

Activity 2: Exploring Diverse Perspectives Through World's Fair Speeches

Perspective 5: Simon Pokagon



Born in 1830, Simon Pokagon was a member of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians. Growing up, he witnessed the forced removal of the Potawatomi and other Native nations of the Midwest. The Potawatomi, or Bodéwadmi, were among the Native nations who controlled the land that would later become the city of Chicago. In the 1821 Treaty of Chicago, they were coerced to cede that land to the United States. In 1832, the Potawatomi ceded most of their remaining land holdings in Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana. In exchange, they were given reserves of land throughout the region, but with the 1833 Treaty of Chicago, they were made to give up this land for cash and land west of the Mississippi River. When a Potawatomi

band refused to leave Indiana by the 1838 deadline, the governor ordered a militia to force about 849 members on a 61-day, 660-mile journey to new reservation lands in present-day Kansas. Over 40 Potawatomi, mostly children, died in what has become known as the Potawatomi Trail of Death.

While other Potawatomi avoided relocation by fleeing to Canada, the Pokagon Band successfully resisted removal from Michigan by adopting Christianity, European-style agriculture, and other aspects of Euro-American culture. Simon Pokagon's father, Leopold Pokagon, led this strategy, partnering with Catholic missionaries to oversee their conversion. Simon Pokagon was educated in Ohio and Indiana and became a talented writer.

Pokagon attended the opening of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, but he disapproved of the fact that the only Native American representation came in the form of battle reenactments and other stereotypical entertainment in the fair's Midway Plaisance. He was inspired to write a pamphlet, originally titled "Red Man's Rebuke," which was renamed "The Red Man's Greeting" and printed by a publisher friend on birch bark. An excerpt from this pamphlet is printed below. After reading the pamphlet, Chicago's mayor invited Pokagon to speak at the fair for Chicago Day on October 9, and Pokagon gave a speech based on his pamphlet.

Pokagon built a short but prolific writing career out of his notoriety from the fair. He was an advocate for Native rights and wrote pieces lamenting the disappearance of Native Americans and their ways of life. In fact, though, the Pokagon Band were able to hold on to many of their traditions, as well as their sense of community. Simon Pokagon passed away in 1899 at the age of 68.

Excerpts from “The Red Man’s Greeting”

“In behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you, the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes, that we have no spirit to celebrate with you the Great Columbian Fair now being held in this Chicago city, the wonder of the world.

No; sooner would we hold high joy-day over the graves of our departed fathers, than to celebrate our own funeral, the discovery of America. And while you who are strangers, and you who live here, bring the offerings of the handiwork of your own lands, and your hearts in admiration rejoice over the beauty and grandeur of this young republic, and you say, ‘Behold the wonders wrought by our children in this foreign land,’ do not forget that this success has been at the sacrifice of *our* homes and a once happy race.

Where these great Columbian show-buildings stretch skyward, and where stands this ‘Queen City of the West,’ *once* stood the red man's wigwam; here met their old men, young men, and maidens; here blazed their council-fires. But now the eagle's eye can find no trace of them. Here was the center of their wide-spread hunting-grounds; stretching far eastward, and to the great salt Gulf southward, and to the lofty Rocky Mountain chain westward; and all about and beyond the Great Lakes northward roamed vast herds of buffalo that no man could number, while moose, deer, and elk were found from ocean to ocean. Pigeons, ducks, and geese in near bow-shot moved in great clouds through the air, while fish swarmed our streams, lakes, and seas close to shore. All were provided by the Great Spirit for our use; we destroyed none except for food and use; had plenty and were contented and happy.

But alas! the pale-faces came by chance to our shores, many times very needy and hungry. We nursed and fed them,--fed the ravens that were soon to pluck out our eyes, and the eyes of our children; for no sooner had the news reached the Old World that a new continent had been found, peopled with another race of men, than, locust-like, they swarmed on all our coasts; and, like the carrion crows in spring, that in circles wheel and clamor long and loud, and will not cease until they find and feast upon the dead, so these strangers from the East long circuits made, and turkey-like they gobbled in our ears, ‘Give us gold, give us gold;’ ‘Where find you gold? Where find you gold?’

We gave for promises and ‘geegaws’ [trinkets] all the gold we had, and showed them where to dig for more; to repay us, they robbed our homes of fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters; some were forced across the sea for slaves in Spain, while multitudes were dragged into the mines to dig for gold, and held in slavery there until all who escaped not, died under the lash of the cruel task-master. It finally passed into their history that, ‘the red man of the west, unlike the black man of the east, will die before he'll be a slave.’ Our hearts were crushed by such base ingratitude; and, as the United States has decreed, ‘No Chinaman shall land on our shores,’ so we then felt that no such barbarians as they, should land on *ours*...

Almighty Spirit of humanity, let thy arms of compassion embrace and shield us from the charge of treachery, vindictiveness, and cruelty, and save us from further oppression! And may the great chief of the United States appoint no more broken-down or disappointed politicians as agents to deal with us, but may he select good men that are tried and true, men who fear not to do the right. This is our prayer. What would remain for us if we were not allowed to pray? All else we acknowledge to be in the hands of this great republic..."

Excerpts from Simon Pokagon, "The Red Man's Greeting" (Hartford, MI: C. H. Engle, 1893), http://digcoll.newberry.org/#/item/nby_eeayer-5659.

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