Indians Camped Near Jenny In Pioneer Years

A retrospect of Indian life, as it existed along the Wisconsin river, particularly in the vicinity of Merrill nearly a century ago, may be gained through an interesting resume given before his death by William Averill, one of the earliest white settlers of Merrill, and preserved by the late Dr. A. R. Wittman, who did some interesting and valuable research along these lines. An article prepared from the data thus gained appared in the issue of the Merrill Daily Herald of Jan. 22, 1921 and is here reproduced verbatim:

"According to Mr. Averill, as long ago as 1850 there was an Indian village site on both sides of West Main street along the Wisconsin river. On the Sixth Ward side of the river were 40 wigwams of Chippewa Indians and a burial ground near by. A temporary camping site was at the Big Eddy east of Merrill and a spring and summer site was on the flats on the north bank of the Wisconsin river opposite John Ament's. A few Indians were buried at Big Eddy and over 100 near Ament's on both sides of the Wisconsin river.

"Other village sites and burial grounds in the country were at the north of Skanawan Creek just north of Gilbert in the town of Bradley; a temporary camping site on the north bank of Rice Lake near Heafford Junction; another in the vicinity of Spirit Lake. At Skanawan Creek the Milwaukee railroad built through the Indian burial grounds where about 100 Indians had been buried during a succession of years. At Heafford Junction there were seven mounds in a row, all circular, on the north side of the mouth of Little Rice. The mounds were intact ten years ago but they cannot be located now, and it is probably they have been submarged by the large reservoir created by the dam on the Tomahawk river. One mound opposite John Dereg's tavern at Heafford Junction and others in the near vicinity indicate that the locale of Tomahawk was also a popular camping site for the Chippewas.

"Mr. Averill said that the Indians remained here except in winter when they camped along Black river and the Mississippi, following the deer that worked down in that direction where there was less snow to hinder their movements. Deer were less plentiful in Lincoln county and other northern counties in winter than now, as the cutting of timber has generally forced them into a smaller area in northern Wisconsin. A wonderful sight witnessed by Mr. Averill was the birch bark canoes moving south in fall with their Indian occupants. As many as 300 were observed in a single day.

"A settlement of Pottawatomies came off the Cherokee reservation in Oklahoma about 1885 and settled on what is now Hancock Lake and then split up. Part of them went to Star Lake. All left the Rice Lake region and a large number went to Willow River in Oneida county in about 1910.

"Indian family feuds existed in the '50's' between a family known as the Turtles and a family called Bagoons, in which three members of the two families were killed. Fifteen years later a finale to the feud was enacted when Indian Jack, one of the Bagoons, was killed while digging potatoes for O. B. Smith, by a squaw named Jimanan, who belonged to the Turtles. Indian Jack claimed to have discovered a silver mine in Michigan northeast of La Vieux Desert and had a chunk of silver, weighing fifteen pounds. The squaw made love to him and stabbed him with a knife to avenge the killing of her brother by one of the Bagoons 15 years before. Mr. Averill saw not only the dead Indian but also the chunk of silver which the Indian found. In those days no attention was paid by the government to Indian crimes and Indians were left to settle their own disputes. Big John, brother of Chief Minocquip, after whom Minocqua is named, and John's brother-in-law fought a duel with knives just north of Wausau in about the year 1872. The Indians had received their allotment from the government and in the duel Big John was killed and the killer was not molested.

"Among the sports witnessed by Mr. Averill and Dan Chandler, as well as others, was a dance with knives in which two armed Indians would take hands and dance and dodge, chanting a song. At a certain word in their song they would strike at each other, endeavoring to see how near their blades could come to their partner's body without causing a wound. When the dancing and the sparring would become too fierce other Indians would part the contestants and frequently these other Indians would include the squaws of the contestants. Under the influence of liquor there usually would be a lively scrap.

"When an Indian became sick so there was danger of death, he would be laid on the smooth ground. Indians armed with clubs, and their squaws armed with tin pans, bells and cans would stamp the ground and circle around the prostrate Indian. The men would strike the ground with clubs and yell while the squaws rattled their bells and pans in an attempt to drive away the evil spirits supposed to have taken possession of the sick Indian. Mr. Averill saw this performance many times.

"On the west side of the Wisconsin river, near the mouth of the Newwood, was a flat where the Hudson Bay company had a trading post. The site of the trading post was still visible in January, 1917, when Mr. Averill gave Dr. Wittman the descriptive story of the early Indian days near Merrill and Tomahawk. Martin Lynch and Bill Cross worked for the Hudson Bay Company, taking their furs by canoe to La Pointe on Lake Superior, by way of the Tomahawk river, then by portage to Flambeau waters to the Manitowish, ascending this stream about 15 miles and then portaging to several lakes, then into Bad river and following this stream to Lake Superior."

Mrs. Louis Bouchier, who came to Merrill in 1872 and for three years was at the Jenny Hotel, said that the Indians probably called oftener at the hotels than anywhere else, principally because it was there they received the largest and most regular handouts. "Hai Pongonai" was their announcement that they were hungry. "Scutiwahu" was the name for whiskey but Mrs. Bouchier could not recall ever having seen an Indian drunk.

The Indians lived west of the Prairie in wigwams built of upright sticks set in the ground and birch bark around these. A small fire on the inside and a hole at the top to allow the smoke to pass out gave added comfort. But the women of Jenny made little effort to see the wigwams west of the Prairie, as they disliked the old time Indian because of his inaptitude for work and his uncleanliness. The Indians later improved, according to Mrs. Bouchier, but Bates and Big Pete of the olden days frequently made themselves useful.

Partridges were plentiful in those days in the vicinity of the Prairie river and it was also a common practice of the Indians to pick raspberries and blackberries west of the Prairie river. These were brought to Merrill in birch bark boxes and in pails. The Indians made bead work, pocketbooks, moccasins and other articles which they offered for sale to the whites. They were usually glad to get flour and salt pork. It was not unusual for the Indians to trade surplus pike from the big catch, for salt fish, which they appeared to like for variety's sake; and venison was often exchanged by them for salt pork.

Fresh meats in those days were luxuries for the whites and were brought here twice a week from Wausau. Partridges and venison furnished by the Indians were therefore very much welcomed. The Indians seldom asked for vegetables, which they probably got at the Indian farms west of Jenny. They frequently wore earrings and in many instances had their faces painted. They never carried their bows and arrows when they came to the settlers' homes.

Mrs. Bouchier's first and second husbands were pioneers of the pineries. Her second husband came to Monimee in 1855 from Canada. He said that the northern woods at that time were full of Chippewas, who had no ponies. They traveled in bark canoes and their canoe trips were always down river. They never traveled upstream owing to the fact that the short, light bark canoe is difficult to man against a current as compared to a dugout or log canoe.

The Indians from the northern lakes made an annual trip to Mosinee and there relinquished their canoes and crossed by trail to Black river. Some continued their trip, however, by canoe to Wisconsin Rapids.

The canoes were made of birch bark and glued together with pitch, which made them waterproof. They carried their wigwams in the canoes. The Indians, at the end of the river trips, had no more use for their canoes, which were then frequently sold as low as two dollars. Returning from the Black river, where they spent the winter hunting deer and fishing, they proceeded slowly back to the north, hunting and fishing on the trip and camping at many intervals. The trip frequently took two months or half the summer. For the next trip south, new canoes were made. But the Indians in the vicinity of Merrill were not addicted to traveling. They were in fact, settlers.

Mr. and Mrs. George Sturdevant were early and long settlers of Merrill. Mr. Surdevant was a surveyor and at one time acted as county clerk.

The first Literary Society was formed in 1875 and the members met every Tuesday in the school house. There was always a debate and one of the first was on woman suffrage.

When C. N. Johnson was postmaster here, he started a system of numbering rural mail boxes. He recommended the idea to the U. S. Post Office Department and it was accepted and put into use nationally.

Lincoln county was the second county in the state to employ a county nurse. Miss Thead, the first to hold that office, resigned after three years to accept a position in Minneapolis.

Julius Klepke conducted a livery stable on Genesee street in the early days. He also operated a farm in the Town of Merrill.

Jul. Thietman was mayor three terms and chairman of the county board. He was active in practically every business — stores, banks, telephone, hotel, logging and farming.