

country. This means that these marriages were not recognized by law or religion.

The French speaking traders of Canada term for this is *a la façon du pays*. Some people would call them “country wives.”

While many marriages brought loving couples together for the rest of their lives, other marriages were very short-lived or violent. Many traders married native women, but also had other wives back home. Sometimes when the men retired from the fur trade, they returned to their legitimate, or legally married wives.

These marriages came with the expectation that trade between the woman's relations and the trader would be secured, and that aid would be mutually provided in times of need. It was also the hope of the woman's family that the trader's generosity would increase after the marriage took place.

The marriages between these two groups would lead to the creation of the *Métis* people, who would be considered the offspring of the fur trade.

So Thomas A. Holmes gave Wapahaša an offer that he accepted. Based on this, Witch-e-ain then picked Thomas A. Holmes. It happened around 1844.

Thomas A. Holmes then married Witch-e-ain *a la façon du pays*. They were married in the fashion of the country, and lived together.



But Witch-e-ain did not like living with Thomas A. Holmes. She was 14 years old, while Tom was 40. Witch-e-ain did not enjoy living at his trading post at Wah-ma-dee, or Eagle Bluffs. It was later called Holmes Landing, and later was called Fountain City in Wisconsin. She missed the Winona prairie in what was later Minnesota,.

Like a caged bird, she soon pined for her Dakota prairie home. By the spring of 1845, while flowers bloomed, Witch-e-ain died of consumption.

And that is what the Shakopee Heritage Society learned about Thomas A, Holmes second marriage, and the sad experience of Witch-e-ain of the Wapahaša's prairie.



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## SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



# Witch-e-ain

The Second Wife of  
Thomas A. Holmes  
ca. 1830-1845

Compiled and written by David R. Schleper, Shakopee Heritage Society © 2022



Witch-e-ain was around 15 years old in early 1844. Witch-e-ain's father was another chief named Mock-ah-pe-ah-*ket-ah-pah*. (Although some people said that Witch-e-ain's father was Wapahaša.)

The name of Witch-e-ain is closest to the Dakota word *wiçíte*, "the human face," although like some of LaFayette Houghton Bunnell's other names, it is highly corrupted. The name "Face" could allude to her beauty and seductiveness. The name may also be a corrupted front formation from *wiçítokapa*, "the eldest born," although this posits such a degree of corruption as to defy probability.

In 1844, a special celebration was happening in Wapahaša's band. They assembled, and after elaborate preparation and sanctification of the ground by invocations and incense, the chief speaker came forward, and in a sonorous address of



Wapahaša II, or Red Leaf, was born in 1779. Wapahaša II was a Dakota leader of the Mdewakanton Santee Sioux Tribe and, like his father, fought on the side of the British in the War of 1812. Later he transferred his allegiance to the United States and was respected by both the Whites and his own people. He died at age 63 during a smallpox epidemic that swept through the Mdewakanton Sioux in 1836. His son, Wapahaša III, succeeded him as the Dakota leader.

The Dakota lived in the valley on the Mississippi River. At the conclusion of the War of 1812, and between the years 1817 and 1823, the Wabasha's trading posts on the upper Mississippi River extending the operation from the foot of Lake Pepin, up the Chippewa River as far as the Falls and down the Mississippi River into Turkey River and cedar River Counties in Iowa. This prairie is where Witch-e-ain was living before she met Thomas A. Holmes.

Thomas A. Holmes tried to settle in the Winona prairie in what was later Minnesota, but Dakota leader Wapahaša refused. So Holmes and his group moved and opened a trading post at Wah-ma-dee, or Eagle Bluffs, in what was later part of Wisconsin.

Witch-e-ain, at about 14 years old, was "married" to Thomas A. Holmes, though she was not that thrilled. Within a year, she died of consumption.

lauded the virtues of chastity and warned against the sin of bearing false witness.

Wah-kon-de-o-tah, the great war-chief of the band, addressed his warriors in a quiet and affectionate manner, and told his braves to maintain the truth as sacred, and not offend the spirits of their ancestors.

Wapahaša then called for the virgins and matrons to come forth, and for some time there was the silence of expectation.

Again the call was made for any virgin to come forward and receive her reward. Two maidens came partly forward, but, upon reaching the line of denunciation, faltered and turned back, probably from modesty. We-no-nah, the wife of the speaker, and eldest sister (or cousin) of Wapahaša, motioned to her youngest daughter, Witch-e-ain to come forward, according to **Winona and Its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Days** by Lafayette Houghton Bunnell.

After repeated calls by the crier of the assembly, Witch-e-ain came modestly forward and was crowned goddess of the feast that immediately followed. Her head was encircled with braids of rich garniture and scented grass, and presents of colored cloths, calicoes, yarns, beads and ribbons were lavished upon her as the tribe's representative of purity.

Wapahaša said that Witch-e-ain could pick either LaFayette Houghton Bunnell or Thomas A. Holmes, as both allowed royal alliance for the family.

Witch-e-ain said she did not like the trader, and preferred LaFayette Houghton Bunnell. When Bunnell decline her offer, Witch-e-ain withering, silent contempt was clear.

During the feast, Thomas A. Holmes was so enchanted that he decided at once to make Witch-e-ain his wife. Witch-e-ain was allowed to marry European American traders, like Thomas A. Holmes, in the fashion of the