"It is the cause of all mischief which the Indians suffer": Native Americans and Alcohol Abuse in the Old Northwest.

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Frontier accounts vary as to whether excessive drinking on the part of many Native American groups stemmed from biological or cultural factors or resulted from the influence of both forces. Recent research, however, has tended to focus on the latter viewpoint. Historical accounts do indicate that the tendency of tribal groups to drink to excess in the area of the Old Northwest became an especially troubling problem as tribes came into closer contact with newly arriving white settlers. Both white officials such as Indiana Territorial Governor William Henry Harrison, and Native American leaders such as Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet, wrestled with this dilemma. Unfortunately, much of this sad and important story has been forgotten. But early reports often brimmed with lengthy and concerned accounts regarding excessive drinking on the part of many Native Americans. And although early witnesses to the problem did not understand the biological and cultural dimensions of many Native Americans' apparent disposition to addiction, they certainly observed its devastating effects.

As early as 1777, records show a Cahokia chief named Patoka explaining to white authorities at a court of inquiry at Kaskaskia in the Illinois country how “our young men never wish to see [alcohol] when they are in winter quarters, because they drink up all their peltries and then their women and children go all naked.” Two years later at the “Court of the District of Kaskaskia in the County of Illinois,” the civil governor issued a hurried proclamation in response to the growing problem of excessive drinking among Indians. The decree prohibited the sale of “any intoxicating liquors or drinks under any pretext whatso-
ever and in howsoever small quantities” to any tribal groups or individuals. Meanwhile, Father Pierre Gibault at the old French trading post of Vincennes complained to his superior, the Bishop of Quebec, in 1786 of the “accursed trade in [alcohol] which I cannot succeed in uprooting and which obliges me to refuse the sacraments in general, for the Indians commit horrible disorder when in liquor, especially those of these nations here.” As more Americans trickled into the region, the problem seemed to worsen. Joseph Buell, also at Vincennes, offered one especially vivid observation while serving as an orderly sergeant in Colonel Harmar’s regiment in 1787. “The Indians came again to our camp. A band of warriors marched in front painted for battle... and commenced a dance round our flag staff.... After performing...they went to the Colonel’s marque, and danced in the hot sun, drinking whisky at the same time, until all were as drunk as they could be and stand on their feet. They then staggered into town, where I saw them fighting and dragging each other through the mud and dirt of the streets.” Roughly a decade later a French visitor, Constantin Volney, passed through the same community and offered his observations regarding the destructive effects of excessive drinking. “The men and women roamed all day about the town, merely to get rum, for which they eagerly exchanged their peltry, their toys, their clothes, and at length, when they had parted with their all, they offered their prayers and entreaties, never ceasing to drink till they had lost their senses.... We found them in the streets by dozens in the morning, wallowing in the filth with the pigs.” Volney also noted how binge drinking without restraint often led to deadly encounters. “It was rare for a day to pass without a deadly quarrel, by which about ten men lose their lives yearly. A savage once stabbed his wife, in four places with a knife, a few paces from me. A similar event took place a fortnight before, and five such the preceding year.” The Frenchman’s account is made sadder when placed alongside his earlier description of a proud band of Native American warriors arriving at Vincennes the day before they acquired alcohol. Then Volney had observed regal warriors with “Conceived bodies... embrowned by exposure to the sun and air... a head uncovered; hair course, black, sleek, straight, and smooth; a face disgusted with black, blue, and red paint, in round, square, and rhomboidal patches.”

In 1800 the Northwest Territory was divided in order to better govern the growing American population. This increasing populace heightened the problem of Indian alcohol abuse. A desperate letter written in 1801 by newly appointed governor to the Indiana Territory William Henry Harrison, to the U.S. Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn, underscores the escalating problem of Indian intoxication. In the letter, Harrison tells of the constant complaints of “the chiefs of most of the Indian natives which inhabit this part of the territory.” These leaders, Harrison reported, strongly protested “their young men made drunk [by whites] and cheated of the peltries which for-
merly procured them necessary articles of clothing, arms, and ammunition to hunt with.” Tribal leaders clearly blamed white traders for the increasing problem. Harrison agreed in part, noting that traders had carried extraordinary amounts of alcohol into the area. “I do not believe there are more than six hundred warriors upon the [Wabash],” Harrison stated, “and yet the quantity of whiskey brought here [by whites] annually for their use is said to amount to at least six thousand gallons.”

Harrison also informed the secretary of war of the debilitating effects of alcohol on Indians. “This poisonous liquor not only incapacitates them from obtaining a living by hunting, but it leads to the most atrocious crimes. Killing each other has become so customary amongst them that it is no longer a crime to murder those whom they have been most accustomed to esteem and regard.” “Their Chiefs,” Harrison further related, “and their nearest relations fall under the strokes of their Tomahawks & Knives. This has been so much the case with the three Tribes nearest us—the Peankashaws, Weas, & Eel River Miamis that there is scarcely a Chief to be found amongst them.” More specifically Harrison recounted the story of two local chiefs, one murdered by his own son, the other murdered by one of his own natives. Both murders came as a result of alcohol intoxication. Summing up the problem Harrison asserted, “I can at once tell by looking at an Indian whom I chance to meet whether he belong to a Neighboring or more distant Tribe. The latter is generally well clothed healthy and vigorous the former half naked, filthy and enfeebled with Intoxication, and many of them without arms except a Knife which they carry for the most villainous purposes.”

The cultural damage to Native Americans as a result of alcohol addiction was not the only problem Harrison faced. Intoxicated Indians often roamed the streets of the territorial capital threatening white settlers and their property. Harrison reported how warriors “are frequently intoxicated to the num-

William Henry Harrison (1773-1841) served as secretary of the Northwest Territory from 1798 to 1799 and then governor of the Indiana Territory from 1800 to 1812. Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library
ber of thirty or forty at once they then commit the greatest disorders drawing their knives and stabbing every one they meet with breaking open the Houses of the Citizens killing their Hogs and cattle and breaking down their fences.” In one extreme instance Harrison related how a warrior “killed without provocation two of the citizens in one of the trading houses.” The occurrence almost caused a riot, and Harrison found it impossible to capture the suspect alive. Fellow Indians responded quickly to the killing of one of their own without legal proceedings. The beleaguered governor reported how several young tribesmen “actually assembled in the borders of the town with a design to seize some favorable opportunity of doing mischief.” Harrison called out the militia to end the crisis.

The governor attempted to respond quickly to the larger problem of alcohol abuse by issuing a proclamation “forbidding traders from selling liquor to Indians in and around Vincennes.” Acknowledging, however, that such exchanges were bound to result, white traders were still allowed “to deliver [whiskey] to them at the distance of at least a mile from the village or on the other side of the Wabash River.” Harrison clearly understood that many traders used alcohol to take advantage of intoxicated Indians when bartering. In response to this unjust practice the governor’s decree further pronounced, “And whereas certain evil disposed persons have made a practice of purchasing from the Indians (and giving them Whiskey in exchange) articles of Clothing, Cooking, and such other articles as are used in hunting, viz; Guns powder, Ball & c. [Governor Harrison] has thought proper to publish an Extract from the Laws of the United States, that the persons offending against the Law may know the penalties to which they are subject.” The proclamation also suggested that alcohol abuse was not only a problem with Native Americans. Harrison additionally instructed “all magistrates and other civil officers vigilantly to discharge their duties by punishing, as the law directs, all persons who are found drunk...in the streets...and to inform against all those who violate the Sabbath by selling or bartering spiritous liquors.”

Not wanting critics to accuse him of giving tribal leaders alcohol at treaty conferences in order to better cheat the Indians out of their land, Harrison
also took special precautions to control its availability at such gatherings. He wrote the secretary of war shortly after an 1802 treaty conference explaining, "Whenever the Indians have assembled for any public purpose the use of ardent spirits has been strictly interdicted until the object for which they were convened was accomplished and if in spite of my vigilance it had been procured a stop was immediately put to all business until it was consumed and its effects completely over."  

Other accounts from this time also demonstrate the alcohol abuse Native Americans wrestled with, even when living far from white influence. In 1801 two Moravian Missionaries, Abraham Luckenbach and John Kluge, along with Kluge's wife Anna, journeyed to the White River country of Northeast Indiana to establish a mission effort there among several tribes. As they passed through the Ohio Territory, they experienced their first encounter with an intoxicated Indian. "The drinking began at once. This Indian drank up everything he had. He continued till late at night, painting himself quite black and bellowing like a wild animal in the woods.... The Indian sister fled with fear to our tent." A few days later, while still moving through Ohio toward the White River settlements, they crossed paths with a larger group of drinking Indians. Rev. Luckenbach recorded how this group "screamed all night in the woods and acted like madmen. No one who has not seen an Indian drunk can possibly have any conception of it. It is as if they had all been changed into evil spirits."  

Once established at "Munceytown" in the Indiana Territory, the missionaries witnessed the incredibly devastating effects of alcohol use among the people. Of the many dozens of accounts found in the missionaries' records concerning the ongoing problem, one vividly related, "An Indian accompanied by drunken Indians of both sexes, passed through our place with 5 barrels of whiskey.... In the afternoon more Indians from the upper towns passed through here, on foot and on horseback, many of them being in such haste that they had stripped themselves naked, carrying their shirts, so that they might overtake the whisky sooner. Others came running breathlessly, calling to one another that they were very thirsty for whiskey.... So that [one Indian] might get this whisky for himself, the Indian gave the dealer a fine mare and her foal. This he did that he might drink his fill. It is indescribable how these Indians are given over to drink."  

The abuse of alcohol further led to destruction of property such as livestock and in many instances, murder. Rev. Luckenbach reported several of the latter examples in great detail, including this early 1802 account of the brutal killings of two Shawnees:

We heard that the Shawnees had murdered, in pitiful fashion, in their town, an Indian of their own nation, while drinking whisky. First they chopped three holes in his head with their tomahawk or Indian hatchet, and as he did not fall dead at once, one of them
jumped on him with a knife and ran it into his body, while another cut his stomach open. This happened 15 miles from here, where the Shawnees live. Thus also lately a Delaware Indian murdered a Shawnee woman. A drunken bout never takes place among the [Indians] without one or the other losing his life or being at least terribly maltreated. Many of them drink themselves to death, of which we have seen and heard pitiful cases, since we are here. The guzzling of whisky among these [Indians] is so dreadful that no one can imagine it. One hundred or more gallons of whisky are brought to such an Indian town by the heathen, and then they do not stop drinking till there is not a drop left.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{M}en were not the only casualties of excessive drinking. Lukenbach wrote, “We heard to our great sorrow that Martha, an Indian woman baptized by the Brethren in former times, had sold all of her 11 bushels of corn and all her belongings to buy whisky. She then sat down and drank so long that, during her drinking, she gave up the ghost and fell over dead.”\textsuperscript{17} In one episode, excessive drinking among several tribesmen threatened the lives of the band of missionaries. Rev. Kluge wrote of this narrow escape in the summer of 1806, noting how he and his family “were compelled to leave our house and to flee with our children to the woods for safety. Br. Luckenbach, who remained behind for the purpose of locking the doors, was discovered by one of the savages, who immediately began to make all sorts of demands on him, among other things wanting him to go along to the drinking place. When Br. Luckenbach refused, the Indian took the hatchet and threatened to hit him on the head with it. After a great deal of trouble he managed to get away from the savage, whereupon he came into the woods, where we were.”\textsuperscript{18} Unlike Harrison, Luckenbach did not blame white traders as the sole cause of the problem, having observed, “It was not too far for the Indians, when about to celebrate certain heathen festivals, to go four or five days’ journey to the Ohio River and bring from five to six horse loads, after which the whole Indian village concerned would be plunged into the most pitiful and terrible state, since nearly all the inhabitants of both sexes, children and minors not excepted, gave themselves over to drink.”\textsuperscript{19}

As time passed, Governor Harrison considered several courses to fix the problem. He forbade traders, whom he licensed, to sell liquor to Indian groups. A typical trading certificate stated that the trader “shall not, by himself, his servants, agents or factors, carry or cause to be carried to the hunting camps of the Indians of said nation, spirituous liquors of any kind; nor shall barter or exchange the same, or any of them. In any quantity whatever, on pain of forfeiture of this license.”\textsuperscript{20} In 1805 Harrison addressed the territorial General Assembly on the emergency, calling upon them “to prevent the sale of ardent spirits to these unhappy people.” Harrison further asserted to territo-
rial leaders, “You have seen our towns crowded with furious and drunken savages, our streets flowing with their blood. Their arms and clothing bar- tered for the liquor that destroys them, and their miserable women and children enduring all the extremities of cold and hunger.” He also reminded territorial leaders how “whole villages have been swept away” by the practice of excessive drinking. “A miserable remnant is all that remains to mark the names and situation of many numerous and warlike tribes.”

At first, legislative response to Harrison’s request seemed positive. Among other efforts, this body stated their commitment “to prevent the sale of ardent spirits among the Indians.” This stood as an object “of utmost importance.”

A harsh economic reality, however, came to impede Harrison and the assembly from carrying out this critical effort. The governor explained the complication in a letter to Secretary of War Dearborn in 1805: “The reason assigned by the legislature for passing the law with the condition of its not taking effect until a similar one was passed by our neighbors, was that it would be of little benefit to the Indians to prohibit their getting liquor here if they could obtain it by going into a neighboring state or Territory and by returning with it into this Territory.” Harrison complained the citizens “would suffer the inconveniences of their drunkenness without the advantage of their trade.”

Around 1805 a new situation appeared. A Shawnee religious leader, called the Prophet by Americans, traveled among the tribes in the region calling for spiritual reform among all Native Americans. The Prophet was certainly not the first Native American spiritual leader to call for the banning of alcohol. In the mid 1700s, Conrad Weiser observed, “starving Shawnees and Onondaga Iroquois at the Susquehanna River town of Otseningo discussing the recent visions of ‘one of their seers.’ In ‘a vision of God,’ the seer learned that God had ‘driven the wild animals out of the country’ in punishment for the crime of killing game for trade in alcohol. The seer convinced his listeners that if they did not stop trading skins for English rum, God would wipe them from the earth.” Later that same year, farther down the river, a missionary by the name of David Brainerd discovered another set of Native American spiritual leaders among the Delawares and Shawnees. One seer in particular denounced alcohol and argued that its use was the cause of tribal sufferings. But as historian Gregory Dowd asserted, among the greatest leaders of such reform movements stood Tenskwata, the Prophet. The Prophet’s initial spiritual distress came while working among the Delaware and Shawnee tribes on the White River near Muncytown close
to the Moravian Mission. Seeing the suffering of his people caused the Prophet to collapse “with a deep and awful sense of his sins.” Out of this breakdown came a great vision of reform including prohibition.

The Prophet represented himself as the medium of Waatha Moretoo, the Great Spirit, and began an effort to lead all tribes to a higher level of living by stressing the abominations of violence, alcohol, and the contaminating influences of whites. Later the Prophet and his brother, Tecumseh, would lead a sharp anti-American movement within the Indian nation. In the beginning, however, Harrison noted to the Secretary of War the potential usefulness of the Prophet’s work, especially regarding the Prophet’s emphasis on abstinence among Indians. “[The Prophet] is shortly to visit me and I shall take the opportunity to endeavor to develop his character and intentions nor do I think it at all impossible to make him an useful instrument in effecting a radical and salutary change in the manners and habits of the Indians. He has already gained two very important points towards the accomplishment of this desirable object. His followers drink no whiskey and are no longer ashamed to cultivate the earth.”

In August 1808, the Prophet addressed Harrison regarding his religious plans. “It is three years since I first began with that system of religion which I now practice. The white people and some of the Indians were against me; but I had no other intention but to introduce among the Indians those good principles of religion which the white people profess.” The Prophet further explained to Harrison his position regarding alcohol use among Indians. “We ought to consider ourselves as one man, but we ought to live agreeable to our several customs, the red people after their mode and the white people after theirs; particularly, that [Indians] should not drink whiskey, that it was not made for them, but the white people, who alone know how to use it; and that it is the cause of all the mischief which the Indians suffer.”

In early July 1808, the Shawnee religious teacher came to Vincennes for a brief visit. Here Harrison observed the Prophet preaching vigorously to his people and reported the event to the Secretary of War. He noted that the Prophet was “rather possessed of considerable talents and the art and address
with which he manages the Indians is really astonishing. I was not able to ascertain whether he is, as I first supposed, a tool of the British or not. His denial of being under any such influence was strong and apparently candid. He says that his sole purpose is to reclaim the Indians from the bad habits they have contracted and to cause them to live in Peace and friendship with all mankind and declares that he is particularly instructed to that effect by the Great Spirit.” Most of all, Harrison found himself swayed by the Prophet's strong stand against alcohol consumption among the Indians. “He frequently harangued his followers in my presence and the evils attendant upon war and the use of ardent spirit was his constant theme. I cannot say how successful he may be in persuading them to lay aside their passion for war but the experiment made to determine whether their refusal to drink whiskey proceeded from principle or was only empty profession, established the former beyond all doubt.” Despite the efforts of both the Prophet and Governor Harrison, alcohol abuse among the tribes continued at an alarming rate.

In late 1808, President Jefferson addressed one particularly pressing issue with Harrison. While access to alcohol had supposedly been limited by prohibiting white traders from selling it to Indians, tribes themselves were running to white settlements and purchasing it there in great quantities. “I am informed,” Jefferson wrote Harrison, “that latterly the Indians have got into the practice of purchasing such liquors themselves, in the neighboring settlements of whites, and of carrying them into their towns, and that, in this way, our regulations, so salutary to them, are now defeated. I must, therefore, request your Excellency to submit this matter to your legislature.”

That same year Jefferson had called Indian leaders from the Northwest Territory to Washington. To the Miamis, Jefferson declared, “I have looked upon you with the same good will as my own fellow citizens, have considered your interests as our interests, and peace and friendship as a blessing to all. Seeing, with sincere regret, that your people were wasting away, believing that this proceeded from your frequent wars, and the destructive use of spiritous liquors, and the scanty supplies of food, I have inculcated peace with all your neighbors, have endeavored to prevent the introduction of spiritous liquors among you, and have pressed on you to rely for food on the culture of the earth more than on hunting.” Ultimately because of the larger context of issues between whites and Native Americans, Jefferson’s efforts were doomed to fail and so were the Prophet’s.

The Moravian group laboring at the White River Mission closely observed the Prophet's work and its final failure in fighting alcohol abuse. This particular band of whites clearly possessed mixed feelings about the Prophet’s efforts. One positive report noted, “The best of all [his] teachings is that [he] prohibits the drinking of whiskey. If only the Indians would follow this injunction.” Despite his preaching of abstinence,
the white missionaries regarded the Prophet's endeavors to be in conflict with their own. "A large number of Delawares and Shawnees had come together in Woapicamikunk to hear what this heathen teacher had to say. As usual his teaching consists of all sorts of ancient heathenism. In addition, he forbids all coarse sins, and [insists] that parents should not strike their children. He also urges most strongly that the Indians should sacrifice; that they should do away with their cattle and keep horses only; that the heathen should shave their heads and live as did the Indians in olden days."35 Over time, the missionaries witnessed how the Prophet's efforts to stem the growing tide of alcohol abuse were rarely successful. For example, an 1806 diary account described how a group of Indians had "flocked through our village on their way to the appointed house of sacrifice, and spoke with the greatest wonder and respect about these lies. They also promised to drink no more whiskey. This last thing would be well, but they promised the same thing at last year's sacrifices, but unfortunately failed to keep their word, and drank more than ever."36

While whites and Indians alike struggled to do something about the excessive use of alcohol amongst tribes, another growing problem would soon come to override all of these efforts. At the heart of the problem lay an inscrutable ambivalence. Perhaps a key to understanding Governor Harrison's own conflicting views regarding Native Americans and their struggle with alcohol abuse stands the fact that Harrison served as Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Indiana Territory and as such obtained twelve treaties with tribal groups that opened more than ninety-five million acres of land to white settlers. Thus, despite his occasional concern for the well-being of Native Americans, he still had to face the political realities of pleasing the dominating white culture, which had little concern for Native Americans. In this respect, Harrison was likely a product of his time, heavily influenced by Jeffersonian philosophy, i.e., admiring the Native American way of life, but at the same time regarding them as an obstacle to national progress. Unable to reconcile his caring views of Native Americans with the complexities of frontier life and

Map of Tippecanoe Battle Ground. The Filson Historical Society
public policy and goals, Harrison often retreated to his political and military instincts in resolving Indian policy problems. Thus, while the dominant white culture strived to humanely address the drinking problem among tribal groups, it also moved forward in its agenda to eliminate Native American cultures in the region of the Old Northwest.

In a confidential letter written in early 1803 by President Jefferson to Governor Harrison, Jefferson explained his thinking regarding the inevitable fate of the Native Americans in the region. Jefferson hoped the Indians would take up farming, an endeavor which required much less land than hunting, but in reality envisioned another more likely scenario: “Our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will either incorporate with us...or remove beyond the Mississippi. The former is certainly the termination of their history.” International events seemed to play some role in what Jefferson desired. After explaining his views regarding what was likely to happen to the Indians, Jefferson then instructed Harrison to purchase land from the tribal groups as quickly and peacefully as possible but to do so without letting the Indians understand the final outcome.

I have given you this view of this system which we suppose will best promote the interests of the Indians and of ourselves, and finally consolidate our whole country into one nation only, that you may be enabled the better to adapt your means to the object. For this purpose we have given you a general commission for treating. The crisis is pressing. Whatever can now be obtained must be obtained quickly. The occupation of New Orleans, hourly expected, by the French, is already felt like a light breeze by the Indians. You know the sentiments they entertain of that nation. Under the hope of their protection, they will immediately stiffen against cessions of land to us. We had better therefore do at once what can now be done. I must repeat that this letter is to be considered as private and friendly, and not to control any particular instructions which you may receive through an official channel. You will also perceive how sacredly it must be kept within your own breast, and especially how improper to be understood by the Indians. [For] their interests and their tranquility it is best they should see only the present [state] of their history.

Tecumseh, the Shawnee leader, along with his brother the Prophet, came rather quickly to understand this secret agenda. The two brothers hurriedly united in forging an Indian homeland effort. In the process, the Prophet began to de-emphasize the alcohol problem. Harrison soon noted this change, for he reported to the Secretary of War in the summer of 1810 that “the Prophet is organizing a most extensive combination against the United States.” Gone now from the governor’s correspondence was any
positive reference to the Prophet’s work. Of greater concern to Harrison loomed Tecumseh who, Harrison noted in the summer of 1811, was “in constant motion” in his efforts to bring the many different bands of tribal groups together to oppose any more white encroachments. “You see him today on the Wabash and in a short time you hear of him on the shores of Lake Erie or Michigan, or on the banks of the Mississippi and wherever he goes he makes an impression favorable to his purposes. He is now upon the last round to put a finishing stroke to his work.”

That same year Tecumseh traveled southward to encourage other Indian groups to join in an Indian homeland effort. The Prophet was left to maintain the movement in the region north of the Ohio River. Harrison sensed the sudden vulnerability of this group and in November 1811 marched on the Indian headquarters at Prophet Town.

The ensuing battle of Tippecanoe was the beginning of the end for Native American empowerment. The peace treaty ending the War of 1812 resolved long-standing issues between England and the United States and deprived the Indians of the Northwest of a major ally. Moreover, Tecumseh, whose leadership stood at the very heart of tribal resistance, died in combat in 1813 at the Battle of the Thames on the shores of Lake Erie. Tecumseh’s avowed adversary, William Henry Harrison, commanded the Northwestern Army there. Given the white culture’s major military victory, overriding concern for the problem of Native American addiction quickly dwindled from this time forward. Now American policy toward Native American groups in the region of the Old Northwest would focus almost exclusively on treaty-making which would garner more tribal lands. Total removal of tribal groups became the logical consequence of these ongoing treaties. But even during these final, dark days, the problem of alcohol abuse among Native Americans still cropped up as a major problem in written accounts. John Tipton, Indian agent at the treaty negotiations in 1826, made the problem a center piece of his argument to the Indians regarding
their possible removal:

Above all, your young men are ruining themselves with whiskey. Even within the recollection of many of you, your numbers have diminished one half, and unless you take some decisive step to check this evil, there will soon not be a red man remaining on this Island. We have tried all we could to prevent you from having this poison, but we cannot. Your bad men will buy, and our bad men will sell. Old and young among you will drink. You sacrifice your property, you abandon your women and children, and you destroy one another. There is but one safety for you, and that is to fly from this mad water. Your Father owns a large country west of the Mississippi. He is anxious that all his red children should remove there and set down in peace together. Then you can hunt, and provide well for their women and children, and once more become a happy people. We are authorized to offer you a residence there, equal in extent to your land here, and to pay you an annuity, which will make you comfortable, and to provide the means of your removal. You will then have a country abounding in game, and you will also have the value of the country you leave. You will be beyond the reach of whiskey, for it cannot reach you there. Your Great Father will never suffer any of his white children to reside there, for it is reserved for the red people. It will be yours, as long as the sun shines, and the rain falls.  

During the final removal of the Potawatomies to Kansas in 1838, alcohol abuse still plagued the broken, departing Indians. In a letter from Chauncy Carter to agent John Tipton in 1838, Carter reported from Missouri “we are almost constantly annoyed by...drunken Indians.”  

Carter further observed that the whiskey had been made available to the Indians by one of the white leaders. In the end, one prominent white settler in Indiana astutely noted of the Indians’ final demise and of the role white culture played in it, “their disappearance has been hastened by the vices, the cupidity, the injustice, the inhumanity of a people claiming to be Christians.”

By 1855, the Native American plight regarding alcohol usage had not improved, in spite of attempts to move tribal groups away from white influence. In that year the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, George Manypenny, lamented, “The appetite of the Indian for ardent spirits seems to be entirely uncontrollable, and at all periods of our intercourse with him the evil effects and injurious consequences arising from the indulgence of the habit are unmistakably seen. It has been the greatest barrier to his improvement in the past, and will continue to be in the future, if some means cannot be adopted to inhibit its use.”  

More recently writer Fergus Bordewich has observed, “The cumulative effect of alcoholism on Indians is staggering. According to the Indian Health Service, Indians are three and a half times more likely than other Americans to die from cirrhosis of
the liver, a benchmark of addiction.” Bordewich’s observations suggest that the problem of alcoholism among Native American groups still haunts us today.

1. See Laurence French, Addictions and Native Americans (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000); also Peter C. Mancall, Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Fergus M. Bordewich, Killing the White Man’s Indian (New York: Anchor Books, 1997). Mancall takes the odd position of arguing that alcoholism has no biological component.

2. Several works have looked at the earlier story of alcohol abuse among Native Americans. However, none of them take an in depth look at how the problem played out in the Old Northwest Territory. For some other examinations of the problem, see Mancall, Deadly Medicine, passim, and Gregory Evans Dowd, A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).


4. Ibid., 536.

5. Ibid.


8. I have used a slightly different version of the second Volney quote found in Logan Esarey, ed., Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 155.

9. Letters from Harrison to the Secretary of War, July 15, 1801, ibid., 25, 29.

10. Ibid., 29.

11. Ibid., 28.


13. Harrison to Secretary of War, March 3, 1803, ibid., 83.


15. Ibid., 374-75.

16. Ibid., 164-65.

17. Ibid., 212.

18. Ibid., 566.

19. Ibid., 610.

20. License to an Indiana Trader, July 10, 1804, in Esarey, Messages and Letters of Harrison, 103.


22. House of Representatives to Governor, July 30, 1805, ibid., 16.

23. Harrison to Secretary of War, September 16, 1805, ibid., 166.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 126.


29. Harrison to Secretary of War, July 12, 1808, in Esarey, ed., Messages and Letters of Harrison, 296.

30. Prophet to Harrison, August 1, 1808, ibid., 299-300.

31. Harrison to Secretary of War, September 1, 1808, ibid., 302.

32. Jefferson to Harrison, December 31, 1808, ibid., 328.


34. Gipson, Moravian Indian Mission on White River, p. 402.

35. Ibid., 392.

36. Ibid., 403.


39. Harrison to Secretary of War, June 14, 1810, ibid., 423.

40. Harrison to Secretary of War, August 7, 1811, ibid., 549.


42. Chauncy Carter to John Tipton, October 14, 1838, ibid., v. 2, 744.


44. In Bordewich, Killing the White Man’s Indian, 246-47.

45. Ibid., 248.