

The Indian historical pageant of '20s had short run

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To attract tourists to the Chequamegon Bay area, a group of businessmen from Ashland and Bayfield organized the Apostle Islands Indian Pageant Corporation in the summer of 1923.

The Times declared that "more than two thousand Indians will be assembled for the first annual historical pageant of the Apostle Islands and ... thousands of tourists will throng over the highways of northern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan."

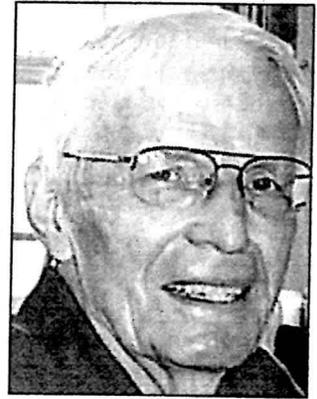
It will be, the paper continued, "the greatest historical event of its character ever staged in America" and will give a "Great Boost to Bay Region."

The Indians, who no doubt had not been consulted as to whether they approved of a pageant in their name and who were certainly not members of the corporation, were reportedly very interested in an event "that will revive their tribal customs and teach thousands of Americans something of the first history of the Middle West."

The corporation purchased land, a "natural amphitheater" at Red Cliff Bay, about two miles north of the village of Red Cliff, for staging the pageant; the Indians were "set to work" clearing the site, constructing roads and a parking lot.

The corporation claimed that "Twenty-five thousand people can be comfortably accommodated on the slopes of the natural arena."

The first pageant, ballyhooed by the pageant corporation as "America's Super Indian Classic," was held during the first three weeks of August 1924. Expectations of attendance were so high — 50,000 daily — that in April a "warning" was given to Washburn by the pageant corporation "to prepare to care for at least double the automobile tourist travel of any previous year," with estimates of 500,000 tourists over the three-week period.



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Aug. 19 was "Washburn Pageant Day," the mayor asking businesses to close in the afternoon and for automobiles to assemble near DuPont club to transport people to the performance.

The setting of the pageant, the advertising brochures declared, was intended to make the audience feel that they were not merely spectators but "participants in a pageant":

"The stretch of woodland through which you pass on foot before you come upon the pageant ground itself is a symbol of the thousands of miles of woodland through which the voyageurs and explorers of the great northwest pursued their way so many hundred years ago. By placing yourselves in the atmosphere of the pageant, its beauties will become a sentient reality, and you will feel to some extent the throb of romance with which the hills and valleys which surround Chequamegon Bay are filled."

The program opened each afternoon "with a Grand Processional emanating from the Indian tepee village in the woods. ... To the stirring flare of trumpets and drums and the weird rhythm of Indian tom-toms the procession will circle down from the forest-clad hills into the 800-acre valley of pageant grounds."

The pageant itself, or "spectacle" as it was called, was titled "Ke-Wa-De-No-Kwa," or "Girl of the North," the "girl" being "the sister of Chief White Crane of the Ojibwas, who married Michel Cadotte, the first white settler of the Apostle Islands."

In 21 episodes or "scenes" presented during the three afternoons, the history of Chequamegon Bay from 1693 to World War I was presented, showing "the dominating influence of the whites, and the tragic subjugation of a powerful Indian Nation."

The cast consisted of several hundred elaborately costumed Indian and white actors, mostly local people. Whatever distortions of history that might have crept in, the pageant was an impressive event, reflecting the hard work and dedication of many people. The Washburn Times was certainly impressed, declaring, "It is the greatest spectacle northern Wisconsin has ever attempted, and in years it promises to equal that of any other big event given anywhere in the United States."

The pageant was held again in August 1925, and tourists came but mostly to attend the log-rolling tournament at brownstone bowl, making the pageant a financial failure.

In 1926 an "Indian opera" replaced the pageant, with nightly performances, during the first two weeks in August. Although well received and coordinated with the log-rolling tournament at brownstone bowl, the opera was also a financial failure, so it was not repeated in 1927.

In 1928 the pageant grounds were sold to "Chicagoans," who intended "to develop the site into a mammoth club property."

The Indian opera was revived for the 1929 Washburn-Bayfield homecoming, held in Ravine Park in Bayfield. The Times reported that "Beautiful songs of the redman sung by famous and talented white vocalists, ballet dances with an Indian motif presented by a chorus of gifted ballet dancers, and native dances of the Ojibwas danced by the Indians themselves will be pleasingly combined in an impressive and satisfying presentation."