

# 13 The Great TEKAMTHI, Also Called TECUMSEH



"We gave them forest-clad mountains, valleys full of game," said Tecumseh. "In return they gave us...rum and trinkets and a grave."

It was the ninth of March in the year 1768 when a great meteor—a shooting star—flamed across the sky with a light bright as fireworks.

In the English colonies those who saw it remarked about the beauty of the heavens; some said it was an omen, a sign of changes to come.

The Indians, too, saw it as an omen. The Shawnee tribes told stories of the stars: this one, the shooting star, was a great spirit called "the Panther." Each night it passed somewhere over the earth, heading for a deep hole and sleep.

Pucksinwah, the Shawnee chief, was awed by the star. He had never seen one of such brilliance. At the very moment the star burst over his head he heard the cry of a new baby. It was his son, born under a shooting star. Pucksinwah knew it was a good sign. He named the boy "The Panther Passing Across." In the Shawnee language that was *Tek-am-thi*.

The boy did not disappoint. Before he was 10 it was known that he would be a leader. He could run faster than the others, he could shoot an arrow straighter, he could remember more, and he didn't brag.

At 11 he had a new friend: a white boy was adopted into the tribe. It was not unusual to have whites become Indians. Some were captured in raids, some were orphans who needed care, some chose to become Indians. (The great Shawnee



chief Blue Jacket, though he tried to hide it, had once been white.)

Tekamthi's new friend taught him to speak English, and, since Tekamthi had a quick mind, he learned easily. He wanted to learn more, so the boy taught him to read and write. That was unusual. Many Indians learned to speak English; few could write it.

Tekamthi learned other things: to love the land and its animals; to know the plants that heal and those that harm. He learned to hunt and was soon the best in his tribe. And he learned of the Great Spirit who ruled the earth and skies, and Tekamthi believed.

He met the white men who were coming into his land—the land of Kentucky and Ohio. He respected the brave men like Daniel Boone, but others he grew to hate. For they killed his father and took his land and made promises they did not keep.

Always the white men told the Indians that if they just moved once more they would be secure. If they just signed a treaty, they would have land and would not have to move again. And some of the Indians believed them. Tekamthi did not.

He wanted the white men to go back—over the mountains—and



William Henry Harrison, who became the 9th president of the United States, was born in 1797 and died in 1841.

Shakers, a sect that used dances in worship, called themselves the United Society of Saints in Christ's Kingdom.

leave the hunting lands of the West for the Indians. He would make the white men go. He would do it by uniting the Indian tribes. One strand of hair, he said, is easily snapped. But a thick braid is almost impossible to tear.

He would braid the tribes into a mighty league. His brother would help him.

Tekamthi was muscular and well-built, and his face was so handsome that men and women remarked about it. When he danced the part of a warrior, it was with such strength that everyone forgot that he had a wounded leg, which gave him a limp.

Tekamthi's brother, Tenskwatawa, was small and homely, but he was a shaman (SHAY-mun)—a religious leader. He was called "The Prophet," and was renowned for his wisdom. Together the brothers made an awesome team.

They told the Indians to stop drinking the white men's liquor—that it only made them weak. And the tribesmen stopped. They told them to go back to Indian ways and to be proud of their heritage. And the Indians did that too.

Tekamthi wished to lead his people in the ways of goodness. He wished to follow the best of the Great Spirit's teachings. His people believed in him.

Tekamthi traveled far to reach other tribes: he went to the white men called New York and then to lands west of the great Mississippi. Everywhere he gathered followers, although when he went South, to visit the powerful Cherokees, their chiefs would not join with him. They liked the ways of the white people. Tekamthi said he did not want to fight the white men, he wanted to share the land, but if the whites would not share, he would fight.

The whites called him Tecumseh and knew he was powerful. Some white Protestant ministers—members of the Shakers—came to listen to Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet. They were surprised by what they heard and mightily impressed. They wrote a report in May 1807. This is what they wrote:

*Our feelings were like Jacob's when he cried out "surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not..." Although these poor Shawnees have had no particular instruction but what they received from the outpouring of the Spirit, yet in point of real light and understanding, as well as behavior, they shame the Christian world.*

William Henry Harrison, who had been appointed governor of the Indiana Territory, was worried about Tecumseh. Most of the Indiana Territory, by treaty, was supposed to be Indian land. But white settlers

were moving in. Harrison was afraid that Tecumseh was too powerful, that the Indians would endanger the white settlers.

William Henry Harrison—tall, slim, and soldierly—had been trained to be a leader. He was the son of Benjamin Harrison, who signed the Declaration of Independence and was governor of Virginia. Young Harrison wished to prove himself. So, in 1811, when he knew Tecumseh was far away visiting tribes in Alabama, Harrison marched to the Shawnee camp on the banks of the Tippecanoe River. The Prophet was in charge. He knew nothing of military leadership; he thought his belief in the Great Spirit would be enough. The Prophet told his followers that God would make the bullets bounce off their chests. He may have believed that. When Harrison and his army were just a mile away from the Indian village, the Prophet and his men attacked.



Trapped by Harrison near Lake Erie when the British retreated, Tecumseh fell at the Battle of the Thames.

The battle at Tippecanoe ended any hope for the creation of a united Indian nation that could forge a peace between the Native Americans and the whites.

Bullets did not bounce off their chests. Indians died. Actually, two of Harrison's soldiers died for every Indian killed. But the Shawnee village was destroyed and the Shawnee hearts went with it.

Harrison claimed a great victory at Tippecanoe. It made him a national hero. His nickname became "Old Tippecanoe."

The tribes would no longer unite behind Tecumseh. No leader was ever able to braid them together. In 1813, Tecumseh fought with the British against the Americans and was killed in battle. White men moved into the Indiana Territory. The treaties with the Indians were forgotten.