

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

Lillian Cassaway, Interviewer,
October 12, 1937.

Interview with J. J. Methvin
Anadarko, Oklahoma

Early Indian Worship

J. J. Methvin was sent to the Indian Country in 1887 by the Methodist Church as a missionary to the blanket Indians.

The Sweat House.

The sweat house was built of slender poles, usually willows, about two inches in diameter, which were struck into the ground in a circle about six feet across, and then bent together at the top and tied, forming a domeshaped hut. This was covered with buffalo robes and blankets, making it as near air tight as possible. This made a medicine or sweat house about four or five feet high. The ground on the inside of this hut was covered with a thick covering of prairie sage gathered around over the prairie. The Indians held this plant in special reverence believing it had special and mysterious powers. It figured very largely in all their superstitious worship.

METHVIN, J.J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

2

In the center of the sweat house a hole about six inches deep and a foot in diameter was dug. The "Medicine Man" took his idol, or medicine charm, a bucket of water, and an eagle feather fan into this hut with him. The eagle feathers were also held in special reverence and were supposed to have peculiar power in sickness and in war. So they used a bunch of eagle feathers over the sick in their superstitious rites, and their war bonnets were, and still are, made of eagle feathers.

Rocks were heated in a fire built near the sweat house and then taken and placed in the hole in the center of the sweat house. The chief medicine man with all the worshipers went in, the robes were tucked down securely, so that no heat could escape, and but little air could get in. The bucket of water was then poured upon the hot rocks and the worshipers would lie down or sit in a cramped position. The steam arising

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

3

from the seething rocks soon caused the perspiration to pour off the worshipers in great profusion, then their weird incantations began. No one was allowed to use a fan till the chief medicine man had gone through the first act of worship, calling all the while upon his grandfather, in continued repetition keeping time with the motion of the eagle feather fan. It would have been a sacrilege to use any other kind of feathers.

After this first act by the chief all the others might begin chanting and fanning and calling upon their idols and their dead ancestors. After this sweating, worshiping process was over, the worshipers made whatever offering was required and the worship was ended.

The sweat house was used in sickness as well as for worship. The patient was put in the sweat house and made to perspire profusely, and taken immediately

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

4

to a stream of water and dipped into it, ^{or} cold water was poured over him. This treatment in many cases proved fatal to the patient.

The Pipe

The pipe was used in all ceremonies, in worship, in sickness and in friendship. A man never smoked alone. Not even for pleasure. And always the same routine, from right to left, even when two were smoking, and only one puff at a time until they were finished.

Worship

When the Indians were not on the move, the medicine or idol was always kept tied on a pole which was leaned against the back of the medicine man's tepee. Over this pole was a rope of buffalo hair

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

5

tied near the idol and drawn entirely around the tepee. When a worshiper came to make an offering he stood outside, calling on his grandfathers to help him to become a great war chief, to kill his enemies and for protection against them.

After calling on his grandfathers for some time the medicine man's wife came out and loosened the rope and let the idol down. It was always kept inside a crescent-shaped bag. She would take it and place it on a tripod a little way back of the tepee. The worshiper then prayed to it directly, then tied his offering to the tripod. If the offering was a horse the worshiper tied a stick about six inches long to the tripod, while the pony was tied somewhere nearby.

The medicine man himself would go out and cut a little hair from the pony's head and tail, pray to the sun for a blessing upon the worshiper, then he would bury the hair. That pony then was sacred and

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

6

must never be hit over the head.

The offerings tied to the idol stayed there until the next day when it was taken and placed beside the medicine. After a few days there, the medicine man's wife took it and put it to the use for which it was intended.

Sometimes a worshiper would build a sweat house. After all preparations were made, he would go to the Medicine man's tepee and, after certain ceremonies, he would enter, circle around to the left 'til he came to the idol, untie it and take it to the sweat house. He was soon followed by the medicine man who, before entering, looked up to the sun and prayed, then called out: "All who wish to worship here now come, come."

Soon all who wished to worship came together. They assembled near the door of the sweat house and stripped themselves entirely nude before entering. On entering they circled to the left and the medicine chief taking his place on the west side facing

7

the east with the idol lying just in front of him. The long stemmed pipe filled with a mixture of sumac and tobacco, which had been placed near the idol, was taken up by the medicine man, while the one who had made the sweat house and called the meeting stepped out upon the prairie for a piece of dried horse ordure which he lighted, then took it in a split stick and held it to the bowl of the pipe while the medicine man proceeded to smoke and mutter some petition to the sun, as he puffed the smoke upward. The stick was laid near the fire in the center of the tepee until the smoking was ended.

Just outside the entrance was placed a buffalo head with its nose toward the entrance, a little farther on was a moon shaped furnace with a fire in it. After the smoking was over, the split stick was taken and laid on this moon shaped furnace and rocks were placed in the furnace to heat. The medicine man would take a little tobacco and pray to the

METHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

8

sun, moon, earth, and idol. He would go through this performance four times. While he offered smoke to the sun, moon, earth, and idol, he motioned towards the four points of the compass and prayed to his grandfathers for power to kill his enemies, and for health and long life.

When the medicine man was through he passed the pipe to the man at his left, who worshiped as the chief before him did, and then passed it to his left, and so on until it reached the extreme left, then it was passed back around the semicircle to the extreme right, when the smoking began again.

After the smoking was over, the medicine man called for the hot rocks. The man who had called the meeting went for the rocks. He placed them at the door of the sweat house and the medicine man went through his motions of accepting them four times and did the fourth time. He put them in the fire-place made for them in the center

MEEHVIN, J. J.

INDIAN WORSHIP.

8852.

9

of the sweat house, then received the water the same way. He would begin to tap the bucket four times and after motioning to do so four times, he poured it onto the hot rocks. The steam from this caused the worshipers to perspire profusely. While the worshipers struck themselves over their bodies with buffalo tails and grass all the time calling upon their ancestors. If the worshipers got too hot they went through a four motion form of worship before raising the side of the tepee to let in cool air. After the worship was over they passed out, filing to the left.

If they heard the voice of a woman or child during this worship it was a good omen, but they mustn't see themselves in any kind of mirror nor come near any wild animal.