

CHAPTER IV

WHAT'S IN A NAME

A great many years ago, long before the discovery of America, the Indians had observed that the water in one of the rivers of Western Michigan had a distinctly whitish, or chalky, cast as it flowed into Lake Michigan, and mingled with the deeper greens and blues of that big body of water.

They hailed this river as the "Way-be-gun-gwish-cup-ago", or the river "with white clay in its banks." The earlier French explorers adopted this name for we find it recorded on their maps as "La Rivierre Croy", or the "Chalk River."

The later French maps, however, designated the river as "La Rivierre Blanche." This is the translation of another name that the Indians had for this river - the Waubish-sippi - which means a river whose water is white, or a white river.

We do not know to what accident of history we owe the circumstance that the second of these two Indian names should have come down to us, or why this river should be known as the White River and not the Chalk River. But we do know that all four of these names allude to the very remarkable phenomenon that there were beds of marl-white clay underneath the bed of this river, just within its ancient mouth, and that the strong current of the river in passing over these marl beds gradually eroded them away, and thus gave a whitish, or chalky, color to its waters.

Mr. Asa W. Slayton, who was Principal of the Whitehall School from 1876 until 1887, was much interested in Indians. One day he asked an Indian, whom he said was Pottawatomie, what the Indian name for White River was. The Indian answered, "Waba-gun-na-gee Skee-boo-goo Nee-bis." Then he explained that the first two words meant clay-washed, making the motion of washing his hands as he told it, and that Nee-bis meant lake. Mr. Slayton spoke of the clay banks near the mouth of the old channel and the Indian said, "yes! yes!"

The late K. G. Smith spent much time checking the name. He found that Wababigan is Chippewa for white-clay, and that Neebish means lake or water. In going over an article by Dwight Goss in the Michigan and Pioneer Collection, he came upon another spelling. That author stated that the name was Wababigan-gweesh-cup-ago, meaning river with white clay in its banks. This he found puzzling for the name had no connection with any word meaning river or water.

When in Sault Ste. Marie, he sought help from the late Father W. F. Gagnieur, the last of the Michigan Jesuits, who had spent much time studying the Indian language and in compiling a diction-

ary. They came to the conclusion that the name was Wababigan-nee-ki-bago Neebish, meaning white-clay back-of-the-lodge lake. That name seemed reasonable because of the vein of marl extending under the bank toward Indian Bay. But, in the 1950s, some Ottawa Indians stated that this name was incorrect. The correct name, they said was Wabagun-gish-boog-wa Nibeesh, Wabagun, they explained, means white-clay, Gish-boog-wa means being washed-away, and Nibeesh, (accent on the last syllable) means in-the-water. The word, neebish, they said, means leaf.

It is reported that the three tribes, Ottawa, Chippewa, and Pottawatomie are descended from three brothers and their languages are so similar that they can carry on a conversation with each other, each speaking his own language. But there are differences, which fact probably accounts for the confusion of names for White Lake. As this was the territory of the Ottawa tribe, their name can be assumed to be correct. Also, this can be corroborated by the fact that the natural outlet of the lake cut through that vein of marl and was continually washing it away. When the Government channel was cut through the dunes, it, too, went through that same vein, washing it out into Lake Michigan.

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