

191

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Native Americans have 10,000 years of history in our bay area

While Wisconsin's history in the sense of a written record of people and events began with the arrival of the French in the 17th century, the Native American peoples were here long before that time, perhaps as early as 10,000 years ago.

In the period prior to the arrival of the French, all of the territory of Wisconsin except a narrow strip of the northwest coast of Lake Michigan was populated by the Winnebago. In that coastal area and the adjacent Upper Peninsula dwelt the Menominee, the Noquet and the Algonquian.

These peoples, and possibly a few Potawatomi, constituted the Indian population of Wisconsin at that time. Thus, when Jean Nicolet landed at Green Bay in 1634, the Indians he met were Winnebago along with a few Menominee. But the Indians whom the French explorers, Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Medard Chouart Groseilliers, encountered at Chequamegon Bay in 1659 were not Winnebago but Ottawa, Cree and some Huron.

Two great catastrophes had occurred during the 26 years between the visit of Nicolet to Green Bay and that of Radisson, Groseilliers, and Allouez to Chequamegon Bay, which dramatically changed the Indian population of Wisconsin.

The first of these was an epidemic, which greatly reduced the number of Winnebago. The second was the influx from the east of Indians of many different tribal affiliations due to aggression by the Iroquois.

As the fur resources of the northeast diminished, competition intensified among tribes for access to new fur sources and for the role of middlemen between the Indians and the French and English. This competition was the principal factor behind the aggression of the Iroquois, whose original locale was in western New York, against tribes to their west and north. Armed with weapons pro-

vided by Dutch, the Iroquois drove the Algonquian tribes in the lower peninsula of Michigan into Wisconsin. One of these tribes, the Fox (or Outagamie), made war on the Winnebago, who, weakened by pestilence and then by the loss of their warriors in a Lake Michigan storm, were reduced to a pitiful remnant of women and children.

As a result of pressure from the Iroquois and their allies, by the time of Radisson and Groseilliers' visit to Chequamegon Bay in 1659, central Wisconsin had become home to wandering bands of Sauk, Fox, Miami, Mascouten and Kickapoo, plus the few remaining Winnebago who, surrounded by these invaders, had made peace with them.

The Huron and Ottawa, always fearful of the terrible Iroquois, moved beyond the Mississippi but soon returned to Wisconsin — the Hurons to the sources of the Black River, and the Ottawa to Lac Court Oreilles.

Across the Mississippi and upon its headwaters in Minnesota lived the Sioux, a warlike people known as "the Iroquois of the West." Thus, the tribes in Wisconsin found themselves caught between "a rock and a hard place," for not only did the Iroquois pursue them into Wisconsin from the east, the Sioux in the west gave them no peace. As a consequence the Wisconsin tribes were forced to wander hither and yon to escape their enemies, and so were mixed together, members of several tribes often occupying the same village site.

During the century and a quarter after 1660, the Indian population of Wisconsin was in constant flux due to exploitation by the British and French, wars between those nations and between them and the Indians, and competition and conflict among the Indians themselves. By about 1830, the major tribes in Wisconsin were the Chippewa — Ojibway, who covered the largest area in northwest and north central Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; the Menominee in the northeast, including the west half of the Door Peninsula; the Potawatomi and Ojibway — Ottawa in the east half of the Door Peninsula and along Lake Michigan to the boundary with Illinois; and the Winnebago, in the southwest and south central portion of the state.

The United States treated the Indian tribes as sovereign nations with all of the rights and responsibilities of such entities. This was a convenient fiction, for whatever "sovereignty" the tribes enjoyed was that which the federal government allowed them.

By unequal treaties negotiated from 1829 to 1848, the Indian lands in Wisconsin were ceded to the government and then sold to settlers and speculators or given to the state. Along with dispossessing them of their lands, the government pursued two policies toward the Indians: removal and acculturation.

Removal meant that the Indians were to be confined to reservations, while through acculturation they were to be assimilated into the white man's civilization.

The implementation and consequences of these policies inflicted new miseries on peoples who had endured untold suffering in the great historical tragedy, which began with their first encounters with Europeans more than two centuries earlier.



**Lars
Larson**

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