

July 22, 1977

The following is a short reply to your questions on Indians in Michigan:

The earliest records, written by white men during their exploration of the peninsulas of Michigan, mention several locations for bands of Ottawas; Sault, Ste. Marie, St. Ignace, Saginaw and Thunder Bays, Mackinaw Island. There were many Ottawa living in the vicinity of Detroit when Fort Ponchartrain was built also. L'Arbre Croche was a later settlement that the Indians were persuaded to move to when game became scarce. Some of the tribes mentioned in connection with Ottawa history were: Pottawatomie, Winnebago, Miami, Ojibway, Huron and of course the Chippewas.

The Ottawa built lodges of poles that were bent and curved over the top or roof which were covered with pieces of basswood bark. These were called wigwams. They also had portable tents for hunting and traveling. When they decided to stop for the night they cut poles and made a frame to fasten their woven grass mats to.

They made their living by hunting, fishing and growing corn, squash, beans and peas. The annual trip to the sugar bush was traditional. They used the sap to make syrup and candy in carved wooden molds.

Little boys were given bows of stiff straws as soon as they could walk and by the time they were 8 or 10 years old they hunted squirrel and other small game. Girls had miniature toys, like cradle boards and corn husk dolls.

The Indians had interesting games and most of them included anyone who wished to play. LaCrosse was played with a light wooden club which had a net on the end to catch a small ball of wood. It was played in much the same way as racquet ball.

Lice was a gambling game played with a round wooden bowl and several bones, which were painted a different color on each side. The Indians would hit the bottom of the bowl and the most bones of one color would win. They might bet a blanket and sometimes even their entire stock of possessions. Straws was another gambling game but it was played only by the men.

One interesting custom of the Ottawas was the Ghost Supper. This was a feast for the dead. In early times a special lodge was built but modern day Indians hold them in their homes. The main staple of the feast was corn soup, also called popcorn soup because the kernels were cooked until they popped. The Indians feasted and then left the remaining food on the tables for the ghosts or spirits to eat. Somehow the food always disappeared.

Another custom, which has held over to the present day, is All Saints Day when the Indians gathered in their cemeteries to decorate the graves with wreaths of flowers or paper.

The Indians of today in this area are still using their ancient skills such as basket making. They make porcupine quill baskets to sell in souvenir shops and museums. They make miniature tepees and canoes of birch bark also.

There is an annual Pow Wow in Cross Village, which is about 30 miles from Petoskey, and people gather in great numbers to watch the dances. There is a group of dancers in Petoskey called the Woodland Dancers and they recently staged a large contest gathering of Indians from all over the United States.

The large concentration of Indians in this area has dwindled to a few but the Indians still send their children to Holy Childhood School in Harbor Springs. This school was established in 1829.

They are the center of a controversy over Indian fishing rights in Little Traverse Bay at the moment. The treaties of 1836 and 1855 gave the Indians broad fishing rights and they are taking fish from the Bay at a rate that upsets sport fishermen, mostly white. However, all local charges were dropped as the U.S. waits for a ruling from the Supreme Court, and the fishing continues.