

Indians in the Bills Lake area

Historians and archeologists agree that Native Americans migrated to the area from Asia sometime between 8,000 and 6,000 B.C.E. The Odawa (not a misspelling) Indians established their first village along the Muskegon River near where the river flows into Lake Michigan. So did the Hopewell tribe long before the birth of Christ. The nearby Croton-Carrigan Mounds represent the earliest known burial site for these Woodland tribes who began moving into the state five thousand years ago. The location of these sites is kept private to prevent collectors from raids.

Why tribes settled in the Croton area is pretty self evident. Called Muskegon Forks before the name was changed to Croton, it was the intersection of the Little and Big Muskegon rivers. The area offered bountiful fishing -- sturgeon and Arctic grayling were plentiful (since exterminated by the logging industry). For centuries, the Indians relied on the Muskegon for food, transportation, clothing and shelter. During the summers, the women grew food crops and men hunted deer, rabbits, and beaver. In the fall, the women would fill handwoven baskets with wild rice from huge stands (since disappeared). They also grew and stockpiled corn for the brutally cold winters. In other words, the river provided everything they needed for centuries.

This remained unchanged until the U.S. government bought millions of acres of Odawa land and sold it at rock

bottom prices to white settlers whose primary skills were logging and farming. In terms of the Bills Lake area, it was farming. If loggers worked on the forests surrounding our lake, they certainly didn't transport the wood through our water although they might have used ice sleds in winter.

In 1836, the U.S. Congress approved the Treaty of Washington, an agreement that transferred ownership of millions of acres of land in West Michigan from the Odawa Indians to the federal government. I don't know whether the Indians actually agreed to this or whether they had no choice in the matter but the tribe received 16 cents an acre for those millions of acres. The government then

In 1836, the U.S. Government bought millions of acres from the Indians for 16 cents an acre and then sold the land to white settlers for \$1.25 an acre.

sold that land to white settlers for \$1.25 an acre.

The government's goal: expand the boundaries of a growing nation by relocating Native Americans and encouraging white settlers to establish

homesteads and communities in the wilderness. For many settlers -- including the Bills, Tannewitz, Stray, and Botsford families -- this was the first chance to own land.

For those intent on making their fortunes in logging, very little time was wasted. Both Martin Ryerson (Ryerson Lake) and Henry Penoyer (Penoyer Creek) arrived in that same year. Penoyer and his partner Hiram Pierson claimed squatters' rights at the mouths of many waterways until they could file claims, called land patents. Mouths of rivers such as

Muskegon Forks were strategic points where dams could be built to provide water power. Penoyer's business partner, Jack McBride built a cabin at the mouth of Penoyer Creek, established a claim and became the first permanent settler in the county.

According to another document, the Indians (Ottawa, and maybe Chippewa and Potawatomi) offered no resistance to the advancement and development of the settlers. "They showed no hostility though some of the pioneer women were apprehen



This Indian burial ground is located a long way --almost to Thornapple --up 86th St., the county dirt road you can enter near Cree St. in the Geronimo zone. No markers remain.

To be sure Ryerson and Penoyer weren't farmers. They saw dollar signs in the region's seemingly endless forests of white pine- trees up to two hundred feet tall with trunks up to eight feet in diameter. They came to known as "green gold."

A few Indians stayed behind. Clarissa Whitney Rice, who arrived in Croton as a youngster in 1855, writes: "There were a lot of Indians here. They sold venison, hams and fish. They made deer skins, maple sugar and syrup. They also made birch baskets."

sive when Indians stopped by to trade their wares," confirms Mrs. Rice in a document entitled "A Pioneer's Story."

What about in more recent times? According to Betty Miller, sometime in the 1970s she was invited by Apache resident Mary Miller (no relation) to visit Carrie Tannewitz who owned the property where the present Hilltop Express resides (See attachment). Carrie had been in the area long enough to remember some interesting tidbits. For example, she would hide behind a tree when she saw Indians walking from Croton to Bills Lake.

About the nearby Indian Cemetery

Surrerar Cemetery is just off 86th St. the dusty seasonal road that follows the power line. The entrance to this part is adjacent to Cree Street in the Geronimo zone. It is essentially a lonely place in the middle of a prairie. It is located almost to Thornapple Road (the road, not the scenic overlook).

The prairie itself is known as a place that many Native Americans called home. It was a large village in that it is relatively close to the Muskegon River where it was narrow and easy passing. It was also a rich hunting ground. Therefore, many believe that it contained an Indian burial ground in that there were signs of burial mounds. The area was also known as a place where two major trails leading to the Mackinaw area crossed according to maps of Native American trails that were found.

But then the white men encroached. Ransom Surrerar made the first purchase of the land, thus the name of the cemetery. The 1880 atlas shows Phillip Dickinson and his wife Sophonia Tibbits owning 160 acres on the edge of that prairie. Apparently, they sold a piece of that land for a new school that was to become Dickinson School.

At this time, many families moved into the area. Croton was only a day's trip from Grand Rapids and development ensued as many families moved to the fertile land. Some of the men made money in the burgeoning logging industry.

Indentations in the ground indicated where several people were buried. However, many of the families moved the remains of their loved ones to Oak Grove Cemetery on Elm St. where members of the Bills family are interred. Names include Overly, English, Saunders, Shattuck, and Boyd. However, it is believed that Mr. Surrerar is buried in the cemetery that bears his name.

Not so his daughter, Martha Jane Surrerar. She married James Bills in 1871 at the age of 21. James was the brother of Charles W. Bills, the Civil War soldier who died in Feb. 1863 and subsequently is the gentleman for whom Bills Lake is named.

James married Martha Jane on April 23, 1871 (she was 21) and between then and 1883, the couple produced five children: Almira Jerusha, Orra Anna (who died in 1876), Ward Henry, James Abel, and Martha.

But Martha, the wife and mother, died in 1883 after only 12 years of marriage leaving children ages 11, 9, 5 and 1. She is not buried in the Surrerar Cemetery

but instead is interred with the Bills monument at Oak Grove, perhaps because her dead daughter is there.

James remarried (see subsequent article) is buried in Grand Rapids.

Currently, the Surrerrar Cemetery is owned by the Forest Service. Because of its remote location, it has become a too-popular place for hunting, drinking, and dumping trash. There is evidence of an effort to dig somebody up. There are no markers there. Sadly, one can deduce why.

