least during good behavior.

At the time Alford was writing, only the Tha-we-gi-la, the Pec-ku-we and the Kis-pu-go clans were represented among the Absentee Shawnees. These three clans always seemed to be closely related, while the Cha-lah-kaw-tha and the May-ku-jay had always stood together. These were represented in the group led by Black Bob which was living in Kansas at the time of the Civil War.

Besides the chiefs of these divisions, there was a group of men in the tribe who made up the Council. Members of all the divisions were on the tribal Council. The council members were intelligent and staunch, fully able to advise about the affairs that affected the tribe. They knew their own history and that of many other tribes as well. Their memories were excellent, and they could remember the gist of all the treaties our people had made with the government--as they had been interpreted to them--for generations.

Although Shawnee life was democratic and all men were believed to be equal, still the leaders and chiefs were highly respected and almost always obeyed. A leader was a man with a reputation for bravery, for wisdom and discretion, and he was admired. Shawnee chiefs were aristocrats. They carried themselves with conscious pride. Each chief appointed subordinates to distribute the work of his division. Most of these appointments were made for life, or at least during "good behavior."

Individuals who committed certain misdeeds or offenses against the unwritten code of good conduct could be punished by command of the chiefs. The exact punishment depended upon the gravity of the offense. The chief's word was law, and persistent refusal to obey could be punished by severe flogging or even death. Anyone who refused to take his punishment like a man was ostracized from his tribe and his friends and his family. Usually if a person were misbehaving in some way, the chiefs would warn them several times to straighten up. If he persisted in his bad way, the chiefs could order him whipped or even shot.