



Ottawas at The Flats - 1800

CHAPTER II

ABORIGINIES

The Pottawatomies seem to have been the original Indians of this area. The territory at the lower end of White Lake was a favorite locality with the Indians for several reasons, two major Indian trails of Western Michigan came together at the old Mouth of the lake. The abundance of food was of great importance as well as the relatively soft climate caused by the adjacency of Lake Michigan.

Although not considered an agricultural society the lakes Indian did cultivate small fields of corn, squash and pumpkins. The long growing season on the shores of Lake Michigan and White Lake where frost comes later than a few miles further inland helped the Indians produce a better yield for their efforts.

Both Lake Michigan and White Lake abounded in fish of many kinds which were easily caught even in the winter. White Lake

provided solid ice for fishing when the larger waters of Lake Michigan were still open or only partially frozen.

In the vast unbroken pine forests, deer, bear, rabbits, porcupines were a readily available source of food and clothing.

In the marshy areas of the rivers and on the wide expanses of open waters of the lakes wild fowl were found in great flocks.

Even though the Indians seem to have had the necessities of life, within easy reach, life was not always ideal. Nature sometimes failed them and there were food shortages. In some years whole bands died of starvation and, there was always enemy tribes to be wary of.

There is a local legend, verified at least in part, that tells of a great Indian tragedy which occurred in this area in the year of 1642.

The story of this Indian village and this battle, verified in the opinion of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C., shaped the Indian history of Western Michigan for at least two centuries or more.

Nearly two centuries ago an aged Pottawatomie woman, then believed to be 100 years old, told the saga of her people, how they had been driven from their village, taking refuge on Indian Point, only to be exposed to the merciless onslaught of the enemy.

The Pottawatomies had their palisaded village located on the northern end of what now is the Cockerill Farm in White River Township, in a remarkable pine grove covering more than 20 acres. Years ago massive pine stumps found here proved that in the time of 1642 these pines were made to grow in a certain manner by human hands. Each of the trunks had several massive branches shooting from the main body of the tree at points close to the ground. The theory is that the Pottawatomies split the trunks of young trees to form branches low enough to provide shade for their village. Their tops also spread out, affording such a dense shade underneath that it was like twilight even at mid-day.

A wide ditch of water ran through the grove with laterals extending to numerous points, which was their water supply. Part of the ravine, beginning just to the south and flaring south-westward into the Old Channel at Lloyd's Landing. Some 75 years ago, this ditch was clearly marked and a team and wagon had difficulty in crossing it.

The aged Pottawatomie woman said this was the site of a large village where her people lived and were attacked by the enemy, which after cutting off their water supply forced the inhabitants to flee for their lives. They fled down the Indian trail to Indian point, where the final massacre occurred.

The Smithsonian Institute gives this account from the early

French Jesuit Relations for 1644. It is learned that the long struggle between the so-called "Neutral Nation" and the "Nation du Feu" or Pottawatomies at that time was still maintained with unabated fury. Father Jerome Lalemant states that in the summer of 1642 the Neuters with a force of some 2,000 warriors advanced into the country of the Nation du Feu and attacked a village of this tribe, which was strongly defended by palisades and manned by some 900 to 1,000 warriors: that these patriots withstood the assaults of the besiegers for ten days, but that at the end of this time, the water supply was shut off and the place overrun.

Many of its defenders were killed on the spot, some taken captives, others escaped only to be captured, tortured and burned at the stake.

The Neutral Indians were a tribe that did not join the Six Nations in their fighting against the English. They were called Neutrals because they were friendly to the whites and seldom made war against them.

From these french records and other data, it has been found that Pottawatomies living in West Michigan were pressed by other tribes, the Neuters and Ottawas who probably came from South-eastern and Central Michigan. The encroachment took place about 1640 and continued until the Pottawatomies were driven Northward to the Straits and thence over into Wisconsin.

The Neuters and Ottawas were of Iroquois stock. Here in our area the conquering tribes dominated for over a century or longer, but their reign was brought to an end as a result of disease, fighting and the white man's whiskey. It was then the Pottawatomies ventured back to their old haunts here to remain probably for a century before white men had begun to enter Central Michigan. About 1825 the Ottawas drove the Pottawatomies into the territory South of St. Joseph and into Illinois. The Ottawas occupied the territory North of St. Joseph.

Indian Point is a promontory on the North Shore of White Lake overlooking White Lake, Lake Michigan and the Old Channel. In recent years, Indian graves have been unearthed and undoubtedly many hidden remains of the unfortunate Pottawatomie of this 1642 Massacre still remain as they had fled from their enemy only to find it impossible to cross what we now call White Lake and on this high bluff found themselves trapped and men, women and children were murdered, with a small band escaping to the Straits, into Wisconsin, to return here many years later to these same happy hunting grounds only to be driven out again by the Ottawas to Southern Michigan and Illinois.

Many artifacts of the Indians culture of the Montague Area have been found in the past century. Some of which are of historic value in piecing together a clear picture of life in this area before

T. BRIGHTWELL AND SONS

Local and long distance moving, Taxi, Frozen Food Locker Service, Gas Station.
Edgar, Wilbur, Ward, Joseph, Adam, Carrie and Norine Brightwell

the coming of the White Man.

Many years ago a man was hunting in a ravine near Montague, his dog dug a copper necklace out of the hillside. Some of the beads were round and graduated in size with the smallest ones at the ends and the largest in the center. Interspersed among them at regular intervals were several long beads. They were still strung on a deer thong. This necklace, minus a few beads kept for souvenirs, is now in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C..

The Indians developed a method of tempering copper, which process hardened it and prevented corrosion. Tempered copper retains its natural state and never turns green. Although white men experimented for years, they never succeeded in learning how this was done. Tempering copper is now a lost art.

A knife of tempered copper was found in the gully beyond Funnell Field and for many years it was in the collection which is now in the Whitehall School.

Fires in the open were built either in pits or within a circle of stones. The Indians were always careful in their use of fire and no disasters are known to have been caused by them.

Their clothing was made of buckskin. Sometimes the women wore short dresses fringed at the bottom, and sometimes they dressed like the men in coat and trousers. Their shoes were moccasins occasionally trimmed with beads.

For food the Indians speared fish and shot wild game. They followed their trails or paddled their dugouts up and down lakes and streams gathering wild rice, huckleberries, black berries, wild currants and cranberries. When the first white settlers came, they found cleared garden plots amounting to 300 acres in White River Township where the Indians grew corn. After harvesting the corn, it was stored in clean, sandy pits until it was needed for food. A number of such pits were located east of Funnell Field in Whitehall where the circular indentations can still be seen. Indications are that not more than 100 years have passed since these pits were in use. The corn was ground on a granite boulder with a hard stone pestle. The large pestles had necks with a knob at the top, but the small ones were egg shaped. Some distance north of Montague there was once a large boulder in which several hollows had been worn by the grinding of corn.

The Indians also made pottery. The clay was mixed with either fine gravel or ground clam shells, worked into shape and packed in marsh grass to dry before firing. Borders of dots and lines cut in the clay and an occasional scalloped edge comprised the decorations. Clay was procured from the river bank at the end of Baldwin Street where there was also an oven in the hillside for firing the dishes. This oven remained intact until 1870, or perhaps later.

A safe and easy landing for canoes and a spring of fresh water were the principal factors in choosing a site for a village or a camp. Shelter from winds was also given some consideration.

The nearest signs of Indian life are along the bank of the gully east of Funnell Field. There was a good canoe landing at the mouth of the brook and a large spring at the foot of the hill. One can still see where their shelters stood and where men chipped out arrows. Nearby, a number of circular indentations mark the location of their storage pits. In Whitehall there was once a small mound containing the skelton of a child, but rain and melting snow have cut into the bank and washed the remains down the slope towards the marsh.

The next group of wigwams, and one of the latest to be occupied was at the celery beds. Until 1910, or later, one could still see rings of blackened stones enclosing bits of charcoal and broken pottery where the Indians had built their fires. On the edge of the hill large patches of white sand and bits of broken implements marked the location of their wigwams, and on the highest point there was a large mound containing six skeltons arranged in a circle with heads toward the center. Obviously, all had been buried at the same time.

The opinion has been ventured that they had been killed at the battle of Tippecanoe and that the survivors of the affair had prepared the bodies according to custom and brought them home for burial. However it is more likely that they died of starvation, which was not an uncommon occurrence.

The structure of this mound is classified by archeologists as the vault type. The bodies were arranged on the ground and earth heaped over them until the mound was the desired size. Then it was covered with a layer of clay, a ring of stones placed on top and a fire built within it. Whether this was a religious ritual, or whether the purpose of the fire was merely to bake the clay or keep the wolves from digging there, is not known. It is a fact that wolves will not dig where there has been a fire.

A mound of a different type was built at the Trading Post. Here one person was buried at a time, each body being placed against the mound and more earth heaped over it. Today it is all but impossible to locate this mound.

A number of years ago, She-Ka-Gaw, sitting in a window at the home of her son, Thomas Armstrong, on the Franklin Hill overlooking Montague and watching men building the Old Channel Trail, remarked that they had dug up the remains of some of her people. When her son asked if he should go down and tell them not to destroy the mounds, she answered, "no, let them build the road over them." The spot has not been marked and few, if any, of the people who

follow the Trail know they are driving over an Indian Burying Ground.

Other mounds in this vicinity are located beside the Old Channel Trail above the site of the Heald Mill, and at Indian Point, where they were enclosed by rustic railings erected by Max Lau when he first purchased the property. Here is the largest burying ground in this area.

Indians also lived along the White River near Lanford Creek. One afternoon thirteen arrows and a tomahawk were found in a field near the creek. Such a find indicates more than usual activity. Another place that yielded a number of artifacts was the row of fields along the south side of Alice Street, or the Watkins Road as it was more familiarly known. Here a fine example of hammered copper was found.

Although this area was occupied by the Ottawa tribe, other tribes traveled through here and sometimes waged war against each other. Hunting arrows are notched where they are bound on the shaft, but the war arrows are not. Both Ottawa and Pottawatomie arrows have been found in this vicinity. The former are slender and the latter are broad.

Rain, wind and plows have brought many artifacts to the surface. With the cutting of the timber, ponds and streams dried up and their beds proved to be good places to find arrows that were lost when shot into the water. It was believed that many articles were interred with the dead.

In late years few artifacts have been found even in the remote sections, and it is doubtful if any more come to light.

The largest Indian mound in this vicinity was built on a high hill above Silver Creek. Because of its size, someone of importance must have been buried there.

An Indian named John Stone frequently visited Mr. Paul Norman. Both had served in the Civil War, and once he did John a favor, which is something an Indian never forgets. One day he asked John who was buried in the great mound and John answered that his people had told him it was Chief Owasippe.

The village over which the Chief presided, he said, was on the flat at the foot of the hill. The creek, Bishe-gain-dang (Beautiful) furnished them with fresh water and a safe landing for canoes. Both fishing and hunting were good and the wooded hills that surrounded them kept out the cold winter winds. They were also comparatively safe here from attacks by hostile bands.

Owasippe had two teen-age sons in whom he took great pride. They liked to hunt and fish and sometimes went far down the river to search of game. When, after a reasonable length of time, they failed to return from one of these expeditions, the Chief became

anxious. Every day he climbed the high hill and sat for hours beneath a great pine tree scanning the long marsh and watching for their reappearance on one of the many streams that wound through the tall grass to the blue of the distant hill. But no sign of them did he see. No news of their whereabouts could he learn. They might have drowned in the treacherous river or met enemies who had tortured and killed them, which was a common occurrence before 1812. Whatever happened, the two boys were never seen again. Eventually, their father succumbed to uncertainty and disappointment. His people found him dead beneath the great pine and built his mound where he had kept vigil so long.

Soon after telling this story, John Stone was struck by a train and killed and no further information about the chief was available.

In the early 1890's, three boys were following the trail along the foot of the rollway at the mouth of Silver Creek when they noticed something that resembled the end of a canoe protruding from the bank. Hurrying back to town, they notified the village marshall, who returned with the boys, bringing men and shovels. They unearthed two dugouts, each containing the skeleton of a teen-age Indian. There were also the metal parts of a flint-lock gun, bits of decayed blankets, a copper kettle and a silver ornament.

The boys thought they had found an Indian burying ground; hence the name, Burying Ground Point, but from the information given by John Stone, it was evident that these youths were the missing sons of Owasippe. The two boys had apparently pulled their canoes up to the bank for the night and the river, constantly cutting into the earth, had caused it to cave in, burying them while they slept.

From Patrick Riley, Mr. Norman acquired the silver ornament for his collection of Indian artifacts.

This ornament and the flint-lock gun are evidence that the French fur traders had already invaded this territory.

The smaller mound beside the Chief's contained the skeleton of a woman, doubtless that of the Chief's wife.

When John Stone told this story, the great pine was still standing. In 1914 only a rotted log remained. Now, even that has disappeared. The mounds have settled beyond recognition and would doubtless be lost but for the marker placed there by the Chicago Boy Scouts.

Some effort has been made to learn the correct name of the Chief, and its meaning. The Indian language being strictly oral, makes the matter difficult. The late K. G. Smith of Lansing and Birch Brook consulted the late Father Gagnieur of Sault St. Marie who thought the name was Awassisibi, meaning "Beyond the River" hence Owasippe.