

Ethnological Notes on the Ottawa

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Ottawa Indians, members of the Algonquian linguistic stock, were not overly interested in vacating their Michigan lands and moving onto reservations in Kansas as stipulated by treaties of the period 1830-1840. Fortunately, the white man did not insist; so for two hundred years and more the Ottawas have continued to inhabit the northwestern areas of Michigan's lower peninsula. In Emmet, Charlevoix, and Antrim counties, and trailing off into contiguous counties, these people have remained, in the midst of their incoming white neighbors, as fishermen and trappers, as small farmers, humble tradesmen, and as laborers in the lumber enterprises of this region. Since the lumber camps and saw mills and shipping docks of a generation ago have faded out with the final cutting down of the great pine forests, the Ottawa population has gradually dwindled. Middle Village, once the largest center of Ottawa life in the midst of numerous smaller habitation sites strung along the Lake Michigan shore in Emmet county, is now only a deserted village. The late generation is filtering out into new localities, but, here and there, notably at Cross Village and Harbor Springs, a semblance of village communal life is still to be found.

According to their own traditions, Indians in this territory must be "counted three layers deep," as they express it. First, long ago—they know not when—there were Indians here—they know not whom. Second, again there were Indians of whom the Ottawas remember nothing. Then, third, and last, came the Ottawas. That, they say, was about two hundred years ago, and then they had everything they have now in the way of living. They have always, they affirm, been poor farmers, made no pottery and only the most simple and crude stone, bone, and flint artifacts. They possessed no copper except that which an occasional individual carried as a charm made of that metal. Father Allouez saw a group of Ottawas blowing smoke into a bronze (?) image a foot high, an article which he recognized as an importation. Is it possible that most of the copper artifacts found on the surface in northern Michigan and Wisconsin (and the vast majority of these have been surface finds) were made after the coming of the French? Quoting from the Jesuit Relations: "Among the donnés and the Jesuit brothers were skillful workers in metal, who repaired guns and utensils of the natives, and taught them how best to obtain and reduce the ore from lead and copper deposits. We have evidence that the copper region of Lake Superior was at times resorted to by the lay followers and their Indian attendants to obtain material for crucifixes and for medals which the missionaries gave to converts" (1, 1:33-34).

The first recorded European contact with the Ottawas is credited to Champlain in 1615 when he met three hundred men of this tribe near the mouth of the French river on Georgian Bay (2, 2:167). These he called "Cheueux relevez," "men of the raised hair," because, to quote

two later sources from the Jesuit fathers, "their hair does not hang down, but is made to stand erect like a high crest" (1, 14:99, 41:77). Champlain reported that their weapons were the bow and arrow, a club, and shield of boiled leather; their bodies were much tattooed in many fashions and designs; their faces were painted in flaming colors; their noses were pierced; their ears were bordered with trinkets. The chief made Champlain understand that they had come to that place to dry huckleberries to be used in winter when nothing else was available (2, 2:168). Even to this day in the months of July and August the hills in these areas of northern Michigan and Ontario are covered with huckleberries.

In the following year Champlain's visit to some of their villages led to his observations that the Ottawa was a populous tribe and that their men were great warriors, hunters, and fishermen, governed by many chiefs, each ruling in his own district. He also observed that they were great tradesmen, sometimes traveling in pursuit of this vocation as far as 1200 to 1500 miles. He said that the women planted corn and other foodstuffs. The women had their bodies covered, but the men wore nothing except in winter when they usually threw a fur robe around their shoulders like a mantle. He committed himself to the effect that the women lived very well with their husbands (2, 2:168).

The shores of Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island to the northwest are credited by early white contacts to have been the Ottawa country. Traditionally, the Ottawas, Chippewas, and Potawatomis were "three fires," which, in the most ancient days, were one—a single people dwelling around one great "fire" somewhere in the north, that is, in Canada. Furthermore, tradition states that the Ottawas and Potawatomis divided from the Chippewa at Mackinaw City. The earliest known habitat of the Potawatomi was in the present northeastern counties of Michigan's lower peninsula (2, 2:289). This suggests the possibility that, when first the Potawatomis and Ottawas left their Chippewa kinsmen, both groups, probably as one people, crossed the straits southward *via* Mackinac Island to the lower peninsula and that the group, later to be known as Potawatomis, chose the northeastern territory along the west shore of Lake Huron. The groups who became historically known as Ottawas took the northwest area around Big and Little Traverse Bays on the east shore of Lake Michigan before journeying to their historic seats as of 1615 *et seq.*

This thought is not apparent within itself but is now suggested, that is, that the Ottawas were resident in Michigan's northwestern lower peninsula before going east and north to their first historically observed seats around Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island. Certain Ottawa legends which I heard last summer from one of the best informed members of this tribe confirm this¹ and, furthermore, suggest the probability that one of the lower "layers" here may have been their own ancestors.

When Champlain first met the Ottawas on Georgian Bay, he credited them with growing their own corn. But the Emmet county Ottawas of today have a tradition of journeying to Manitoulin from the lower

¹Joe Ettawageshik, Harbor Springs, Michigan.

peninsula and also retain a tribal legend of how first, in this same lower peninsula country, they were directed to use the gift of corn.

They say the Ottawas went to Manitoulin because a bad Midu caused them much trouble when they were living at Houghton Lake, which is about 100 miles south of Little Traverse Bay. This bad Midu stole an infant sunning in its cradle, but, because of a charm, no one knew for several days that the baby had been spirited away. When the time came that they were to know about it, the people heard a crying a long way off. Following the sound over to the west side of the lake, they heard the cry getting louder and louder; finally they came to a tunnel. They went into this tunnel and there were the baby's cries! But, as they went farther, the cries did not come any closer because the bad Midu was digging as fast as they were coming. Then the Ottawas went back to the opening of the tunnel and hung over it a virgin's dress so that the bad Midu could not come out that way. The leaders went around to the other side of the hill and tunneled in from there toward the crying and got the infant. But the people were still afraid for their children in that bad place; so they went eastward to the shore, near the place Port Huron is now located, and from there went to Manitoulin and spread over their new lands. All of this vast territory northwest of the Huron lands was first called by the French the country of the Ottawas; the first Jesuit mission founded in all that country at Sault Ste. Marie in 1641 was called the Ottawa Mission.

The tale of the gift of corn is as follows: One fall the Ottawas departed from Wequadonzing, Little Harbor, to go south into warmer lands to hunt. They kept going until they came to Sleeping Bear, which is a high hill near the present city of Frankfort, approximately 120 miles south of Little Traverse Bay. After camp had been made for the night and everyone was resting, the young hunters heard a scratching noise on the hill. Thinking it the sound of enemies, they went up there but could find nothing that might have made the noise. When everyone was again resting in camp, the scratching noise came down as before; once more the young men went towards the sound but saw nothing except some little stalks waving in the breeze. Again they went back to their sleeping, and again they heard a scratching. For the third time they went in search of the makers of the noise, and, very carefully coming toward the sound, they discovered it was the little stalks scratching their sides for them to hear. The young warriors pulled these up and returned with them to the Sagima, the medicine man. Next night the Sagima had a dream, and on the following day, when the warriors, hunters, and all who were following with them had assembled, he said that these little stalks that had called to them were saying "mindamin," corn. From these he kept the seeds, which were all put in the ground the next year; these grew more "mindamin" which was then divided among all the Ottawa families, some to be saved for growing but the most part to be used for their eating. And so, the legend says the Ottawas had corn before they went to Manitoulin.

The Jesuit Relations of 1662-1664 recounting Father René Menard's labors among the Ottawa, says: "corn and bread are entirely unknown in those countries" (1, 48:119). And in the same narrative: "In this

country there is wild rice" (1, 48:123). This does not mean that corn was then unknown to the Ottawas, for it refers to a time when they and their neighbors, the Hurons, having been driven out of their lands in the proximity of Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island by the Iroquois, were dwelling in northern Wisconsin, a native habitat for wild rice. Here, evidently, life had become too complicated to include corn planting! In the year 1665 Father Allouez founded his mission for them at La Pointe, on Chequamegon Bay, on the south shore of Lake Superior. Father Marquette succeeded Allouez at La Pointe in 1669. Shortly thereafter the Ottawas and Hurons incurred the hostility of the Sioux, who drove them eastward like so many leaves before an autumn blast. Marquette followed and founded a mission at St. Ignace, which became the largest and most successful mission in the northwest. Here in 1673, just before Marquette started on his famous voyage leading to his discovery of the Mississippi river, were gathered 1300 Ottawas and 500 Hurons. During the following 50 years the Ottawas were *ex patria*, wandering in small groups here and there, some as far south as Detroit and Fort Wayne, others going equally far south on the other side of Michigan and into northeastern Illinois. By 1730 many had returned and once more were living around Big and Little Traverse Bays where they have remained to this day.

The Ottawas say that in this country they had wild potatoes, wild wheat, wild rice, wild turnips, but no wild corn. This last item was something different that grew only in planted fields where they put it. They have no traditions concerning first knowledge of tobacco. Here is an interesting definition for the word Kenekinic which I am repeating just as it was given to me: "Men are sitting around in a circle, not in solemn council, but just enjoying themselves. In the center is a wooden dish filled with tobacco. Kenekinic means—you reach in and help yourself to some tobacco."

The Ottawas claim that their people were not pottery makers. They had this ingenious method for boiling meats without pot: A deer "gut" was cleaned out and filled with water; pieces of meat were put in this, and the "gut" placed by the side of the fire. By the time the "gut" was burned the meat was cooked, or cooked enough.¹

Mink bones were used for sewing needles. Strange to say, in this birch country, birch bark was not used for canoes by the Ottawas. Dug-outs were their chief mode of water transportation, but, when they were traveling on land and came to a body of water that required a boat, they made what they called "temporary canoes" from elm bark. To quote, "When they got to the other side they just left the boat there."² This use of large boats fits in with the historic knowledge that the Ottawas were great traders and, perforce, great travelers. They led all the early expeditions down to Montreal to trade with the French, and, after the first contact years, they continued to act as middle-men. The Ottawas claimed the great river as their own to the French, and no others might travel without their consent (2, 2:168). Father Allouez said that, regardless of their nationality, all the early Indian voyagers

¹Joe Ettawegeshik, Harbor Springs, Michigan.

²Fred Ettawegeshik, Harbor Springs, Michigan.

down to Montreal called themselves Ottawas, under whose convoyance the trips were made (2, 2:168).

The Ottawas had a system of patrilineal, exogamous gens. The Ettawegeshiks say their family is called "kewawegwame," the underground or earthen-house people, and they explain this thus: Long ago the Ottawas went into the west to war on enemies. Among the prisoners they brought back a young brave who out there had lived in an earthen house. This foreigner was a great warrior and was permitted to marry into the Ottawa tribe, and for many generations, even to today, his descendants are known as the underground or earthen-house family.

The Ottawas say their language is almost the same as the Chippewa but not mutually intelligible. One must spend a little time in the Chippewa villages, and then the difference disappears. As explained to me, Ottawa is low Chippewa, the former employing a "K" sound where Chippewa uses a "C." The Jesuits in their zeal made a tactical error in baptising the Indians' dying, aged, and infants. This paradox made the new religion a highly questionable venture to strong, vigorous Ottawas in the prime of their pristine faculties, but today they are all devoted Catholics, and most of their children attend parochial schools.

Bibliography

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