

# POTAWATOMI CULTURE & RELIGION

By Huron H. Smith

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[MATERIAL CULTURE](#)

[RELIGION](#)

[MEDICINE LODGE](#)

[PLANT MEDICINES](#)

[PART I](#)

[PART II](#)

[PART III](#)

[FOOD PLANTS](#)

[VEGETABLE FIBERS](#)

---

## MATERIAL CULTURE

The Forest Potawatomi still retain an archaic, simple, non-intensive Algonkian culture. Being woods dwellers, they use the same type of wigwam as other Wisconsin woodland Indians. An early description of them (1718) says, 25 "The Poutouatamis have their village near the fort. This nation makes its cabins of mats; these are made of reeds. All this work is done by the women. This nation is well-clothed like our savages resident at Montreal. The only occupation of the men is to hunt and to adorn themselves. They use a great deal of vermilion. They use many buffalo robes, highly ornamented, to cover themselves in winter and in summer they wear red or blue cloth." This refers to their winter abode.

It only requires the cutting of poles and the use of rolls of birch bark and reed mats to quickly make a wigwam. In the summer time, the



Potawatomi usually lived in more substantial rectangular dwellings near their fields of corn and beans. They used birch bark for all sorts of cooking and storage utensils as well as for canoes. Aboriginally they used shell beads,



but after the traders came these were replaced by glass beads. Porcupine quills were profusely employed to ornament their deerskin clothing and various other objects. The Potawatomi made some durable baskets and bags from the bark fiber of the white cedar or arbor vitae and from the bark fiber of the linden. Splint baskets were made from the wood of the black ash. Baskets were made of elm and hickory bark. A crude cloth was woven from bear and elk hair, together with a "grass that grows in the prairie". They say that this "grass" grew at Lake Koshkonong in the Rock River, and it may have been the Great Bulrush, (*Scirpus validus*). Wooden bowls were fashioned from the stump burls of black ash and hard maple. Spoons and other utensils were likewise made from wood.

The Potawatomi practiced agriculture quite extensively. Hunting and fishing were also important. Fish nets were made from basswood bark cord. Sometimes they used spears with long shafts and stone or deer antler points. Both the pine log dugout and the birch bark canoe were used. For night hunting, pitch-pine and cedar torches were placed on the bow of the canoe. The birch bark canoes were from twenty-five to thirty feet long and five feet wide. They made the frame of cedar and sewed on the bark with the roots of the jack pine, covering the seams with pine pitch.

From the earliest times, the Potawatomi supplemented the products of hunting and fishing with the practice of primitive agriculture. Their summer residence was more or less fixed by the clearings that they made in their summer villages and according to Allouez in 1670,<sup>26</sup> they had fields of Indian corn or maize, squashes, pumpkins, beans and tobacco.

The forests and natural openings were likewise full of edible berries and nuts which they hoarded for winter use. Other wild roots were preserved and dried for winter use.

The Forest Potawatomi since 1914 have had as a rule unusually large farms, each allotment comprising one hundred and sixty acres. Though they do not cultivate so very much of this acreage, some fairly respectable crops of hay and corn are grown. While there is a great deal of sand in the north country, there is some very good productive soil, and even some clay, to be found in that region.

---

## RELIGION

The aboriginal religion of the Forest Potawatomi was quite similar to that of other Algonkian peoples and their culture hero was Mana'bozo who was considered the founder of their religious cult. Religion has ever been a most interesting feature of primitive culture.

According to their own statements, the Potawatomi have three principal concerns in life: food, health, and the proper valuation of woman. Any man will starve himself if necessary, in order that his wife or daughters may get the proper amount of food. Health depends upon the understanding of the use of medicines and the acquirement of the right kind of food. It is not strange that their religion considers longevity as the greatest good. Their most sacred edifice is the medicine lodge and the ingredients of their medicines are vested with sacred value.

History records some curious narratives concerning the religion of the Potawatomi. Christian Hoecken,<sup>27</sup> a Jesuit missionary to the Potawatomi in 1847, compares them to the ancient Hebrews and tries to show that they live under the laws of Moses. It is likely that he came into contact with Indians who had Jesuit training for several generations and who appreciated the stories that they heard from the early missionaries and told them again to him, transforming them into their own tradition. He reports that their stories said that there were six persons rescued from the general wreckage upon an ark which is now to be found in the south on a high mountain where it has been turned to stone. He claims that the Potawatomi knew the history of Moses, of his exposure on the Nile River, and of his adventures in the desert. These stories he discovers interwoven with some of their hunting stories. He tells of their traditions about the sun being a globe of fire encompassed by a certain power that prevents combustion. He says that they consider the moon to be the sun of the night. They account for claps of thunder as being the collision of gigantic balls in the heavens in some game that the inhabitants of the spirit world are playing. The earliest account we have of the religious beliefs of the Potawatomi is from the diary of Father Allouez.<sup>28</sup>

He naturally takes the position that their religion is pagan and far from the ideal of the Christian, but he describes it at some length. He says in part "There is here a false and abominable religion resembling in many respects the faith of some of the ancient pagans. Savages of these regions recognize no sovereign master of heaven and earth, but believe there are many genii, some of which are beneficent,

as the Sun, the Moon, the Lakes, Rivers, and Woods; others malevolent, as the Adder, the Dragon, Cold and Storms, and, in general, whatever seems to them either helpful or hurtful they call a Manitou, and pay it the worship and veneration which we render only to the true God.

Those divinities they invoke whenever they go out hunting, fishing, to war, or on a journey—offering them sacrifices, with ceremonies appropriate only for sacrificial priests.

"One of the leading old men of the village discharges the function of priest, beginning with a carefully prepared harangue addressed to the sun—if the Eat-all feast, which bears a certain resemblance to a holocaust, is held in his honor. He declares in a loud voice that he pays his thanks to that luminary, for having lighted him, so that he could successfully kill some animal or other,—praying and exhorting it by this feast to continue its kind care of his family. During this invocation, all the guests eat, even to the last morsel; after which a man appointed toward the purpose takes a cake of tobacco, breaks it in two and throws it into the fire. Everyone cries aloud while the tobacco burns and the smoke rises aloft and with these outcries the whole sacrifice ends.

"I have seen an idol set up in the middle of a village; and to it, among other presents, ten dogs are offered in sacrifice, in order to prevail on this false God to send elsewhere the distemper that was depopulating the village. Everyone went daily to make his offering to this idol, according to his needs. Besides these public sacrifices, they have some that are private and domestic; for often in their cabins they throw tobacco into the fire, with a kind of an outward offering which they make to their false gods. During storms and tempest, they sacrifice a dog, throwing it into the lake. 'That is to appease thee', they say to the latter, 'Keep quiet'. At perilous places in the river, they propitiate the eddies and rapids by offering them presents; and so persuaded are they that they honor their pretended deities by this external worship, that those among them who are converted and baptized, observe the same ceremonies toward the true God until they are disabused.

"As, moreover, these people are of gross nature, they recognize no purely spiritual divinity; believing that the sun is a man, and the moon is his wife; that snow and ice are also a man, who goes away in the spring and comes back in the winter; that the evil spirit is in adders, dragons and other monsters; that the crow, the kite, and some other birds are

genii, and speak just as we do; and that there are even people among them that understand the language of birds, as some understand a little that of the French. They moreover believe that the people of the departed govern the fishes in the lake; and thus from earliest times they have held the immortality and even the metempsychosis of the souls of dead fishes, believing that they pass into other fishes' bodies. Therefore they never throw their bones into the fire, for fear that they may offend these souls, so that they will cease to come into their nets.

"They hold in very special veneration a certain fabulous animal which they have never seen except in dreams, and which they call 'Missibizi', acknowledging it to be a great genius and offering it sacrifices in order to obtain good sturgeon fishing. They also say that the little pebbles of copper which they find at the bottom of the water in the lake, or in the rivers emptying into it, are the riches of the gods who dwell in the depths of the earth. . . . They hold that there is a great and excellent genius master of all the rest, who made heaven and earth, and who dwells they say in the East, toward the country of the French.

"The fountain head of their religion is libertinism; and all these various sacrifices end ordinarily in debauches, indecent dances, and shameful acts of concubinage. All the devotion of the men is directed towards securing many wives, and changing them whenever they choose; that of the women toward leaving their husbands; and that of the girls toward a life of profligacy.

"They endure a great deal on account of these ridiculous deities; for they fast in their honor for the purpose of learning the issue of some affair. I have seen with compassion men who had some scheme of war or hunting, pass a whole week, taking scarcely anything. They show such fixity of purpose that they will not desist until they have seen in a dream what they desire,—either a herd of moose, or a band of Iroquois put to flight, or something similar,—no very difficult thing for an empty brain, utterly exhausted with hunger and thinking all day of nothing else."

Captain Thomas G. Anderson 29 furnished a narrative in 1882, which he obtained from Chief Nanaboujou of the Two Rivers village in 1804, which is a typical story of the origin of the Forest Potawatomi. He said, translating directly from Chief Nanaboujou, "I take my name from my ancestors who were the first living man and woman. They found themselves in a big canoe, all the animals were also in the same canoe,

floating on thick water. After a while the ancestors insisted that there must be something more substantial beneath the waters. To test it they wanted a deer or some other animal to dive down and ascertain. None would venture on so perilous and uncertain an undertaking. At length a beaver volunteered to make the effort, and jumped overboard, plunging beneath the waters. After a long time he rose to the surface, almost dead, without being able to relate anything satisfactory. But the ancestors still persisted that there must be a hard substance upon which the waters rested. Finally they persuaded the muskrat to go on a trip of discovery.

He, too, was gone a long time on his subwatery exploration, but at length he emerged from the flood of water quite exhausted. The woman ancestor took him up in her arms, and on nursing and drying him to bring him to, found a little clay adhering to one of his forepaws. This she carefully scraped off, worked it between her thumb and finger and placed it on the water to see if it would float. It immediately began to increase in size and in three days it was more than three fathoms broad.

"The wolf now began to grow very troublesome, snarling and growling at all the other animals, so the woman ancestor scolded him sharply, but to no purpose. At length she got angry and threw him out upon the little island, which was as yet too small to bear him up in one position. He therefore had to run round and round the little island, which is the cause of the shores of the lakes and rivers being harder than the rest of the land. The island continued to grow, herbs sprang up on it, so that they could send other animals out of the canoe to find lodgement there. The woman ancestor said to her husband, 'What a pity we have no trees growing on the island', and proposed to paddle around somewhere to find a tree. They soon found a nice little balsam flower, which they brought and planted in the center of the island. It grew in a very short time until it reached the sky. They then observed an object over their heads, moving east and west, day after day. The woman ancestor was quite captivated with it, and she sent her husband up the tree to set a snare to catch this beautiful object. He went up and found it had the appearance of an old woman. However, he set a snare, and descended. The beautiful object was caught in the net, and there it stuck. The woman ancestor was perfectly outraged, because it was stopped in its course; and scolded her husband for setting the trap. She then desired her husband to ascend the tree, and let the beautiful object go on its course again,—but he declined to do so. She then tried to get the deer and other

animals to go up, but they could not climb. At last she induced a raccoon to make the effort. The heat was so great when he got near the object, that it scorched him and he came tumbling down through the branches of the tree. The good woman was now in a greater rage than ever, when she found she could not have her curiosity gratified, and the object loosened from its captivity. After a long time, a mole volunteered to go up. All the other animals began to laugh at him for his temerity but up he went, and when he got near the object, finding it very hot, he managed to burrow along till he reached the snare, and cut the object loose. But in doing so he scorched his nose, and that is the reason moles have brown noses and small eyes; and the sun once loosened from its trap has been going ever since."

---

## MEDICINE LODGE

Hoffman in the Publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology, has described the workings of the medicine lodge, as has also the late Alanson Skinner in his book on "The Material Culture of the Menomini" published by the Museum of the American Indian—Heye Foundation, so that it will not be necessary to here describe in detail the Potawatomie ceremony as it is very similar to that of the Menomini or the Ojibwe. The Potawatomie have several medicine men and medicine women who guard their secrets very jealously. It was to these practitioners that we had to look for much of our knowledge concerning plant medicines. Both Mr. Ritchie and Mr. Bennett were quick to agree upon the names of the best medicine men and women among the Potawatomi, but were also agreed that it was useless to visit certain ones whom they named. We visited the most difficult one first and without the use of an interpreter. With confidence established, this medicine man told us everything that we wanted to know about the plants. After this experience, the interpreter had no hesitancy in taking us to see any informant. We found full agreement as to the names and uses of the plants in question.

The medicine lodge is rarely assembled except in the spring when the trees are in blossom or in the fall after the leaves have fallen. When it is assembled for curative purposes, it is for some particularly difficult case where more than one medicine man is needed to give the treatment.

Usually, however, the medicine lodge is reserved for the initiation of new members, which most frequently takes the form of a replacement of a member who has died a year previously. The medicine lodge structure is approximately the same in shape and

size as that of the Menomini, the Ojibwe, or the Winnebago. It is usually from eighty to one hundred and fifty feet long by twelve or fifteen feet in width. It is built with poles that arch over at a height of about eight feet in the center and is rounded at either end. It is situated on the ground and is oriented due east and west. It is covered along the sides by cat-tail mats, or with old canvas if mats are not available, and roofed with rolls of birch bark. The entrance to the medicine lodge is always at the east and usually there is only one door. Just inside the door is the sacred fire and directly above it an opening in the roof to allow the smoke to escape. The medicine lodge members sit along the sides of the lodge with the candidate and his relatives sitting to the south of the entrance and the chief instructors or medicine men sitting to the north of the entrance. The other members group themselves by clans along the north, west and south walls of the lodge. The usual water drum is used in the medicine lodge. It is about six inches in diameter and twelve inches in height. From time to time, it is reversed and the water is allowed to penetrate and soak up the buckskin drumhead. This causes a louder and more resonant tone. Draughts of medicine are sometimes prepared and administered at the healing ceremonies.

The Prairie Potawatomi and some of the Forest Potawatomi have taken up the peyote cult in recent years. The Forest Potawatomi have not accepted this new type of religion as readily as the Prairie Potawatomi.

Their habit of visiting has brought them into contact with other tribes in this state, in Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota and Oklahoma. Since most of the Forest Potawatomi live in isolated places, the practice of the peyote cult is more adapted to their present mode of living than is the medicine lodge. The peyote cult is said to have originated among the tribes of Mexico.

The participants chew and swallow peyote "buttons", the button-shaped branches of a cactus (*Lophophora Williamsii*) found in Texas, New Mexico and Old Mexico. The beginner in the use of peyote finds that two or three buttons are sufficient to induce the visions necessary in this religious observance, while the hardened addict is able to chew as many as ninety in one evening. Peyote users much eschew their old medicine lodge practices and therefore they care nothing about the preserving of their old religious and ceremonial objects belonging to the medicine lodge. They claim to have a new philosophy of life which entirely governs their conduct and allies their practice with the Christian religion.

The Indian Service of the government has placed a ban on the use of this narcotic and confiscates any found in possession of

the Indians, usually accompanying confiscation with a jail sentence.

The Forest Potawatomi have three main types of dances. The first is the medicine lodge ceremony with its attendant dances, all of which are freighted with meaning. The second is the Dream Dance which has been so thoroughly described by Dr. S. A. Barrett 30 and is well understood as a sacred ceremonial dance which is not performed in secret. In fact, the whites are often invited to be present. The third type is the game dance which accompanies the playing of the several Indian games such as lacrosse, etc. It is further said, 31 "In summer they play a great deal at La Crosse, twenty or more on each side. Their bat is a sort of small racket, and the ball with which they play is of very heavy wood, larger than the balls we use in tennis. When they play, they are entirely naked; they have only a breech-clout and shoes of deerskin. Their bodies are painted all over with all kinds of colors. There are some who paint their bodies with white clay, applying it to resemble silver lace sewed on all the seams of a coat and at a distance one would take it for silver lace. They play for large sums and often the prize amounts to more than 800 Lives.

They set up two goals and begin their game midway between; one party drives the ball one way and the other in the opposite direction, and those who can drive it to the goal are the winners. All this is very diverting and interesting to behold. Often one village plays against another, the Poux against the Ottawas or Hurons for very considerable prizes. The French frequently take part in the game". Each of these dances requires a differently decorated type of thin drum and each has its characteristic songs. Most of the dream dances are performed upon some particular occasion such as the harvest time of maize or at other periods of the year when it is necessary for the Indians to thank their deities for good growing seasons or for harvests.

---

#### FOOTNOTES:

- |                        |                               |                            |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2 Handbook, 2:289.     | 11 Wis. Hist. Coll., 11:66-67 | 22 Wis. Hist. Mag., 4:170. |
| 3 Blair, 2:287-297.    | 12 Blair. 1:149.              | 23 Wis. Hist. Mag., 3:380. |
| 4 Skinner, 1924, 6:16. | 13 Wis. Hist. Coll., 16:359.  | 24 Wis. Arch., 19:41-116   |
|                        |                               | 25 Wis. Hist.              |

5 Skinner, 1924, 6:13.	16 Gregory, 2:565-595.	Coll., 16:366- 8.
6 Wis. Hist. Coll., 3:136.	17 Wis. Hist. Coll., 17:100, 111-120.	26 Wis. Hist. Coll., 16:67.
7 N. Y. Col. Doc., 9:153- 161.	18 Wis. Hist. Coll., 6:175-6.	27 Hoecken, 6:88- 326.
8 Blair, 1:329.	19 Wis. Hist. Coll., 11:394.	28 Wis. Hist. Coll., 16:50- 54.
9 Wis. Hist. Coll., 3:125- 138.	20 Wis. Hist. Coll., 14:402. 404.	29 Wis. Hist. Coll., 9:136.
10 Wis. Hist. Mag., 2:417.	21 Blair, 2:287-297.	30 Barrett, 1:4.
		31 Wis. Hist. Coll., 16:366- 8.

---

### AUTHORITIES QUOTED

Barrett, Dr. S. A. 1911, The Dream Dance of the Chippewa and Menomini Indians of Wisconsin. Bulletin of the Milwaukee Public Museum, Vol. 1, Art. IV.

Blair, E. H. 1911, Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes Region. Vols. 1 and 2.

Carver, Capt. Jonathan 1796, Carver's Travels

Gregory, John G. 1931, History of Milwaukee

Handbook of American Indians 1907, Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology, Parts 1 and 2.

Herbalist, The 1918, The Herbalist, Indiana Herb Gardens, Hammond, Indiana. Joseph E. Meyer.

Hoecken, Christian 1847, Catholic Magazine and Monthly Review, Vol.6.

Kalm, Peter 1772, Travels in North America.

Lyons, A. B. 1907, Plant Names, Scientific and Popular.

National Dispensatory 1916, National Standard Dispensatory, Hare, Caspari & Rusby. N. Y.

Col. Documents 1855, New York Colonial Documents, Vol. 9.

Nickell, J. M. 1911, Botanical Ready Reference.

Pammel, L. H. 1917, Manual of Poisonous Plants.

Pokagon, Simon 1899, Ogimakwe Mitigwaki, Queen of the Woods.

Schoolcraft, H. S. 1860, Archives of Aboriginal Knowledge.

Shetrone, H. C. 1930, The Mound Builders.

Skinner, Alanson 1921, Material Culture of the Menomini. Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, N. Y. 1924, The Mascoutens of Prairie Potawatomi. Bull. of the Milwaukee Public Museum, Vol. 6.

Strong, William Duncan 1926, Indian Tribes of the Chicago Region. Anthropology Leaflet No. 24, Field Museum, Chicago.

Sturtevant, E. Lewis 1919, Sturtevant's Notes on Edible Plants, edited by U. P. Hedrick. Wisconsin Archeologist 1920. P. V. Lawson on "The Potawatomi". Vol. 19.

Wisconsin Historical Collections 1855-1902, Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Vols. 1-17.

Wisconsin History Magazine 1917-1921, Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vols. 1-4.

---

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[MATERIAL CULTURE](#)

[RELIGION](#)

[MEDICINE LODGE](#)

[PLANT MEDICINES](#)

[PART I](#)

[PART II](#)

[PART III](#)

[FOOD PLANTS](#)

[VEGETABLE FIBERS](#)

[EMAIL](#)

[HOME](#)

[INDEX](#)

[TRADING POST](#)