



Grosse Pointe Historical Society

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Indians

From the WPA circa 1930

Although no mention of an Indian Settlement in Grosse Pointe is made by historians, the beautiful lake, St. Clair was always a great attraction to the Indian and was beloved by them. This district densely wooded and bordering the lake was for years the Indians hunting ground. The great chieftain Pontiac selected Peche Island just off the Grosse Pointe Shore for his summer home.

He there had a commanding view of the waterways. He also could visit the French farmers along the shore without being discovered at the fort.

An important incident dealing with Grosse Pointe was the hard fought battle at Windmill Pointe in 1712. "An army of Indians known as the Foxes came down from Green Bay to erase Detroit from the map. At the time of their arrival the friendly Huron and Ottawa were on a hunting trip, but runners were sent out to notify them, and they returned and rallied to the defense of the post. The church of St. Anne was close to the stockade, and fearing that it might be set on fire by blazing arrows and endanger other buildings, the rattled commandant (protem) Dubison burned it himself.

The hostiles built a long breastwork within 200 feet of the fort, and fired hundreds of blazing arrows of pitch pine into the roofs of the building. But peltries in the warehouse were brought out and the roofs covered with wetted skins, so that danger from fire was greatly reduced. After making an unsuccessful attempt to capture the fort and failing also to fire it, the hostiles withdrew to the banks of Lake St. Clair and the commandant forthwith dispatched M'de Vincennes with a company of French-men and an army of Indians to drive them away. The attacking party found the enemy entrenched behind fallen trees near the present Windmill Pointe. Instead of charging their breastwork and sacrificing many lives in the assault the French and their allies erected high stages along the front of the works, and taking positions on these, they compelled the Foxes to keep undercover. The latter were not permitted to resort to the lakeshore for water and were finally compelled by the torments of thirst to break cover and fly. They returned to their encampment at Green Bay.

Shortly after one of the Indian raids into Ohio, Mrs. Grant (wife of an early settler of Grosse Pointe, Commodore Grant) heard that a band of Indians had encamped at Belle Isle. They were to hold a "pow-wow" to celebrate their exploits, and to torture and burn a young white captive whose mother they had killed.

The Commodore was away, but his wife's mother instincts were aroused, and knowing the love and esteem of the Indians for her family, she determined to make an effort to save the poor boy from so terrible a fate. She was rowed to Belle Isle, made her way to the camp and asked the amount of ransom

for the child. The Indians, who were making preparations for their horrible feast, would not come and listen to her at first. The courageous woman was not to be baffled and at least partly by lavish presents and partly by threats that the black gown (priest) would bring some calamity on them, she succeeded in her mission. The little boy was brought home and adopted by his humane deliverer, who already had ten daughters of her own. On the Commodore's return his good wife described to him her visit to the Indian encampment and its gratifying results.

From the day when the English garrison settled in Detroit, Pontiac began to plot for the elimination of the whites from this region. He was then in the prime of his life. His was a dignified commanding figure, strongly built and rather simply dressed, but his face with strong regular features, large nose and flaming eyes, showed strong character. His air was that of one accustomed to being eyed, and of a man who demanded respect from white men as well as Indians.

The aim of Pontiac was the organization of all the Indians in an area of 200,000 square miles, into a compact federation for common offense and defense. He planned simultaneous attacks upon the forts at Mackinac, at St. Joseph on Lake Michigan, at Detroit, at Fort Pitt, renamed from Fort Du Quesne and now the site of Pittsburgh, at Verango, Le Bveuf, Presque Isle, now Erie Pa. Sandusky Ohio, and Green Bay Wisconsin.

Pontiac studied the local situation at every place and planned a stratagem by which each garrison could be deceived and then overwhelmed. The action was to be practically simultaneous so that one would be unable to lend support to another. His forces were to be distributed in bands of sufficient size to accomplish their appointed task and they were to stop at nothing that might clear the entire western country of the hated English. It was a scheme worthy of Napoleon and showed real military genius.

An interesting account of an event influencing Pontiac and leading up to his "conspiracy" is told by one who lived in Grosse Pointe and who, in childhood listened to many legends and tales of the Indians when they inhabited this district. The story deals with an unusual phenomenon, which took place in the fall of 1762, when a great storm lashed the shores of Grosse Pointe and Isle au Peche. Everything was enveloped in darkness, so dense that the despairing moans of animals and howling of wolves was heard on every side. Man and beast were filled with terror. When the rain fell the drops were black as ink. Pontiac, viewing these signs as prophetic warnings, followed the ancient custom of the Indians, who prepared themselves, for the great undertakings by fasting. He dismissed his squaws and retinue to the Ottawa village on the eastern shore of Le Detroit, and went alone to Isle au Peche to consult the Prophet whose bones lie beneath. There amid the calm and picturesque scenes of nature, and in that harmonious silence so eloquent in its muteness, he conceived a plan of that wonderful coup d'etat which was blazoned by his name on history's page. Brought up in the solemn grandeur of the primitive forests where no passing mood or fancy of the wind but had its image or echo in the wild world around, the autumn blast as it shrieked its discordant symphonies through the forest, poured its fierce energy into his heart. The sullen roar of the waves as they dashed against the beach in foaming rage inflamed his resentment; his fevered imagination saw the phantoms of his race urging him on to defend their resting place from the despoiling hand of the invader. In the moaning reeds the voice of the Prophet bade him gather his tribe; to ride up, be strong as the whirlwind and to go forth like lightning and scatter the English like leaves before the autumn wind. The plan conceived on this small island gave satisfaction to the grave and silent warriors who, drawing their blankets over their heads, retired to their village to await the signal which was to return to them the hunting grounds for their forefathers.

Several objects of mystery were uncovered in 1926, in the 700 acres owned by Edsel Ford at Gaukler's Pointe, Grosse Pointe Shores. A silver bracelet encircling the bones of a human forearm, a silver cross

and a lower jawbone set with a full array of well-formed teeth. The silver bracelet was two inches wide and the thickness of paper, the cross was six inches in height and bore an undecipherable inscription. Mr. Ford classified the discovery as one of great importance, according to Capt. Orville Ingalsbe of Grosse Pointe Shores Police, who was notified at the time of the find and declared the silver cross and bracelet indicated that the person was of high rank.

Upon the request of Mr. Ford and as he was going to conduct an investigation the objects were removed to his museum for safekeeping. Joseph Vann Ashe, 83 years old and one of the first settlers at Gaukler's Pointe was consulted in regard to the discovery and said "Gaukler's Pointe at the spot where the objects were unearthed was underwater at the time of the early Indian arrivals. It has been a great number of years since the water fell to a level that would allow a burial at the spot. The silver cross and silver bracelet make it likely that it was the burial of an Indian princess. They wore silver ornaments. He also told of the great bands of Chippewa and Huron tribes who often stopped for weeks at Gaukler's Pointe to come and make merry after receiving their pension at the government post at Detroit. They usually made this trip in the spring of the year, in canoes laden with furs, the result of their trapping in the forest of the far north. We would see them coming, the chief, his wife and children, in the large canoe that headed the fleet. After the families were settled in came the men would proceed toward the city to do their trading. I have watched the Indians bury their dead at night and could even now point out their burial spots along the shore. We played with the Indian children and learned many words of their language. I loved them as brothers and spent many happy moments of my childhood with them. I know their customs, signs, and their language."

Another life long resident tells of the Indian trail in the rear of their farm on the shore and how the settlers were always just a little fearful of the Indians and usually had some secretive place or underground cave where they could escape, should the "red skins" become menacing, though they were always careful to provide them a good meal should they make a friendly visit.

Mrs. J. H. Hass of Grosse Pointe Farms is the possessor of an important collection of Indian Art, some are very rare specimens and of great age. The collection includes articles from all parts of the United States.

When Cadillac accompanied by fifty soldiers, fifty civilians, and one hundred Algonquin Indians, silently paddled their canoes along the shores of Grosse Pointe, they surveyed with restless eyes the thickly wooded shores, seeking a convenient place for disembarking. Every available spot for the site of a military post was carefully observed, but neither friend nor foe came forth to greet the intrepid travelers.

Since Cadillac's object in founding the colony was to monopolize the fur trading industry, he immediately conceived the plan of inviting the friendly Indians to locate as near as possible to the French fort.

He also induced his soldiers to marry the Indian maidens and thus forming a strong bond of kinship and mutual interest between the aborigines and the French. To this end and for the purpose of getting even with the Jesuits at Mackinac he endeavored from the first to bring the Hurons from that place to Detroit.

After two years of negotiation a band of Hurons arrived at Detroit, and Cadillac could not conceal his exultation.

They soon had cleared up about 200 acres of land on the west side of Fort Ponchartrain, by 1703, the Allengoo or Loups (called Wolves) had a village and fort on the east side, and above the fort, four tribes of Ottawa had settled. Also an Ottawa tribe established a village on the opposite side of the river where Sandwich now stands, and there constructed a stockade of pickets. This tribe produced the noted Pontiac, the outstanding conspirator of all the Michigan Indians.

The Ottawa were loyal to the French and fought with them against the hostile tribes, but to the conquering English they became antagonistic.

In 1703, the Sauteur's and Messissague's came, and incorporating with each other by the advice of Cadillac, formed another village the fort on the Detroit River. Also several households and families of the Miami's and some Nepissirmeen's. The former incorporating themselves with the Huron and the later with the appenagos or Wolves.

The following translation from a French Colonial Memoir written in 1707 and preserved at Paris, gives a vivid picture of Indian Life at the period.

“The village of the Pottawatamies adjoins the Fort; the lodge partly under apaquois, which are made of mat grass. The women do all the work, the men belonging to that nation are well clothed, like our Indians at Montreal; their entire occupation is hunting and dress; they make use of a great deal of vermilion and in winter wear buffalo robes painted. They play a good deal of La Crosse in summer. This is a fine recreation and worth seeing. Sometimes Frenchmen join in the game with them.

The Hurons are also near, perhaps an eighth of a league from the French fort. This is the most industrious nation that can be seen. They scarcely ever dance, and are always at work; raise a large amount of Indian corn, peas, beans, some grow wheat. They construct their huts entirely of bark, very strong and solid, very lofty and very long, and arched like arrows. Their fort is strongly encircled with pickets and has strong gates.”

“In 1736 there were 500 Indian Warriors at Detroit. Houghainville in 1757 says; “the Ottawa, the Sceuteus and the Potawatemies of all the Indians are the most faithful and the most attached to our interests”.

Andrew Blackbird, (in Indian Mack-aw-de-be-nessoy or Black Hawk) son of an Ottawa chief and well educated, wrote a history of the Ottawa. A grammar of their language. This is the only instance where a native Indian has recorded the story of his own people.

In describing his people in their primitive state, he says “*they were honest and upright in their dealings with their fellow beings. Their word of promises was as good as a promissory note. If an Ottawa Indian promised to execute a certain obligation at such a time in so many days, and at such height of the sun, when that time came he would be there punctually to fulfill his obligation. They believed that there is a Supreme Ruler of the Universe the Creator of all things, the Great Spirit whom they worshiped.*

“*The Ottawa were the leaders and the most civilized of all the Michigan tribes. Their wars and forays were far less atrocious than those of the treacherous Chippewa, who reveled in indiscriminate slaughter. More than once in the history of the colony the Ottawa saved white men from death and torture at the hands of other tribes.*

“Some of the educated Indians were unable to resist the charms with which the green wood had impressed their youthful imaginations and after some years of trial abandoned their civilization and returned to the wild live of their ancestors.”

“The popular belief is, that the business of the Indians was to fight. Fighting and warfare were no more prevalent, if as much so in pre-historic times. The occupation of the Indian was to procure subsistence from such resources as nature had provided where they lived. Temperamentally, Indians were excitable, although when not frenzied by emotion, they concealed their excitability under a cloak of taciturnity and a simulated stoicism.”

“For the most part the effect of the contact of the two races has been to afford the Indian additional incentives to vice, while his intellectual and moral elevation has been little advanced. The so-called civilizing influence of the whites upset their equilibrium more and more. Taking advantage of the uncontrollable craving the Indians had for liquor, the traders supplied them with all they asked for as long as the supply of furs held out. Thus the Indians fell from a respectable estate of fairly well being to utter degradation.”

It is sad to think that in a few years will have utterly perished from the face of this goodly land ever vestige of its former proprietors. Like the wild beasts which the hunted, they too, pass from sight and from memory leaving no memorials, except in the names which their poetic language has bestowed upon the natural features of this country.



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