



A Native American History Lesson

Door County is a magical place. It's a peninsula that juts out like a thumb from Wisconsin's large hand, with two water masses, Green Bay on one side and Lake Michigan on the other. Although I live far away now, I still think about playing in the sand at Lake Michigan, a lake so big that I thought it was an ocean. I remember the place at Peninsula State Park where the birds would land on my shoulders and eat from my hand. I'd go with my parents to shop the interesting stores in the pretty little fishing villages that dotted the bay. Back then, I didn't think shops were very interesting, so I'd walk to the water and watch the sailboats, the windsurfers, and the fishermen, and wish that I could be out there with them. Then we'd drive to Sister Bay for a brunch at Al Johnson's restaurant, but I much preferred watching the goats on the roof than to go inside for lingonberry jam on thin, little pancakes with Swedish meatballs alongside. I'd beg my parents to drive to PC Junction where a Lionel Train would deliver a hamburger and fries right to my table.

And I remember a boy and his dog. Now that I've retired from my work, I've decided to tell his story. It's a story about Wyatt, his talking dog, Bailey, and their woodland animal friends. But first, I'll tell you about the Bode'wadmi (Potawatomi) tribe that lived in Door County more than three

hundred years before Wyatt attended the Winneconne schools, two hours to the south of Door County. Wyatt had learned the legend from his fifth grade teacher, Mr. White Cloud, a Sauk tribal member. Wyatt knew about the battle at a fort that had disappeared over time, but he didn't know the story about a Potawatomi boy, Me'skwak Kno (his English name was Red Eagle) who had carved a bear amulet, a good luck piece, that saved his tribe from the fierce invaders.

Robert sat cross legged on the floor and listened intently as his grandfather spoke. He hoped to someday have the wisdom of this old tribal leader, the last one alive who knew the ancient stories about his people. Robert loved this old man who had already taught him so much. And he knew that Grandfather loved him, too.

Grandfather smiled at Robert as he began the history lesson.

Grandfather closed his eyes and Robert knew that he was looking into the far distant past, to three hundred fifty years before when his tale began.

"The Iroquois League warriors, the most feared Natives in Eastern North America, approached from the big lake. But the Potawatomi women and warriors had built their fortification against the enemy. At first, they had fought the enemy from their canoes. Even though the Potawatomi were excellent navigators and their birch bark canoes were far superior to the vessels of their enemy, they were too few, and, without muskets, they had little chance. So the Potawatomi warriors retreated to their newly built fort to fight from behind log fortifications. Could they possibly defeat the Iroquois muskets with bows, arrows, and war clubs? Would Fort Mechingan be strong enough?"

Robert lived on his Forest County reservation, one hundred miles northwest of Door County. He spent hours with his grandfather, a wise old mIshome, who was one of a few who remembered their native language. Robert's grandfather had learned from his grandfather who had learned from his grandfather the oral history that had been told by the tribe's elders from long before anyone could remember.

Grandfather continued his story.

"History books tell us that years before this battle, the Potawatomi, with the Ojibwa and the Ottawa, first lived in the far northeast and then moved to the eastern shore of Lake Huron. But our people know that long before that, the Potawatomi tribe had lived along the Great Lakes' shores. In search of better land, they continued to move westward. In 1630 many tribes began battling in what came to be called the Beaver Wars. After more than twenty years of warfare, the Iroquois emerged as the most powerful of the Eastern Natives. Having a spiritual longing to return to their homeland on the Great Lakes and wanting to avoid this fierce enemy, the Potawatomi migrated to the upper regions of lower Michigan, then across the big lake to Door County, Wisconsin. But repeated Iroquois attacks over the years forced the Potawatomi to join with the Wyandot and Ottawa to build their fortified village near Lake Michigan's shore and to prepare to defend it against the attack that came a week after they'd finished it.

The Iroquois persisted and continued the siege for days, trying to starve the Potawatomi defenders from their fortification. Although our people had fresh spring water bubbling up within their enclosure, food was running low on both sides of the stockade. For a while it appeared that the Iroquois would starve the Potawatomi from their fortress, but then a miracle occurred. A huge black bear, looking for scarce food, wandered from the woods and was mortally wounded by Iroquois bullets. Confused, the bear ran from the hunters and toward the fort. There, he collapsed and died outside the gates. The Potawatomi sentries fired a barrage of arrows at the pursuing Iroquois while others pulled the carcass into the fort. Near starvation and disheartened watching the Potawatomi feast upon the great bear

carcass that should have been their food, the Iroquois retreated to their boats and rowed for home.”

“Did all this really happen, Grandfather?”

“We know that our ancestors built the fort and the Iroquois invaders besieged it. And we know that the battle lasted a long time, but the invaders ran out of food and left for home.” Grandfather paused. “And the legend tells how the bear was shot by the Iroquois and ran toward the fort.”

Robert loved his grandfather’s history lessons. But most of all he loved the time with his Grandfather, a man whom everyone in their tribe respected and honored. And these lessons allowed Robert to have this old man to himself. His Grandfather had told the stories before, but Robert was happy to hear them once more.

“Grandfather, didn’t you tell about a boy who helped the tribe in this battle?”

“Yes, Robert, there are stories about Red Eagle, a Potawatomi boy who would have been about your age. You won’t find him in the history books. And most of the old people didn’t tell his story. Maybe it never occurred. Or maybe history is only told about grown-ups. But there were those who believed it happened.”

“Tell me again, Grandfather.”

“Three months before the battle, Red Eagle had begun his preparation. He was too young to fight, but he knew that he could help in other ways. Red Eagle had developed carving skills early, learning from his mshome (grandfather), the best carver in the village.

While others spent their summer hours gathering food and hunting fish and game from the surrounding waters and forest, Red Eagle’s grandfather had searched for stone among the limestone cliffs so that he could carve the woodland animals and make them live again.

And Red Eagle did the same. First, he had looked for the right size stone. It couldn’t be cracked, brittle, or crumbly. The grain of the stone had to flow from the bear’s feet to his shoulders so that the legs and ears would be connected to the body’s core. The stone had to be twice as long as its height, and wide so the bear could stand on four feet.

Limestone was abundant near his wigwam, but Red Eagle had searched five days before finding a stone suitable for the bear he imagined. He had walked over a mile to a limestone outcropping where, during winter, ice chiseled pieces off the stone face. Searching through the debris, Red Eagle had selected a slab perfect for the bear he released. The rock was about the size of his hand and four times as thick. It was free of cracks and the grain ran from the base of his little finger to the tip of his thumb as it lay on his open hand. The stone was as strong as the bear it would become.

He had carried the stone back to his wigwam and wrapped it in a deer hide to protect it until the great bear stepped from the stone. The following morning at sunrise, Red Eagle had taken the stone from its wrappings and headed to his secret forest spot. He then took his most prized possession from his bag, an iron chisel given to him by his grandfather after Red Eagle had carved his first amulet. His grandfather had traded six beaver skins to an Ottawa warrior for this white man’s treasure.

Using the sharp edge of his chisel, Red Eagle outlined the great bear on the stone — first, each side, then the back and bottom. After scratching the outline, he had placed the chisel near the stone’s edge and struck it with his hickory mallet, breaking off a small fragment of unwanted material. Red Eagle had continued to chip away stone, slowly creating the shape of an animal.

Two weeks had elapsed before the unwanted edges were gone. Then Red Eagle began the painstaking task of shaping the bear’s body, head, and legs. He had cut away small pieces, a thin layer at a time, as he chipped his way around the animal. First, he had cut grooves from top to bottom, leaving vertical ridges down the animal’s side. He then chiseled the ridges until the figure was uniformly smooth, never losing the shape of the bear. He

continued grooving and cutting, over and over again, until, a month later, the stone had become a bear. Its tiny eyes and small round ears seemed misplaced on a head that was as thick as the body. The bear's muscles rippled from its shoulders and haunches down through its stump-like legs. It was a powerful animal — a defender of his tribe.

But Red Eagle wasn't finished. For days he had polished the animal with a hide cut from a wild boar that his father had killed months earlier. At first, he wet the hide, dipped it in sand, and then rubbed the bear repeatedly with this abrasive mix. As the limestone became smoother, he eliminated the sand and rubbed with the coarse wet hide. Every day for another two weeks he had smoothed it until, finally, when the sun shined on it, he could see his reflection in the great bear's hide. This good luck charm was ready, and just in time. The battle commenced the same day that he gave the amulet to their tribe's chief, his father. But during the battle it was ripped from his father's neck and lost forever."

"Grandfather," Robert said, "did the spirit in the amulet return as the great bear to help our people?"

"The legend? Who knows for sure? But if it's true, the great bear provided the food our people needed to survive the Iroquois attack on Mechingan."

"What happened to Mechingan, Grandfather? Why do we now live far away in northern Wisconsin?"

"After the victory against the Iroquois, our ancestors prospered for years. Their Door County land was rich and they were adaptable. Learning farming methods from the Sauk, Fox,

Kickapoo, and Winnebago tribes, the Potawatomi grew corn, beans, and squash. While the women gathered wild rice from the streams and collected syrup from the numerous maple trees, the men hunted wild game in the forests and fished the big lake and inland waters. Life was good. But, then, northeast Wisconsin became overcrowded and some Potawatomi migrated south along the great lake. We inhabited large amounts of land in Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana, but eventually lost all of it in forty-two treaties with the United States government. Later, we were evicted from all land east of the Mississippi River. The Potawatomi were forced to walk from Illinois to Kansas and many died on the way. Some refused to go and ran off and hid in the Wisconsin woods. Those were our people, the Forest County Potawatomi."

Robert sat cross legged, entranced by his grandfather's story. "Grandfather, what happened to Red Eagle? To Mechingan?"

"The exact spot of the fort has never been found, but Red Eagle grew up to become the tribe's chief. And you know that Red Eagle's blood runs through your veins."

If I don't trip over my footstool, fall off the porch, and knock myself silly, tomorrow I'll tell you how Wyatt Thorpe and his yellow lab friend, Bailey, began their search for the lost Fort Mechingan.