

Chequamegon Bay played a role in state's fur trading

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Within the broad sweep of Wisconsin history, Chequamegon Bay played out its own unique history in the fur trade. From 1659, when it was discovered by Europeans, to as late as 1840, the fur trade remained the chief occupation around Chequamegon Bay, even after the trade had died out in the rest of the state and the southern region was developing its agricultural and industrial resources.

It was only after the Civil War that the mineral and timber resources of the Chequamegon Bay region began to be exploited, and the region became more or less integrated with the southern region by rail and by the settlement of the intervening territory—"more or less" because much of the north country remained quite different from the agricultural, industrialized, and urbanized south, as it does even today.

The fur trade originated from the increasing demand of the middle classes of England and the continent for luxury goods among which were fur and fur-trimmed garments, particularly beaver hats.

The harvesting of animal furs was an ancient practice in Europe, but the stocks of fur bearing animals began to decline and could not satisfy this new level of demand.

In North America conditions for satisfying this new market existed: an unlimited (or at least so it seemed) supply of beaver and other fur bearing animals; a low cost system for collecting the furs, that is, trade with the Indians; and an extensive network of rivers and lakes that facilitated access of men and trade goods to the vast interior and the transport of furs to the coastal collection points. By the beginning of the 17th century there was already limited trade in furs between the French, who came to the Gulf of St. Lawrence to fish, and the Indians, who came to the coastal areas for the same purpose.

The crews of the fishing boats exchanged whatever items they could spare for furs that the Indians had acquired and were using for their own purposes. The Indians were, of course, hunters of animals for their furs, hides, meat, and bone.

The beaver was particularly important to them because it was large and easy to locate and kill, and for its edible meat and its fur, which they made into robes.

The Indian method of processing the beaver furs for robes made the robes particularly valuable to the French. Gradually, the fur trade ceased to be incidental to fishing, as the Indians began hunting animals for furs to trade, and French merchants or their agents came to the Gulf with goods for the same purpose.

An important center of this early trade was Tadoussac, to which the Indians brought their furs down the Saguenay and other rivers from the interior. But this trade could not meet the increased demand for furs, so the French began to push up the St. Lawrence and its tributaries and westward into the Great Lakes and beyond to tap the vast fur resources of the interior.

It was largely through the pursuit of the fur trade by the French, then the British, and finally the Americans that the territory that was to become Wisconsin was explored and settled. There were other factors, including missionary work, the search for a passage to the Indies, relations with the Indians, conflict among the Indian tribes themselves, and larger political and military considerations. But shaping and energizing these factors, to a significant extent, was the fur trade.

The Chequamegon Bay region, rich in fur bearing animals and populated by Indians attracted there by plentiful fish and game, was an obvious place for a fur trading post as the trade moved westward.

In addition to a large supply of fur-bearing animals and a population of Indians to hunt them, the bay was at the center of a water transportation network that connected the posts and administrative centers to the east with the northern interior regions.

From the Brule River in the west, to the Montreal River in the east, a network of rivers, streams, and lakes provided access to the northern half of the Wisconsin territory, while easy portages connected to the Wisconsin, St. Croix, and Mississippi Rivers.

Within the bay itself, Chequamegon Point connected Madeline Island to the protected travel route along the south shore of Lake Superior from Mackinac and Sault Ste. Marie, while the island was protected against the vagaries of weather on the big lake and was an ideal location for defense against hostile Indians.

Ultimately, however, the importance of Chequamegon Bay and La Pointe for the fur trade depended on political circumstances and the economies of the trade, and for these reasons La Pointe was all but abandoned on several occasions while at other times it was a key center for the fur trade in the northwest.



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.