

# Tenskwatawa



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

History has not been kind to Tenskwatawa, otherwise known as Lalawethika or The Prophet. He is inevitably compared to his heroic brother Tecumseh and fails to measure up in both physical and moral stature. He seems hidden in the shade of his brother's name, whereas his brother would never have had the stature he received if it were not for The Prophet's religion of classical Indian heritage.

Lalawethika seemed to be plentiful of both physical and social shortcomings. An unimpressive-looking man of below-average height, fond of wearing jewelry, especially small medals, which he hung from his pierced nose and ears. His most striking physical characteristic was his damaged right eye, which was permanently closed after he injured it with a bow and arrow. Lalawethika was not a likable person. He was not accepted by the other Shawnee youths and refused to take part in traditionally prestigious male activities such as hunting and fighting. As a young man he boasted of his abilities but seemed to lack any ambition. He attempted to compensate for his misfortunes but was only counterproductive in making a truculent, bragging personality that earned him his nickname Lalawethika (The Rattle or Noisemaker)" (p. 73).

Two activities Lalawethika liked were drinking and talking. He wasn't as gifted a speaker as his brother Tecumseh, but he was nonetheless manipulative and forceful. Using these qualities he became a medicine man in Tecumseh's village. Lalawethika's transformation from a lazy drunkard into a powerful spiritual leader came after a dream in which he claimed to have been visited by the Great Spirit. He proclaimed his new name to be Tenskwatawa meaning "The Open Door." White settlers began to call him

The Prophet because he said the gods had shown him the path to salvation for his people. This new religion called upon Natives to reject white culture and return to the traditional way of life. Tenskwatawa gave up alcohol and urged his followers to do the same. The distinguished changes apparent in Tenskwatawa immensely supported his new way of life.

When those sent by The Master of Life took Lalawethika in his dream, they showed him a very fertile land full of game as well as a large wigwam where eternal fires burned. " The Master of Life had chosen him to lead the Indians back down the road toward salvation" (p. 76). At the heart of these new teachings was the belief that the land was held in common by all the tribes. One of the major downfalls of the Indian Tribes as a whole was the selling of land to the Long Knives. Worst case scenarios included unrecognized chiefs selling land they didn't own. The Prophet preached that no tribe had the right to give up their territory, because it belonged to all Natives. This infuriated white settlers and leaders such as Indiana Territory Governor William Henry Harrison.

Tenskwatawa soon attracted a considerable following, especially among the younger, more radical warriors. The Prophet and Tecumseh decided to move these followers farther away from the harassment of white settlers and closer to undisturbed food sources. They established a new village at the point where the Wabash and Tippecanoe Rivers meet in northwestern Indiana. The settlers called it Prophet's Town while the Natives named it Tippecanoe.

During the following years Tenskwatawa served as a major leader in the village, greeting incoming representatives who wished palaver and dealing with them personally. For a very long time the majority of people, both

American and British viewed him as the main authority figure in the village. In most cases it was not until Tecumseh himself came into direct contact with an individual that they realized what influence he had on the Shawnee and gathering tribes. Even after Tecumseh took down the veil of secrecy and showed the world his true motives, government chiefs such as Main Poc still denounced his leadership mainly because they disagreed with his goals for a unified Indian nation.

In the fall of 1811, while Tecumseh was away on a six-month trip aimed at convincing the southern tribes such as the Creeks and Choctaws to join Tecumseh's Indian Confederation, U. S. soldiers under William Henry Harrison decided to attack Prophet's Town. They saw the village as a dangerous symbol of native resistance and a barrier to white settlement. The ensuing Battle of Tippecanoe was not a major military encounter. Although more American soldiers died in the skirmish than native warriors, Harrison's troops advanced into the village and razed it to the ground, claiming a great victory.

After the battle, Tenskwatawa was blamed for allowing the community to be destroyed. One group of warriors, the Winnebagos, were so angry that they tied him up and threatened to kill him. However, " he still remained Tecumseh's brother, and that relationship probably saved his life" (p. 158).

The failure of The Prophets military leadership and magic to protect Tippecanoe was a major factor in the decline of his influence.

After the War of 1812, Tenskwatawa stayed in Amherstburg and feuded with a succession of British Indian agents. He finally returned to the United States and died a broken man in Kansas in the fall of 1836. He moved there in a last-ditch attempt to consolidate his power and become the leader of a

displaced group of Shawnees. He was a pathetic figure by the end; the epitome of everything he once claimed to despise. He had become an advocate of land trades and deals with the Long Knives.

Although Tenskwatawa is often portrayed as a cowardly demagogue overshadowed by his legendary brother, The Prophet's religion was essential to Tecumseh's success. His spiritual message added credibility to Tecumseh's political and military plans. It is important to remember that it was Tenskwatawa, not Tecumseh, who started the reform movement. This religious movement, flawed as its leader may have been, was meant to solve the very real problems, which the influx of white culture had incurred for native people. Tecumseh has become one of the most heroic figures in North American history, but he could not have achieved that status without the tragic character of Tenskwatawa by his side.

Bibliography:

Bibliography

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