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Series Editors' Introduction

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Sol Tax's "action anthropology" project with the Meskwaki community at Tama, Iowa, has been lauded in the received history of Americanist anthropology as an early successful attempt to combine the scientific aims of anthropology, the ethical aspirations of the anthropologist to be useful to the community studied, and the Native American impetus to utilize the results of such study for their own purposes. Judith Daubenmier's account, grounded in a nonjudgmental historicism, successfully alternates between the standpoints of the Meskwaki and the anthropology students Tax sent to their community over more than a decade. Unlike works by many other historians, the perspective of contemporary Meskwaki survivors is a central part of the story Daubenmier tells about past anthropological activity.¹ Carrying the story forward into the contemporary circumstances of the Meskwaki is a major accomplishment by Daubenmier.

The contrast of perspectives provides insights of Tax's practice of action anthropology to be of considerable relevance to contemporary situations. At the time the project seemed to have little transformative effect on the discipline of anthropology. The effects were more impressive in the emergence of Native American radical politics in the 1960s, again with the aiding and abetting by Sol Tax. Over the course of more recent decades, anthropology has moved much closer to Tax's vision than to that of most of his contemporaries. Moreover (some) Chicago-trained anthropologists remain in the vanguard of support for Native American activism.

Student participants, largely from the universities of Chicago

and Iowa, have been enthusiastic about the aims and results of the project, both retrospectively and at the time of their studies. The Meskwaki project, for many, has served as a model for how Native American fieldwork ought to be done, in its emerging ethic of collaborative research. Most of the students did not pursue the rhetoric of action anthropology, and none of them developed a theoretical justification for the pragmatic or applied nature of their work. Thus, the legacy, for most of the discipline, has been largely invisible for decades.

The narrative often depicts the students as naive and their urges to help the Meskwaki as reproducing the very hegemonies they aspired to transcend. They lacked the funding and the structural power to initiate dramatic changes in the material fortunes of the Meskwaki. What their hosts—often bemused, one suspects—made of them has more to do with their good will and openness to establishing local friendships and relationships than it does with actual improvements in the quality of life for Meskwaki. The anthropologists are remembered as pleasant young people, not as agents of transformation of the Meskwaki community. There is no question that the fledgling anthropologists remained outsiders.

Daubenmier also puts the Meskwaki project in a comparative context with two bigger and better-funded Harvard projects (in Rimrock, New Mexico, and in highland Chiapas, Mexico) and with the kind of fieldwork training school with which Tax had been involved as a student during the early 1930s.

This is not a biography of Sol Tax. In fact, he is sometimes a rather shadowy and distant figure in the narrative. But his commitment to making ethnography a more intersubjective experience, for both observer and observed, remains a significant legacy. The Meskwaki project and Tax's efforts influenced a major change in the U.S. government's Indian policy from coerced assimilation to recognizing sovereignty and encouraging self-determination. Tax also was centrally involved in facilitating a pan-tribal gathering of Native American leaders that led directly to the Native American activism of the 1960s.

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The inclusive intention of Tax's action anthropology provided a baseline for much of the applied anthropology that became more visible in the 1960s and 1970s, leading in turn to the more reflexive public anthropology of today. The Meskwaki project also showed Tax's determination to internationalize the anthropological voice to include those who had formerly been the studied populations. All of these commitments remain germane and compelling.

Introduction

On July 15, 1948, Ed Davenport was glad to see his old friend Sol Tax get out of the car on the road by his home on the Meskwaki settlement near Tama, Iowa. It had been thirteen years since the University of Chicago professor had visited the community where he did research for his dissertation in anthropology, and some catching up on the health of family members was in order. Then the two men turned to the reason Tax had come, to talk about the state of the Meskwaki people and how they had changed in recent years. After answering Tax's questions about education, a new law enforcement arrangement for the settlement, and political divisions within the tribe that had just ousted him as chairman, Davenport interrupted the flow of the conversation with his own questions.

"Do you find politics everywhere, the same as here?" he asked Tax.

When Tax answered that indeed he did, Davenport laid it on the line.

"Then why don't you work out some sort of a plan to fix things up, instead of just studying people?" he wanted to know. Davenport, who had served as an informant for anthropologist Truman Michelson in earlier years, must have wondered what more there was to learn about the Meskwaki after all the work Michelson and other anthropologists had done. With the community divided deeply over a new government and the possibility of reduced federal services looming, Davenport may have thought that more study was irrelevant to the pressing needs of the tribe.¹

One of Tax's students who had accompanied him on the visit, Walter Miller, delivered a defense of the social sciences based on the need

to understand how society worked before attempting to fix it, but the answer was only a short summary of one position in a simmering dispute over the role of social sciences in the modern world. Davenport's question touched on an issue that had stirred sharp debates among anthropologists and other social scientists in recent years. In his own way, Davenport was re-asking the question Robert Lynd had posed in his 1939 essay *Knowledge for What?* in which Lynd had challenged social scientists to make their research socially useful.²

As the drift of the conversation indicated, the meeting between Tax and Davenport had many layers. On one level, it represented a re-uniting of people who had not seen each other for several years and were glad to renew acquaintances. On another level, it represented two people who were not so much re-united as eying each other across an educational and cultural divide. On that level, the meeting represented the coming together of an intellectual and a common person, a social scientist and a person from the society to be studied, an anthropologist and a Native American. In coming years, the broader group of anthropologists and Native Americans represented in the Tax-Davenport meeting looked at each other across that cultural divide many times and tried to understand the context, agenda, and expectations of the other. In the crucible of cross-cultural communication, people on both sides of the divide worked out a new way of doing anthropology that came to be called "action anthropology."

The cultural divide across which Davenport and Tax viewed each other existed in part because of an imbalance in power between the two parties, an imbalance that Native Americans had experienced since the birth of anthropology in this country, but an imbalance that anthropologists rarely acknowledged. Most American anthropologists would not be ready to rethink their relationship with the people they studied until 1969, when Vine Deloria Jr. delivered his scathing critique of anthropology in his book *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Deloria compared anthropologists to a plague of insects that descended upon Indian communities each summer, living off grant money and gathering information for books that were irrelevant

to the day-to-day needs of the desperately poor people whom they studied.³

For Deloria, the very act of studying Indians turned them into objects for manipulation and experimentation. He blamed anthropologists' focus on Native Americans as berry-picking food gatherers for the eagerness of Congress to force Indians into mainstream society. Indians who did not fit the primitive stereotype constructed by anthropologists became invisible, as anthropologists ignored the current needs of Indians in favor of piling up masses of irrelevant information that would justify future studies. The prestige that accrued to anthropologists for their studies of Indians gave them so much power within Indian communities that Indian leadership was stifled. Young people merely parroted the theories of anthropologists about Indians instead of thinking for themselves. Deloria urged Native Americans to refuse to be "objects of observation for those who do nothing to help us" and to demand that the "ideological vultures" do something to help the communities in which they wished to work.⁴

American anthropologists believed that the mirror Deloria held up to them was cracked, and most failed to recognize themselves in its image. Some anthropologists saw themselves as friends of the people they studied. They could not face the possibility that what they took to be friendship covered up an uneven, exploitive power relationship between themselves and Native Americans. Yet Deloria's manifesto sparked a dialogue between Native Americans and anthropologists that led to a 1970 symposium on relations between the two. At the meeting, anthropologist Margaret Mead insisted that "no one in my generation had the slightest intention of ever exploiting anybody," while anthropologist Omer C. Stewart called the relationship of Indians and anthropologists "mutually useful and amicable."⁵

Some anthropologists, however, had begun to question the ethics of their relationship with Native Americans even before Deloria's manifesto. More than twenty years earlier, anthropologists from the University of Chicago moved onto the Meskwaki settlement near Tama, Iowa, where the two groups groped their way toward a new balance

of power based on an exchange of services rather than a one-sided extraction of information. Tax began the project as a way to provide field experience to anthropology students. It quickly blossomed into a new way of doing anthropology, labeled “action anthropology,” that demanded not just research from anthropologists but a commitment to helping the community among whom they lived and from whose expertise they benefited. The ideals of action anthropology attracted attention in the anthropological community of the 1950s, but few practitioners. Rather than embrace action anthropology, skeptics worried about the consequences for their field when social scientists abandoned their stance of detachment from their objects of study. Typical was the stiff criticism that greeted Tax at a December 1957 symposium sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation entitled “Values in Action,” where colleagues pressed Tax to say if he would be willing to help a group who wanted to practice cannibalism.⁶

This book presents a detailed history of the Meskwaki project. It is the first effort to present a full account of how members of the Meskwaki community experienced the project then and how it is remembered now. My work describes the genesis of the project, its functioning from a practical standpoint, the origins of action anthropology, and examples of how it worked in the ten years the Chicago project operated in Tama. It also assesses the results of the Chicago project for the Meskwaki, the broader Native American community, the individual anthropologists, and anthropology as a whole.

An agenda that includes attempting to give voice to a Meskwaki view of action anthropology departs from the slim historiography of the Chicago project at Tama. Historians of anthropology have looked at the project in terms of how it is remembered within the field of anthropology. One historian of anthropology, John Bennett, placed Tax among “the opening guns of the rebellion in the ranks of anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s” when some anthropologists began to attack the colonial roots of their field and the lingering vestiges of that past. Yet, paradoxically, Bennett concluded that Tax did not receive any credit for helping foment that rebellion, and that the 1960s and 1970s critique of anthropology was only “reminiscent” of

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action anthropology. George Stocking Jr., another historian of anthropology, rejects the idea that Tax and action anthropology had any influence or impact on anthropology in general and uses the more limited term of “resonance” to describe Tax’s relationship to the field. According to Stocking, action anthropology was “kept at the margins” of anthropology.⁷

Other scholars have examined the program itself and found action anthropology’s impact to have been negligible even within the confines of the settlement. Iowa State University economist Elizabeth Hoyt visited the Meskwaki community in the early 1960s, and afterward she wrote an article stressing the failures of the University of Chicago program—the impending bankruptcy of a craft business started during the project and the inadequate funding of a scholarship program.⁸

A second critique of the project was more subdued. Working from a documentary history of the project compiled by the Chicago anthropologists, Larry R. Stucki found the project lacked continuity, both in personnel and programs. Stucki compared the researchers to “do-gooders” who are at first enthusiastic about helping a community and then move on to greener pastures after finding the situation more difficult than they expected. He also criticized the anthropologists for never arranging for an independent evaluation of the program and for failing to live up to their goal of creating programs based on what the Meskwaki wanted. Instead, Stucki said, the anthropologists came up with ideas and explained them to people with whom they chose to work.⁹

More recently, Douglas E. Foley described the project as “a tiny blip in the long flow of Meskwaki history,” although he credits the scholarship program with starting a trend of Meskwaki college attendance. Foley, in “The Fox Project: A Reappraisal,” devoted some space to Meskwaki memories of the anthropologists and the project in general. He summarized the Meskwaki reaction as “a wry, humorous, detached yet generous view” of the project, but generally submerged the voices of individual Meskwaki in favor of an attempt to arrive at a single community-wide assessment.¹⁰

Former students also have added their perspectives. Anthropologist Fred Gearing, a former graduate student who lived at the settlement, wrote *Face of the Fox* to describe his experiences during the project, but it is more about the inability to really come to know someone from another culture than about how individual Meskwaki viewed the project. Regarding the university's project at the settlement, Gearing said he came to the conclusion that the Meskwaki settlement was "structurally paralyzed" and "torn by mutual hostility, fear, ignorance, self-pity, and a feeling of incompetence." As Gearing's understanding of the community grew, he said, "the more my 'helping' was reduced to mere talk."¹¹

In trying to uncover more of how individual Meskwaki regarded the project, this book falls into the category of a "counter-story" about anthropology similar to the one that Linda Tuhiwai Smith lays out in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Although Smith wrote as a Maori from New Zealand, her reflections on the relationship between native peoples and academic researchers (not just anthropologists) captures many of the same tensions that surfaced between Meskwaki and the Chicago anthropologists. According to Smith, while western researchers view their research as helping humanity, indigenous people offer a counter-story: "the history of western research through the eyes of the colonized." Among native peoples, Smith said, "research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs."¹²

The links between anthropology and colonialism go back to the beginnings of European exploration of the world that brought Europeans into contact with peoples previously unknown to them. Europeans had been curious about the customs and beliefs of the people they encountered, and traders, crusaders, missionaries, and other travelers acting as amateur anthropologists tried to explain them to a European audience. In the thirteenth century, for example, Marco Polo wrote of Asian customs he observed during his travels along

1. Making the Modern Meskwaki Nation

In 1934 the four hundred residents of the Meskwaki settlement were as much in need of a new deal as the rest of the nation. They lived in small, wood-framed houses without electricity or running water, as did many of their white neighbors in the days before Franklin D. Roosevelt's rural electric cooperatives lit up the countryside. Meskwaki women drew water from outside hand pumps and carried it to their homes, did their washing by hand, and chopped the wood they burned to stave off the bitter cold of long Iowa winters. Still, their two-room houses often were cold. In warm weather people compensated for their small houses in part by the widespread use of summer houses—rectangular pavilions with plank floors and benches along the walls—where families slept, lounged, and ate during pleasant weather. Women did much of their food preparation and other work outside beneath a cook shack—a roof of tree branches supported by four poles. Even twenty years later, anthropology students who stopped by for interviews sometimes took note of a stew simmering in an iron pot suspended over a fire by a chain.¹

Many families lacked their own wells, and some had to carry their water a mile or more. Washday was particularly difficult for women with large families, who did the washing outside in the summer in a tub or, in some cases, with the aid of a gas-powered washing machine. "When I have to wash . . . hard work," said a mother of nine who had only a washtub for laundry. The settlement school tried to make up for the lack of indoor plumbing by offering weekly baths for children. Although white medical care paid for by the federal government was available from a Tama doctor, some people preferred

their own cures and picked special plants to make teas or soups for stomach aches and other ailments. Despite the hard conditions, the Meskwaki community grew steadily during the 1930s, adding an average net of ten people a year from 1934 to 1944.²

Some men farmed portions of the tribe's 3,253 acres, but the tribe's informal land assignment system over the years had resulted in wide variances in land distribution. A few families had as much as 60 acres of land while others had only enough for a homestead and garden. Even the larger holdings were not viable farming operations given the glutted commodity markets of the 1930s. The jobs in surrounding towns that had been the backbone of the Meskwaki cash economy mostly vanished when the Great Depression erased much of the nation's economic activity. In the late 1930s, as the low prices of the Depression-era farm economy choked off business activity in rural areas, half of the Meskwaki depended on federal relief. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, an Iowan, noted that the Depression left the cash-poor Meskwaki with little to live on besides corn, beans, and squash.³

In 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt named John Collier to be head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the same year Collier promised Native Americans a new deal to parallel that being designed for the rest of society. The centerpiece of the Indian New Deal, the Indian Reorganization Act, passed in 1934 and was intended to give tribes more independence in running their own affairs, greater religious freedom, and more ways to improve their local economies. On the Meskwaki settlement the Indian New Deal also brought immediate relief in the form of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) jobs and paychecks to some people. Young men planted a pine forest as the start of a timber program, installed erosion control measures on Meskwaki farmland, and built a road three-fourths of a mile long. CCC workers also started, but did not finish, a stone building on Meskwaki land bordering U.S. Highway 30 that was designed to be used for selling souvenirs to passersby on the transcontinental highway. In 1937 the Works Progress Administration set up a cannery that helped women preserve a portion of their garden produce for winter consumption. It

closed, however, when the government employee who started it died. For those without jobs, the Indian New Deal also brought government relief in the form of surplus commodities such as butter and flour that were distributed free to needy families. Even with the assistance of the Indian New Deal, Meskwaki families had only about \$500 a year to live on in the mid-1930s, less than a quarter of the \$2,085 average gross income reported for white Iowa farm families.⁴

While Meskwaki shared the economic struggles of their white neighbors, the settlement continued to exist in a fashion that kept the Meskwaki culturally, as well as physically, separate in many ways. Little intermarriage with whites had occurred, except in the nineteenth century, although some Meskwaki had married Winnebago or other Indians. Few of the Meskwaki were Christian despite the presence of a United Presbyterian mission near the settlement since 1883 and occasional forays onto the settlement by missionaries of other denominations. Most people continued to worship in the traditional Meskwaki fashion with a liturgy that revolved around sacred bundles held by clans within the tribe, feasts for honoring the dead, adoptions to replace a deceased family member, and so on. A few men still fasted for visions, although the practice was beginning to decline. About three out of every four children grew up speaking Meskwaki and learned English only when they entered the Sac and Fox Day School on the settlement. Although adults had jobs in nearby towns and worked with or for whites, some young children were so unaccustomed to seeing white people that they ran into the house when they saw one approach. One man said he was eighteen years old before he ever visited the town of Tama just a mile away. Many elderly people—between 10 and 15 percent of the entire community—spoke only Meskwaki and could not speak or write English. A few storekeepers in the nearby town of Tama spoke a little Meskwaki to accommodate them.⁵

Who the Meskwaki Are and How They Got to Iowa

One factor that may have facilitated Meskwaki separateness was the fact that, unlike most American Indian tribes, they do not live on a

reservation. They call their home a “settlement” because, since 1857, they have owned the land themselves and paid property taxes on it, just as their white neighbors do. The story of how this came to be forms an important part of Meskwaki identity and has its roots in the community’s deep past.⁶

An Algonquin woodlands tribe, the Meskwaki had trod a zigzag path of defeat and resurgence before ending up in eastern Iowa. Meskwaki who know their oral history say their ancestors originally lived on the Atlantic seaboard, perhaps in present-day Maine. By the seventeenth century, the Meskwaki were living in Michigan but left there possibly due to repeated attack from the Iroquois. When the first recorded contact with whites came in 1666 or 1667, the Meskwaki were living around Green Bay, Wisconsin, and relying on an economy based on small-scale farming and hunting.⁷

In the face of constant friction with the French and their Indian allies through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Meskwaki had moved south from Wisconsin into Illinois, along with their close relations, the Sac. By 1750 the Sac were living along the east bank of the Mississippi River in present-day Illinois, and the Meskwaki were living along the west bank in what is now Iowa. The tribes lost most of their land as a result of the 1832 military conflict involving the Sac leader Black Hawk, who had refused to vacate land in Illinois allegedly relinquished to the U.S. government in an 1804 treaty. Although most Meskwaki had stayed out of the fighting, the federal government punished them along with their relations and pushed them west again into central Iowa along the Des Moines and Iowa rivers. By 1842 the tribe was deeply in debt to white traders and had to sell the last of their land to the U.S. government to settle their accounts. The purchase agreement called for the Meskwaki to move west again, this time to Kansas, to live on a reservation with the Sac.⁸

Many Meskwaki never left Iowa for Kansas. They camped in woods along riverbanks, hunted, and sometimes even begged for food to get by. Of those who did move west, many drifted back for a variety of reasons, especially dislike of an effort by the federal government

to divide their reservation land into individual homesteads for families to farm. Each spring federal troops would try to round up all the Indians they could find in Iowa and force them back to Kansas. The spectacle aroused the sympathy of white settlers in the area, who petitioned the governor of Iowa to allow them to stay. Gov. James W. Grimes agreed, and on July 13, 1856, the Iowa Legislature approved a measure permitting the Meskwaki to stay in Iowa and asking the War Department to pay them their share of the Sac and Fox annuities.⁹

Using money saved from the annuities they received in Kansas, Meskwaki representatives on July 13, 1857, purchased 80 acres of land along the Iowa River for \$1,000 and took up residence there. The governor of Iowa, not the federal government, held the land in trust for them. The bureau, in fact, refused to recognize the Meskwaki as a distinct tribe and paid their share of annuities to the Sac in Kansas. Finally, in 1866, the federal government agreed to begin paying annuities to the Meskwaki but recognized them only as a band of the Sac and Fox, rather than as the Meskwaki. The Indian service assigned agents to the Meskwaki, but they usually were local people who did little but pay out the annuities. In 1873 the government appointed a man to teach the Meskwaki how to farm, and in 1876 it opened a school. Few Meskwaki showed interest in such innovations. Gradually, the tribe bought more land until the settlement reached 3,253 acres in 1915. The community celebrates the initial land purchase each July 13 as a holiday, often holding Proclamation Day ceremonies, to which heirs of the white family who sold them the first 80 acres of land are invited. The Meskwaki and their land remained under state jurisdiction until the end of the nineteenth century, when Indian rights groups successfully pushed for the transfer of jurisdiction to the federal government. That was completed in 1908.¹⁰

Because of their peculiar history, the Meskwaki avoided the federal government's allotment policy contained in the Dawes Act of 1887. After the passage of the act, the federal government had chopped up most reservations into parcels of land that individual Indian families were expected to farm for their livelihood, and then sold the excess to whites. The policy devastated the land base of most tribes, as total

Indian land holdings shrank from 132 million acres when the policy began in 1887 to 52 million in 1934 when Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner John Collier halted it. Since the Meskwaki settlement in Iowa was under state, not federal, jurisdiction in the late nineteenth century, the federal government had no authority to impose the allotment policy. After the Meskwaki were returned to federal supervision, the federal government tried in 1910, 1916, and 1923 to force the Meskwaki to divide up the land among individuals. Each attempt failed, however, due to Meskwaki resistance and the government's uncertainty about whether it had the power to force such a change on a tribe that owned its land.¹¹

Instead, the community retained its system of assigning lands in which individual families picked out parcels on which to farm or build houses, and others tacitly accepted their rights to use the parcels. Gradually, families began to pass on to their heirs the land they had selected, and the heirs continued to farm or live on it. Actually, few Meskwaki were interested in being farmers. Although the settlement was surrounded by the fertile black soil from which white farmers annually extracted the world's highest yields of corn and soybeans, more than half of the Meskwaki's 3,253 acres of land were unsuitable for farming. Much settlement land was either wooded, hilly, or both, or in the flood plain of the Iowa River, which regularly rose out of its banks to wash out crops and force families temporarily to higher ground. A few families engaged in commercial farming, but most families maintained only large gardens that provided an important share of their food. Instead of farming, many Meskwaki sought jobs in the town of Tama, about a mile away. By 1929 about half of the Meskwaki men had jobs at small industries in the area, such as a paper mill or wood-preserving plant.¹²

Another source of cash for the Meskwaki was the annual powwow held on the Meskwaki settlement for four days each August. The commercial enterprise evolved in the 1870s, shortly after the Meskwaki's return to Iowa, when members of the tribe invited local whites to watch the Meskwaki's annual harvest ceremonies. A local newspaper account contended that in 1912 a white suggested that

the Meskwaki set up bales of hay for seating and charge admission, but one Meskwaki version is that some young men of the tribe came up with the idea and asked the approval of Chief Pushetonequa to start it. Even though some settlement residents laughed at the idea, the dancers collected a few hundred dollars when the first powwow was over.¹³

Over the years the powwow became both an important social gathering for the community and a commercial enterprise that drew thousands of tourists who paid to watch Meskwaki dancing. The performances excluded dances associated with the religious ceremonies of the community. The Meskwaki never put those on display. Instead, the dances were public ones that celebrated a successful harvest or hunt, depicted warriors in battle, or illustrated other such secular themes. As time went on, Meskwaki began to incorporate dances from other tribes. Tourists apparently could not appreciate the difference, and through the early 1950s the powwow was well attended. Proceeds from ticket sales were divided among Meskwaki based on the amount they participated in the event. An adult who worked all four days of the powwow could earn more than \$20, and a child half that. Families made additional money by setting up stands to sell refreshments or souvenirs.¹⁴

Perhaps because of the cultural separateness maintained by many in the community, the idea of white-style education for children was a frequent source of controversy, both internally and with outsiders. In 1897 the federal government built a boarding school for Meskwaki children in nearby Toledo, but after a year of operation, only four children were enrolled. The Bureau of Indian Affairs officials summoned the chief, Pushetonequa, and three council members to Washington to discuss the future of the school. The bureau offered Pushetonequa federal recognition as chief and an annual salary of \$500 if he would enroll his children in the boarding school and encourage others to do the same. When Pushetonequa accepted the offer and sent his children to school, some Meskwaki reacted by forming an opposition group, called the Old Bears, objecting to Pushetonequa's status as a federally appointed chief.¹⁵

Meskwaki schools were the center of controversy again in the 1930s, but this time it was an attempt to close schools that sparked the dispute. The federal government had replaced the boarding school with two day schools on the settlement, but in 1934 the Meskwaki's BIA agent decided to close them. Instead of settlement schools, Meskwaki children would be sent to a public school with white children in the nearby town of Montour. Residents of the settlement were furious. The council threatened to blockade the settlement roads to keep school buses from entering the community and taking their children to the town school. Sol Tax, then a University of Chicago anthropology graduate student visiting the settlement to do research on his dissertation, decided to try to help. Without consulting any Meskwaki, Tax wrote to BIA commissioner John Collier to take the Indians' side in the dispute. In his letter to Collier, Tax proposed a compromise: the Meskwaki children would go to school with the white children in Montour that fall, and the BIA would promise to reopen the settlement schools the following year. While the Indians would have had to make a temporary concession, in the long run Tax's compromise would have allowed them to keep their own schools. In the letter, Tax described himself as "a personal friend of many of the Indians at Tama," an admission of the difficulty of remaining objective in the field despite the norm of scientific detachment imposed by his profession in that era.¹⁶

Tax did not know Collier and feared his letter might be regarded as presumptuous, but the BIA acted swiftly on the matter. BIA director of education W. Carson Ryan Jr. notified the Meskwaki's agent in North Dakota to leave for Tama immediately and settle the dispute. He passed along Tax's proposed compromise. In the end, the children stayed in their own school, as the Indians desired. Ryan noted that the Indians' motives might have been mixed, as one man on the settlement was trying to get the bus contract for \$10 more than the lowest bid. Still, Collier's rapid response to Tax illustrates the value he placed on anthropology's potential contribution to the Indian service's responsibility toward Native Americans, as would be clear in his effort to use anthropologists in the formulation of the Indian New Deal.¹⁷

Meskwaki Government

Of more lasting significance to Meskwaki than the relief programs was the new form of government that the Indian New Deal brought to the settlement. The Meskwaki experience with its new government presents a ground-level view of the effects of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) on Native American communities. In all, 181 tribes with 129,750 members voted to come under the act, while 77 tribes representing 86,365 Indians rejected it. Although the Meskwaki saga deals with the efforts of just one tribe to reorganize, it may well illustrate broader themes. The story reveals how Native American and European ideas of authority and governance clashed in the implementation of the IRA. It shows how John Collier personally shepherded tribes toward inclusion under the act, how he experimented with new approaches to Indian policy, such as using the expertise of social scientists, and how staff shortages prevented more effective assistance to Indian communities. It also puts opposition to the act in terms of day-to-day, bread-and-butter issues for Native Americans, replacing the vague, simplistic characterization of the struggle as “progressive” versus “conservative” factions often employed by Bureau of Indian Affairs agents. The story of Meskwaki organization under the Indian Reorganization Act is one local version of the national story of the revolution in Indian policy that John Collier attempted in the 1930s. It demonstrates that occasionally small, little-known tribes outside the Far West impacted the formation of national Indian policy.¹⁸

Although most Euro-Americans may not have recognized it as such, the Meskwaki had their own structure and style of government long before the arrival of the Indian Reorganization Act. In place of a strong central authority, the Meskwaki government consisted of several chiefs and a tribal council. A war chief took charge in times of military conflict, but in times of peace a village chief was the community leader. Although the village chief generally was drawn from the Bear Clan within the tribe, the twelve-member tribal council had to endorse the chief and could pass over a rightful heir who was

judged too young or incompetent. The village chief held little actual power but instead represented the authority of the whole community. Rather than following the rule of the majority, the tribal council traditionally acted only after obtaining unanimous consent among its members. Council members discussed an issue until all agreed on an action. Without agreement, the council did not act. On some occasions, all adult members of the tribe met to decide matters. A major task of the chiefs was trying, with more or less success, to keep young men in the tribe from starting war parties against other tribes in order to gain prestige within the community. Some whites considered Meskwaki chiefs to be relatively weak, as noted by an agent serving the Meskwaki in 1824, who said that Meskwaki braves did not listen to their chiefs the way their relatives the Sacs did.¹⁹

More recently, the Meskwaki had demonstrated the ability of their government to get things done, despite its lack of a European-type structure of government. Relying on their long-standing use of consensus-style governing, the Meskwaki had engineered their return to Iowa from Kansas and established the unusual relationship with the state of Iowa that allowed them to buy their own land. They had survived without federal government supervision from 1856 to 1896 and did not even receive federal annuities from 1856 to 1866. Without the benefit of elected officials, Meskwaki had agreed on using their later annuities to buy more land. Meskwaki government had passed a key test for any government—the ability to accomplish what was necessary to safeguard the future of its citizens.

After the Meskwaki returned to federal control in 1896, the federal government upset the balance within Meskwaki government with its recognition of Pushetonequa. The traditional tribal council had selected Pushetonequa as chief in 1883 when the old chief died and the council considered his son too young to take over. Meskwaki accepted Pushetonequa's rule until the federal government intervened to recognize him as chief in order to entice more settlement residents to send their children to school. In 1914 the Bureau of Indian Affairs agent began appointing members of the council, and when Pushetonequa died in 1919, the federal government refused