

"Mesquakie" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, February 1992

Mesquakie

The name "Mesquakie" which means "red earth people" comes from the color of the red soil of their homeland. At one point in their migration, the Mesquakie lived in the forests of what is now Wisconsin and Michigan. Seasons determined how they lived. During the summer months (May to September), the Mesquakie lived in villages located along major rivers in the center of tribal lands. Their homes consisted of poles covered with slabs of elm bark. Several families lived in each town house. Mesquakie women tended gardens near their summer homes. They also gathered food (wild berries, nuts, and roots) and collected bark and cattails for weaving baskets and mats.

Young Mesquakie boys learned to hunt small game with bows and arrows while the men hunted deer and elk and protected the villages from enemies.

Once the Mesquakie encountered European-Americans, they gathered pelts for trading. The Mesquakie bartered for cloth, glass beads, iron and copper cooking utensils, blankets, and guns. Winter also provided time for tribal elders to tell stories around the campfires and for playing games.

As European-American settlers moved west, the Mesquakie were forced to move to reservations land in Kansas. A few households stayed behind, setting up camps along Iowa rivers. In 1850, Mesquakies living on the Kansas reservation combined their money and sold many of their ponies to purchase land in Iowa, now known as the Mesquakie Indian Settlement near Tama. A "settlement" differs from a reservation because the Indians-not the government-own and control the land.