

Neshnabek: The People.

16 mm film, 30 minutes, black and white, 1980, rental \$12.00, purchase \$225.00.

Film Services

University of Kansas

Division of Continuing Education Building

Lawrence, Kansas 66045 (913/864-3352)

The Potawatomi Indians (Prairie Band) of Kansas are portrayed in this film which has been some forty to fifty years in the making. The original footage was taken by Floyd A. Schultz, an amateur anthropologist, between 1930 and 1941. These scenes have been supplemented by historical still shots, maps, and other archival documents assembled from various sources in the 1960s and 1970s. During the summers of 1978 and 1979 Donald Stull, a professor of anthropology presently at the University of Kansas, conducted field interviews with some of the originally-photographed Potawatomi along with their friends and relatives. Portions of those interviews provide the primary soundtrack for the resulting film entitled *Neshnabek: The People*. The juxtaposition of the older footage and the more recent commentaries offers an intriguing "time warp" and some interesting material for the consideration of cultural continuities and changes as well as ethnic affiliations and individual identities. For example, one scene shows an eight year old girl playing with a handmade doll and a cradle board. Over this footage a woman's voice comments "That's my oldest daughter—she's forty-six now That's her doll . . . that's the way they used to carry them when they was on a cradle." In another scene, women from the 1930s are shown making fry bread over an open fire while the contemporary Potawatomi commentator remarks that bread cooked in that manner tastes better than that prepared on modern stoves.

Students of material culture especially will be delighted with the excellent scenes showing crafts and other activities which are less readily observed today than fifty years ago—for example the collection of reeds and the weaving of mats, the fleshing and tanning of deer hides, the chopping of a burl to fashion a wooden bowl, and the stripping of bark for the construction of a dome-shaped wickiup. Other scenes provide historical counterparts for activities which are still practiced by many Native Americans and bespeak of cultural persistence in the face of so-called assimilation: the manufacture of beaded moccasins and bags, the slicing and drying of squash, traditional methods of shelling and preparing corn, the use of sweatlodges, the playing of "squaw dice" and other games, and the musicological and choreographic forms of pow wows and other dances.

In handling data pertaining to religious activities, the producers of the film faced an ethical dilemma confronting many students of ethnic and minority studies, in particular those dealing with American Indians. Respecting the wishes of the contemporary Potawatomi, Schultz's scenes of certain ceremonies are shown but their meaning and functions are not explained. For that sensitivity the film producers are to be congratulated. On the other hand, the lack of an appropriate context and the somewhat jerky movements of individuals captured on the old movie film, may cause viewers to perceive the episodes as humorous and they may implicitly regard the participants as "uncivilized." Without any explanations, some audiences may observe the animistic rituals and the all-too-familiar stereotypes of "primitive" religion and Native American "savages" may unwittingly be reinforced. More sophisticated viewers, of course, will appreciate the harmony of the Potawatomi and their total environment and will recognize the fact that American Indians, and indeed most non-Western peoples, do not draw the same distinctions between secular and sacred spheres of life as do adherents to the Judaeo-Christian religious traditions.

To overcome some of these difficulties, the producers of *Neshnabek* prepared a 28-page discussion leader's guide to accompany the film. Included in the booklet are a rationale for making the film, a description of the method of putting together the scenes and soundtrack, an historical overview of the Potawatomi, descriptive notes on selected cultural forms which were photographed, suggested topics for further group discussion, and an entire script of the film. The latter is especially valuable since the soundtrack is uneven and sometimes difficult to follow. More important, however, the guide will allow teachers and group leaders showing *Neshnabek* to prepare their audiences for sensitive viewings of the film. Individuals using *Neshnabek* are thus advised to preview the film, read the accompanying guide, and think about their purposes in showing the film. Otherwise misunderstandings may well reign rampant and negative stereotypes be perpetuated.

—David M. Gradwohl
Iowa State University