

## Big Medicine Caused 1938 Missouri Flood

Oklahoma, Texas and Arkansas are experiencing a devastating flood, and I want everyone to know I had nothing to do with it. I gave up dabbling in the occult arts many years ago. After more than a half century of silence, I reckon it is safe to admit that I was partly responsible for the Great Arkansas-Missouri flood of 1938. Mostly, though, it was the fault of Chief Kow Tow and Cousin Charley. Chief Kow Tow claimed to be of noble Choctaw blood whose forefathers were forced to Oklahoma Territory reservations many moons ago. He evaded the white devils and stayed behind in southeast Missouri to "make big medicine" for ancestral spirits still haunting the shores of the St. Francis River. The Chief's real name was unpronounceable. "Kow Tow" was as close as folks could get to the Indian sound. He said his name meant "Singing In The Clouds." Kow Tow insisted he was 100 years old. He boasted that as a young brave he had taken 99 scalps and been promised by his spirit guide, Red Hawk, a year of life for each trophy. Having surpassed his allotment of years, the Chief said he felt obliged to even accounts by taking one more white-devil scalp before he died. Folks pooh-poohed Chief Kow Tow's threat as showmanship for his business of wooden spoons. Four notches on the handle and pokeberry stain on the bowl was guaranteed to ward off ptomaine poison. People laughed, but shelled out a dollar for a magic spoon --- just in case. \* \* \* Charley was not as colorful a character as Chief Kow Tow. Nevertheless, my older cousin had managed to become a legend in his own time. It was during a summer visit to his house that he introduced me to the town's principal celebrity. The old Indian lived alone in a one-room tin-roofed cabin back in a canebrake. The mosquitoes were fierce but didn't seem to bother him. Kow Tow tolerated visitors if they brought along a little sugar, coffee, tobacco, or whiskey --- the only necessities he didn't grow in his garden or find in the wild. Those people who failed to bring a gift were reminded by the chief of his outstanding debt to Red Hawk. Missouri and Arkansas were suffering from a drought. Cotton was drying in the bolls. It was Cousin Charley's inspiration that we ask Chief Kow Tow to perform a rain dance. For inducement we invested (my money) in a bag of Bull Durham and a peppermint stick, the old fellow's special treat. The chief received us cordially enough and heard our request. He sucked thoughtfully on the peppermint before replying. "That powerful medicine. Worth more. What else you got?" After further negotiation we threw in a jack knife, a red bandanna and a Sunday school badge given me for 13 weeks perfect attendance --- my all-time record. Gathering up his booty, Kow Tow retired to his cabin. Bye and bye he reappeared dressed in a silk top hat ringed with feathers, a frock coat and a red cravat over his usual attire of flannel shirt and faded Levis. Over his shoulder he carried a fringed, buckskin bag decorated with paintings of birds and mysterious symbols. From it Kow Tow took four arrows tipped with beautiful pink and white stone which I now know came from Flint Ridge, Ohio, and was widely traded among Indians for ceremonial purposes. \* \* \* The Chief drew a square on the ground and stuck his arrows, point up, at the corners. In the center he set a decorated pottery bowl. Into the bowl he crumbled sumac leaves, willow bark and a few pinches of tobacco from his newly acquired pouch of Bull Durham. "Kinnikinnick," he explained. "Make sacred smoke." Kow Tow began striking sparks from two stones onto the kinnikinnick. Presently a thick smoke curled upwards, and he fanned it with a hawk wing. He bent over the smoldering mixture and breathed in the fumes. "You, too," he commanded. Charley and I sniffed the acrid smoke. It made our eyes burn and our heads swim a bit. Then the old chief took two, gourd rattles from his medicine bag and began to dance around the arrows. "Huh yuh, huh yuh," he chanted as he shook the rattles vigorously. I felt goose bumps rising on my arms. "Geez," whispered Cousin Charley. "Ain't this sumthin?" After about ten minutes of stomping and chanting, Chief Kow Tow stopped suddenly. "That's plenty," he said emphatically as he gathered up his paraphernalia. We thanked him and left, confident that the long dry spell would soon be over. \* \* \* By golly, the next day it started to rain --- hard! It rained steadily for two days and two nights. Off in the distance we could hear a faint, continuous rumbling. "Water's rising," grownups with worried frowns told each other. Cousin Charley and I were scared. It was more than we had bargained for. In the early dark of the third morning of rain there was a pounding on the front door. Obviously bad news. Uncle Ruppert hurried out of bed, already sensing the trouble. "The New Madrid levee broke!" shouted the messenger. "They need all the help they can get!" Aunt Thelma fixed two sandwiches for Uncle Ruppert and kissed him as he left to join a straggling line of other men trudging along the railroad, the highest ground. "Be careful Rup!" Cousin Charley and I shivered. That afternoon we swore a mighty oath --- sealed with blood pricked from our thumbs --- never to tell about our visit to Chief Kow Tow. Uncle Ruppert came home two days later --- dog-tired and haggard. He hadn't slept for 36 hours. He had tragic news. The main levee of the Mississippi had broken but a secondary levee held. Men were ferried by barge across the flood to heave sand bags into the breach. On one of the trips, the barge overturned. Twenty men drowned! There was a score of sad funerals that week in southeast Missouri, one in our town. My guilt was overwhelming. \* \* \* Cousin Charley came to visit me a year later and told me that he had gotten into an argument with Chief Kow Tow over ownership of a dog. "That hound took up with me, but old Kow Tow said it belonged to him. I started to dispute him, but he declared, "Don't rile me or I'll make it rain!" "I saw his point right off," said Charley. "That mangy dog wasn't much of a hunter anyhow."

## About the Author

Singapore healthcare, Singapore medicine, Singapore hospital service, Singapore medical service, Singapore medical care, international.

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