

These are re-typed pieces given to me, Eugene Clark, from Mary Congdon in ~Sep2021 shortly after I assumed the President position from Bob McGuffin.

A RECOUNTING OF SOME INTERESTING HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND LORE OF THE CISCO CHAIN

Researched and Prepared by O. W. Bilharz, around 1965. Note: Bilharz was CCROA President in 1964. Reproduced for Distribution by H. G. Bethune, Jr.

The purpose of this paper is to present to you something of the history of our northern highlands area. It is suggested that I go back in this history to ancient man's footsteps as they can be visualized leaving their marks in our forests. It is further suggested that I related the natural course of human events leading to the present time, more particularly as they relate to our own Cisco Chain of Lakes. These suggestions are the natural outgrowth of the wishes of many of you who have expressed a desire to hear some of the past history of the area. I have therefore taken many liberties in lifting excerpts from much that I have read, as well as in recalling much of what I remember, since the first time I was exposed to the area some 58 years ago.

NATIVE AMERICAN MAN

Native American man, as we have come to know him, was not born in a cultural vacuum. Behind him, as part of his natural heritage, lies a vast store of world history of which no adequate record can be given. There is much speculation from whence he came.

From an examination of the excavations of the many ruins so far discovered, however, can be traced the first steps of his human development from its simplest beginnings. Archeologists have found evidence from excavated artifacts that discloses a culture classed as archaic and belonging to the early Neolithic culture of the Stone Age. These primitive people lived and worked in a period many thousands of years earlier than at first indicated. The radio-active carbon method of dating fossil remains of plants, animals and man determined that bones, charcoal samples and other campsite traces of early man found at Tule, Nevada, were more than 23,000 years old.

Native American peoples of this age were, by environment, hunters and fishermen, and, living as they did by the chance supply of game and fish from forest and stream, they were wanderers. At that time, Wisconsin and the whole middle west were covered by the great ice sheet. This Great Glacialization period, the so-called Wisconsin Drift, was the last in America and ended about 12,000 years ago. It is not hard to visualize that some of the more venturesome travelers among these early peoples explored the Mississippi Valley when the floods from retreating ice sheets had subsided. Were they or their descendants the first to find the Great Lakes? Were they the first to cross Lake Superior to take copper from the rocks of Isle Royal and the great lodes of the Keeweenaw (sic) Peninsula? It seems probable. For it is here that the ancient pits of these early people, the first miners if you please, leave indelible and dramatic records of their labors on the bare rock countryside left by the retreating glaciers. Crude mallets made of stone, which could only have come from distant homelands, are still lying in these pits, their battered ends bespeaking the use to which they were put to break the rock away from the nuggets of red native copper,

One of the earliest and most authentic account of the work of these ancient miners is given in a Smithsonian Institute publication of 1862. This account states that the work must have been the equivalent of 10,000 men over a period of 1,000 years. All work abruptly ceased at least by 1200AD.

So here we find the first footprints in the forests of the glacial Moraine Lake country of our great northern highlands, and, without a doubt, the first to fish on what is now our Cisco Chain some time during the thousands of years that elapsed between the retreat of the great ice sheet and the invasion of Europeans in the 16th Century. Yet there is no record from whence these early peoples came nor to where they went.

The early American Indian that the first Europeans found in the Great Lakes basin belonged to the Shoshosan (sic) linguistic stock, with the Iroquoian in the eastern and the Siouan tribes in the western Great Lakes. They were first contacted when Norsemen visited the New England coast during the first two decades of the 11th Century.

There are records to show that a party of these Norse adventurers penetrated as far as Minnesota territory. The odd "Kensington Stone", upturned by a Minnesota farmer plowing his field in 1898, has runic carvings which, translated, state that a party of Swedes and Norwegians, exploring westward from Vineland (Gene: area near and around the mouth of the St Lawrence Seaway and Newfoundland), reached that point in 1362. There is also some evidence that Basques, Normans and Britons explored this region by the middle of the 15th Century.

EUROPEANS COME TO THE LAKE COUNTRY

Jean Nicolet is known as Wisconsin's discoverer in 1634. Missionaries soon followed Nicolet and the famous missionary and equally famous explorer Louis Joliet was the first white man to establish the Fox-Wisconsin water route from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River. French settlements at the ends of that route were Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, and they thus became the links between the new France of Quebec and the French in Louisiana. With the missionaries came the fur traders, and soon Wisconsin's streams and lakes saw much of the French voyageurs in their colorful red caps and sashes, the rhythm of their paddles stroking to the songs of "LaBelle Rose" and "A La Claire Fontaine". During this time Pierre Radisson, Allouez, Marquette, Fathers Jacques and Raymbault, Dablon, Carheil, and Marest all stamped their names on the area.

It was not until the British, victorious in the French and Indian War (Gene: around 1760-2), fortified Mackinac (MAK-in-aw) Island that the renowned Fort Cadillac was to assume importance as the outpost of the fur trading industry.

THE FUR TRADE

Michilimacknac ('The Green Turtle'), the French called Macquina. Here focus history, legend and romance. At the end of the Revolution, Mackinac was ceded to America, but it was not evacuated until 1796. Retaken by the British in the War of 1812, it was returned under the terms of the Treaty of Ghent (Dec 1814). In 1817, John Jacob Astor, with his American Fur Company, centered his operation at Mackinac. Here he employed 2,000 voyageurs and 400 clerks. Beaver laid the foundation for Astor's fabulous fortune. In 1822 alone, three million dollars' worth of pelts passed through his headquarters and clearinghouse at Mackinac. Beaver pelts became the 'coin' of the times and debts were paid and goods purchased on the 'beaver standard'.

But it was in the forests and the thousands of inland lakes as we now know them that was to be the proving ground for the intrepid fur traders. The Indians called this lake country 'MISH-SAWG-YE-GAN' (Gene: Michigan).

I have a little book by R. Clyde Ford entitled "Sandy McDonald's Man", which gives an interesting account of episodes of the Mackinac fur trade during the period. It was of particular interest to me because it ties the fur trade to the Cisco Chain. The story deals with the trials and tribulations of a man who was outfitted in Mackinac by a fur trader named Sandy McDonald. This man went into the "Wisconsin County" to trade for furs with the Indians. It charts the log of his trading expedition from Mackinac in a voyageur canoe over the Portage at the Soo Rapids, along the south shore of Lake Superior to the then occupied Indian village at the mouth of the Ontonagon River, then up this river and eventually overland to Lac Vieus De Sert (Gene: Lac Vieux Desert), called by the Indians 'KA-TA-KIT-TE-KON'. Here he established his headquarters somewhat north of the location of the present Indian village.

One episode of this book describes a canoe trip from Vieus De Sert down the Wisconsin River, thence up to Mill Creek to Mill Lake and Landing Lake, then called Lake Chemung. Quoting from the book – "The next day we packed over the Portage to Black Oak Lake, crossed it, and with two more short Potages made Spring Lake and next Spring Creek, which brought us to the south end of that sprawling monster of the forest country, Crooked Lake. 'MEX-I-NIN-NE' had made it plain to us that we must head directly west from the outlet of Spring Creek across the lake, where we should find, coming in from a chain of small lakes to the southwest, a stream which would give us a shortcut to the 'MAN-I-TO-WEESH' " (Gene: Manitowish).

You will note that the south end of the Chain was called Crooked Lake. The stream mentioned could be no other than Helen Creek. So I assume the shortcut route of the Indians to High Lake was by way of Helen Lake, Ben Lake, down the Upper Trout Creek to a portage to Jute Lake then to High Lake. It might be noted that before the extensive lumbering operations, forest run-off was sufficient to make most streams navigable by canoe. It is also of interest that the easier route as we know it that goes from the Chain via Palmer Lake, Cochran, Jones and Devils Lakes to High Lake is not mentioned as being used by the Indians, even though the large rice bed on Palmer was harvested for wild rice for many years by the Indians.

THE FIRST SETTLERS

After the War of 1812, Wisconsin began to fill with American settlers and by 1848 was populous enough to be admitted into statehood. That year a flood of German liberals immigrated to Wisconsin. In addition, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Irish, Belgians and Poles all came in response to news of the wonderful fertility and beauty of the new land.

Mining played a big part in the early development of the Upper Peninsula country. The existence of native copper was known to the Indians. In fact, the so-called Ontonagon Band, a detachment of the La Pointes (Chief Buffalos) who populated the Indian village at the mouth of the Ontonagon River about 1830, owned a huge boulder of native copper found in the Ontonagon River. It was not until 1841, however, that Dr. Douglass Houghton, then State Geologist, reported the existence of copper in the Upper Peninsula. Interest stimulated by his reports resulted in the eventual establishment of mining on the great copper lodes of the Keweenaw Peninsula. Some years later, in 1845, a Chippewa Chief named 'Matji Gesick' found a lump of iron ore which led to the development of the Marquette, Minnongue and Gogebic iron ranges. So mining became a magnet to draw additional emigrants to our north country. The famous Cornish miner, the 'Cousin Jack' of the copper country, whose wife's 'hot pasty' helped build the country, is a legend. Finns, Swedes, Irish, Italians and French Canadians were attracted to the mining industry and the lumbering industry soon to follow. Their dialect stories are a part of the local folklore to this day.

Logging of Wisconsin's virgin white pine timber began in 1830 and spanned 100 years with the peak crop being cut in 1899 after the Northwestern Railroad built a new line into the Upper Peninsula. Many of the early inhabitants of this area can trace their forebears back to the rousing, swashbuckling lumberjacks, whose cries of "timber" echoes through the forests of MISH_SAWG_YE_GAN during this historic period. About this time, too, we find mention of the first pioneers to establish themselves on the Chain.

THE FIRST CISCO CHAIN SETTLERS

One of the earliest, if not the first, settler on the Cisco Chain was a man by the name of Delano. Delano started a camp on the south shore of Mamie Lake to hunt and fish for market, using a wagon and team to transport his product to the station on the Northwestern called Stateline, now the present station of Land o' Lakes. It was not long after this that the William H. Bent family, coming from the small town of Abrams, Wisconsin landed at Delano's Camp. William Bent, together with his sons Charlie, Horace, Edward, George and Walter, had just finished a contract to supply meat for the construction workers of the railroad. Charlie, after seeing the tremendous waste of good sport fishing on the Chain and surrounding lakes, purchased the camp from Delano and in 1896 established it as a sports resort. On the lake Charlie named for his wife, Mamie, 'Bent's Camp' became a popular resort which drew many people to the Chain to later become themselves owners of resorts and summer homes... today, Bent's Camp is successfully operated by Mr. and Mrs. Roy Benedict and remains one of the popular resorts on the Chain. At the time Charlie Bent operated the camp, guests were met for many years at the state line station. I have vivid memories in 1907 on Charlie's lumber wagon. (Note: 1907 +58 = 1965, the inferred date of writing this article.)

It is reported that the first private cabin built on the Chain was that of the Bullocks in 1902. This cabin stood on the point on West Bay Lake. Vacant and sadly deteriorated, this beautiful spot was recently acquired by Barry Bockoff, who renovated and modernized the old cabin into a comfortable summer home. About 1912, the Shattucks built between West Bay and Morley Lakes just north of what is now called the 'sand cut'. Another beautiful spot now owned by Tony Kotrich. In 1916 or 1918, Johnny Franks started a resort and tavern on West Bay Lake. This place was soon purchased by the Frankenthals and about 1926 was purchased and enlarged by the Lamonts. The big Lamont house still stands though it has been unoccupied for many years. It is now owned by Mrs. Kiefer. About 1910, the east end of Thousand Island Lake was purchased by a Mr. Hewitt, an official of the Northwestern Railroad. A few of you will remember his caretaker, Lon Loveless. Later acquired by General Motors, it has for many years been the summer home of the Fisher brothers.

I recall many other early-day fishermen and pioneer vacationers. Karl Shilling and his 'Grunebaum Island', now owned by the Vogel family on Crooked Lake; the Klotz Cabin, built around 1926, now owned by the Forsythes; Bob Bennett's island, now Saddlers, both the latter also on Crooked Lake; the Clouds (?), Miss Goodrich, Fannie Vair, Seaverns, the Caldwell campers, Charlie Davis, the Ketchums, Old Jim Fitzgerald and Mamie Bent's brother Benny Twombly, are just a few of the many that have left their permanent mark on the Chain.

With the building of the dam at the Cisco Lake outlet of the Chain, the method of entry to the Chain changed. The dam, originally built to permit floating of white pine timber cut on the Chain over rapids at the outlet of Lindsley Lake to a rail spur on the north shore of Cisco Lake, raised water levels on the Chain some five feet. You can still note the shoreline drownout of trees; many of the old cedars still stand as gaunt sentinels after some 60 years submergence. After its usefulness to the lumber company ended and to prevent its destruction, Mr. Hewitt, with the help of other local people, was instrumental in saving the dam. It was then that the present concrete dam was put in to maintain water levels and so

permit and facilitate boating though the Chain. Mr. Hewitt also influenced the Northwestern Railroad to service the lumber spur to Cisco Lake and for many years a Pullman sleeper was shunted down from Watersmeet to Cisco Lake. The so-called 'Fishmen's Special' left Chicago at 6:00PM and one arrived at Cisco at 7:00AM the next morning. It then became customary for all boats on the Chain to meet the early morning train to pick up mail, supplies and guests and to again make the trip in the evening with outgoing mail and guests. I am sure that some of you remember, as I do, the wonderful evening suppers cooked over the open campfire at the landing and enjoyed before departing on the evening train. Here is where I first saw and rode in the old 'tar baby'. Through the courtesy of Gene and Bonny Bent, I have a picture of her with me. She was a steam-driven scow-type boat built by 'Grandpa' Bill Bent to use going back and forth to Cisco Landing. It antedated the launches later much in use by most of the resorts for this purpose.

It was not until the entry road was improved from State Line to Bent's Camp for what is now Hwy. 45 that automobiles could be used and the old Cisco Landing was abandoned. State Line again became the focal point from which to enter the Chain, thus it was not long before a community sprang up around the station and this became the progressive and prosperous little town of Land o' Lakes. As highways were improved, the entry road to Bent's Camp was extended, first as far as Palmer Lake Landing, then extended to High Lake and Boulder Junction and subsequently improved to the present County B Highway.

I feel it is to the credit of the interested officials of Vilas County that they have kept County B beautiful and free from incongruous signs of commercialism. To me it is one of the few remaining beautiful drives of the highlands at all times of the year. The colorful Spring flowers along the parking, the deep summer coat of the evergreens, the brilliant Fall leaves of the hardwoods and the glistening whiteness of the Winter's snow, all leave impressions one cannot easily forget. County B now is the proper entry to the equally beautiful Cisco Chain which has contributed so much to the enjoyment of so many interesting people, including you, the present Riparians.

In closing, may I say that I realize I have covered only very briefly the Cisco Chain story. Many of you will recall your own early experiences here on these lakes, and I apologize if I have not mentioned all. However, it is my hope that the beauty of this body of water can be held inviolate from ravages of fire, from depredations of careless and thoughtless campers and fishermen, and Riparian owners can pass on to our children and grandchildren or to those who follow our footsteps through the forests of the area, the joys and traditions and loyal friendships of a wonderful group of people, the Cisco Chain gang.

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