

**Sketch of the Life of Jotham Meeker, undated**  
**By his daughter Mrs. W.T. [Eliza] Keith**

From the August 2004 HEADLIGHT

Dear Miss [Catherine] Campbell,

Please excuse my lengthy sketch, this is my first attempt at magazine writing. I did not know how to close any sooner or just what to write. I have done my best to give you the substance; transpose or do with it as you think best. I would like you to send one[?] Souvenir copy; should appreciate it so much. I am always interested in Ottawa affairs. I was born there in 1849 & I am always more than proud of my birthplace. Hoping you will make a success of your magazine, I am most sincerely yours.

Mrs. W.T. [Eliza] Keith

About fifty years ago when the white settlers were pushing the Indians farther west and the worst element of the whites were corrupting the morals of the Savages, it came into the hearts of a few brave men to influence the government to allow them to take some of the Indians off to themselves beyond this evil influence, and place missionaries among them, to teach them God's goodness and right living. Isaac McCoy was one of the leaders in this movement. We might call him the Judson in America among the tribes in Michigan and the central states. He did a most noble work among them. It was when he was stationed at Thomas Station in Michigan he became sorely pressed for helpers, and teachers in his work, he prevailed upon Mr. Meeker to come and assist him. Jotham Meeker, the subject of this sketch, was employed in the printing in Cincinnati, Ohio. After he and Mr. McCoy had corresponded quite a little, the former was induced to try the new field for a time. Arriving at McCoy's he was welcomed at once, as one of the family. An Indian school had been established there, both boys and girls were boarded and clothed by the good people at the Station. Fresh from the wigwams and the forest, and [with] their wild ungovernable natures we can only imagine the trials and hardships to be overcome and the fearful responsibility they had to face. Even their lives were endangered at every turn.

Mr. Meeker remained there nearly a year and feeling the need of a helpmate, he returned to Cincinnati and was soon married to Eleanor Richardson, the 28<sup>th</sup> day of September 1831 being their wedding day. Mrs. Meeker was a true zealous missionary and was deeply interested in this work, had been working in the missionary field previous to her marriage. As they were needed so badly, they lost no time in returning to the Thomas Station. They continued to labor at this place a year longer. The Catholic Priests were working against them every way possible and finding their work was so hindered [*and*] interrupted, they appealed to the board of Missions for advice. A new field was to be opened up farther north and they (Mr. and Mrs. Meeker) were transferred to Sault-St-Marie. They worked here most faithfully but the board decided to concentrate forces & all the missionaries were sent to the Indian territory. In those days, facilities for traveling were in a crude state. There were no steam cars—boats were few and far between. Most of the travel was done by canal boats, drawn along the bank by a mule. When horseback was used a man [*had*] to travel 30 to 40 miles, leave that horse, get a fresh one, go on again the like distance, leave that horse, & continue in like manner to the journey's end. Then return home in the same way. They had to swim rivers, make rafts & canoes out of fallen trees, hollowed out, traveling in the night to get away from flies & mosquitoes. Their hardships were too numerous to mention. Mr. Meeker with his wife, arrived at Independence landing, Mo October 2, 1833. The Ottawa tribe had preceded them by a few months. Mr. M. understood their language better than some other tribes & was anxious to be with them, his first visit being 11 days after he reached the territory. After becoming better acquainted with them, they held a council & chose him as their leader. The Government to pay \$300 per year for his services.

Mr. and Mrs. Meeker lived at the Shawnee Mission near Westport for several years. The Ottawas settled near the city of Lawrence, Kan until they went to their own allotment. Mr. Meeker had ordered a printing press before leaving Cincinnati, in due time it arrived—the first press west of the Missouri River. He had been working on a new orthography, a phonetic system which made it very easy to learn to read & write in all the different languages & it could be taught to others in a few weeks, 6 or 8 different tribes were now living in the Territory, all spoke different languages. All had missionaries and teachers who were anxious to have books & literature printed in the language of their several tribes. Mr. Meeker printed the first newspaper in the Territory called the *Messenger*. It was issued monthly. He also compiled a Hymn Book & translated the 4 Gospels into the Indian

tongue so they could be used by all the tribes as soon as prepared for them. Necessarily, he was in great demand with this knowledge & owning the only Press in the Territory, he also edited the *Shawnee Sun*.

The Shawnee Mission was located two or three miles from Westport Mo over on the Kansas side of the state line. It was built of stone and the first mission house built. It was here where Mr. and Mrs. Meeker's first child was born in 1834 [*actually not their first chil. A son had been born and died in June of 1833—ed.*], being the first white girl born into the great state of the present Kansas. The missionaries all worked in forwarding the one great cause of civilizing the Red Man.

As time went on, the Ottawa tribe became anxious to get located on the land allotted to them by the Government. After many delays & disappointments, they succeeded in obtaining their coveted desire. Mr. and Mrs. Meeker arrived at the present site of Ottawa June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1837, preceded by the Indians only a few months. A location was chosen near a river on account of water facilities with a spring nearby for drinking purposes. In rainy seasons malaria made much sickness & retarded progress in their work. Everything was in the crude stage, out in an unbroken country, away from all conveniences and modern improvements, many unthought-of hardships,, as well as possibilities, confronted them. So hard to find reliable help to get animals to do anything, with patience tried to the refiners point, in dealing with the wild class around them; Mr.M. was compelled to secure help in the Presswork as it was too severe a strain on his health combined with other duties, he soon had a small home, an office room, & later the school house, built nearby. Later he farmed it, was too near the river, so he had to rebuild on higher ground. Floods in rainy seasons gave them serious trouble. Mr. Meeker, not only had his own affairs to manage, but to plan & control all his people. He was their agent, physician, teacher, pastor, coroner, advisory and general manager of everything.

The tribe numbered 600 souls & all looked to him for example in all things to counsel with them in their wigwams & tepees, & to be of them. They grew to love and trust him, almost to idolatry. All this took time, and even years, to overcome the distrust felt in the savage breast. It was very hard to get them to realize the needs, benefits of education, of church work, of observing the Sabbath, of truth itself. They would get rebellious, determined to get rid of this restraint of the white man, set various traps to kill Mr. M. but the Lord overruled, and their plans were frustrated by some friendly

Indian or by fervent prayer for deliverance. Mr.M. and family had great faith in prayer, & in His protecting power, indeed that was their all, their armor through all difficulties. Mrs. Meeker was a noble, self sacrificing devoted wife, mother & friend to all. Away from all her home ties, she threw her heart & soul in the work of redeeming the poor savages.. They were taught to keep house, cook, sew, spin and dress in a civilized manner, read, write, sing, and above all lead honest Christian lives. They lived & labored faithfully at Ottawa for 18 years prior to their death, over 100 Indians were truly converted into the Christian religion, a church home was built, Sunday School was carried on, had concerts once each month. One of the converted chiefs gave his life & mostly his time going from house to house as a missionary among his people; his name was Thomas Wolf. His death was caused trying to cross a high river, in trying to attend prayer meeting.

As one drives out of the city of Ottawa, 6 miles east on the Santa Fe Trail [no, K-68 highway] looking to the left one can see a few tombstones on a rise ¼ mile from the road. This is the historical spot where the pioneer missionaries lived & died. The church & home were near each other, back of the church was the graveyard. A few of the names on the stones can yet be deciphered, Here is the sacred spot where many tragic as well as lovely scenes occurred in the long ago. The Indians were staunch friends of those who could win their confidence & love.

It was here the loved ones died, away from kindred, surrounded only by Indians. The parting scenes were only seen by the faithful red men. After committing the family & flock to an all-wise Creator, the faithful servant of God left them with a sublime smile on his countenance to enter into the joys of his Lord. On account of heavy rains, the white friends could not possibly get to the mission, so all that was done was conducted by the devoted Indians, even the shroud & coffin was made by them. A song & a prayer was offered in the Indian tongue, & the loved remains consigned to the tomb. Mrs. Meeker was left only one year to mourn her great loss when she too was called up higher. She died March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1856, aged 46 years. Both were natives of Ohio. After the death of the parents, two girls were left at home, one 6 the other 16 years of age. An older sister had married & was living in Westport. The home was sold with all its belongings. The tribe, broken-hearted & deserted, tried to keep together for a time, but they gradually lessened in numbers & some died, and others moved away until at present [1911] only a small remnant remain, being located in northeastern Oklahoma. [*The Ottawas have thrived there, and their numbers, as with*

*most Indian tribes, are growing.] Ottawa Jones & wife were two of the most faithful friends to the last, always ready to give or lend a helping hand in time of need, both followers of Jesus.*

*The sketch ends here with a notation that the original of Jotham Meeker's diary resides at the Kansas State Historical Society.*