

Pre-Settlement Period

Our county was first laid out in 1840 and given the name Okkuddo. Except for occasional Indian inhabitants there were no permanent residents until the late 1860s when the first strong interest in the timber resources in this area occurred. Seasonal visits for berries and fishing in the numerous lakes were the major reasons for Indian habitations.

The name Okkuddo was not attractive. It was an Indian word meaning sickly “literally stomach pains”. Why the county was so named is not known. It is possible the name was suggested by Henry Schoolcraft who is responsible for attaching various Indian names to the northern counties. “Of the 28 counties laid out in 1840 all but one were of Indian origin, also named by Schoolcraft were such counties as Alpena, Alcona, Kalkaska, Leelanau and Otsego”.[4]

The name Okkuddo was changed to Otsego by an act of the state legislature in March 1843. The name Otsego appears to have various meanings. It is generally agreed by authorities of Indian languages that the word is from the Iroquois language. The word has been used extensively in New York state and from there was apparently passed on to Otsego County, Michigan by Schoolcraft.

In the first issue of the New York Otsego Herald published in 1795, the suggestion is given that the word conveys the idea of a spot where meetings were held. New York State called the Otsego Rock where, according to tradition, Indians were accustomed to rendezvous. It not only signified a place of rendezvous but also a friendly greeting. “Se-go” was a well-known salutation and meant literally, “as yet” perhaps still alive or yet well.[5]

It is also suggested in the writings of Father Bryas and Henry Schoolcraft that by making allowances for changes in the form of the word, it would be possible to interpret the word “place of the rock”.[6]

In Campbell’s Annals of Tryon County, it is indicated the word Otsego means “the water is deep and clear”. Henry Schoolcraft felt Otsego is a deviation from an Iroquois word denoting bodies of water and becomes by ellipsis the name for "lake" as he observed it in "Otisco". The term ego means beautiful therefore the word becomes "beautiful lake". Finally from The Story of Cooperstown by Ralph Birdsall it is suggested that another possible definition by the extension of the Mohawk word Otsato, the meaning becomes the place of the storm. [7]

It is clear that the word Otsego has many derivations in its place of origin, the State of New York.

As for our county it may be concluded the name was given to this area from the Otsego Lake area in New York State. The reason for applying the name Otsego to this area however is not clear as the name was given before settlers entered the county. Although research has shown that the name was placed on our county by Schoolcraft, his reason for doing so has not been established.

Indian Activity

The pre-settlement period shows some Indian activity in the county. Frequent visits to the county were made for food gathering and some travel from one side of Michigan to the other. Berry picking, fishing and perhaps some maple sugar production made up the bulk of the food gathering. In addition it is possible the hunting of the passenger pigeon took place as there were a number of roosts in the area. Wild game was scarce in these early years in the pine areas of the county because of lack of cover and plants for food under the magnificent canopy of the majestic white pine.

Evidence of Indian activity has been discovered in many areas of the county but the discovery of artifacts has been very limited. Seven burial mounds were excavated prior to the 1920s but no evidence of them has been preserved. Occasional artifacts have been picked up, arrowheads at the Otsego Lake State Park, Big Lake, Lewis Lake (now called Lake Louise) and Guthrie Lake. [8] It has also been established by interviews with early residents that a flint workshop was located across from the State Park in an old gravel pit.

In addition it is said an Indian village once stood just south of Otsego Lake but no evidence of it remains. It does appear on map 14 of Hinsdale's – Archeological Atlas completed in 1931. Indian trails did cross the county, a major trail occurring just below Otsego Lake, a portage area between the headwaters of the Manistee and Au Sable rivers. The map included at the end of the chapter traces all the known Indian activity and habitation. [9]

An early Indian legend relates the story of an Indian family while crossing the swamp area near the present Marsh Ridge resort contracted swamp fever, resulting in the death of the children and the wife. It is said the father still roams the area mourning the loss of his family. It has not been established if this story is of Indian or settler origin.

Most information concerning Indian life has been provided by Lewis F. Smith, early pioneer settler of this area. Mr. Smith's father entered the Otsego Lake area in the early 1870s. Mr. Smith was our most reliable source in the area of Indian settlement.

The Indians who visited our area were probably members of the Chippewa and Ottawa tribes from the La Abre Croche bands living in the Little Traverse Bay area. A description of them given in 1838 by the Acting-Superintendent of Indian Affairs of Michigan follows: "Ottawas of Mackinac and its environs have advanced more in agriculture than any other lake tribe. They have fenced fields and live generally in comfortable log houses. They make a considerable quantity of maple sugar, which together with a limited crop of corn is sold in the Mackinac market. This is particularly the case with several villages on Little Traverse Bay, usually comprehended under the name of the La' Abre Croche Bands. In proportion they have neglected the chase for which the country at this time offers little inducement.

“The Chippewa cultivate corn and potatoes to a limited extent, but devote most of their time in quest of food in the chase or fishing. They also manufacture sugar from the rock maple. The tribe exhibits no general improvement or advance in civilization: with few exceptions they live in bark lodges which are transported on their migrations. The country which both tribes occupy contains large portions of the margins of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. Population of both tribes number about 4,565.” [10]

Additional information on Indian life in Michigan is available through the writings of Henry R. Schoolcraft, Chief Blackbird and many other reputable sources.

Endnotes

4. Michigan Tradesman June 29, 1910 - Clark Historical Collection Central Michigan University - Mt. Pleasant, MI.
5. Otsego Herald Times - Aug 29, 1940 - Page 5 - Otsego County Library Gaylord, MI - as quoted from Rev. Livermore's History of Cooperstown. Information supplied the paper by James Clyde Gilbert.
6. Ibid - as quoted from S.M. Beachchamp - Aboriginal Place Names of New York - Archeology Bulletin - 108 - May 12, 1907.
7. Otsego County Herald Times - Aug. 29, 1940 - Page 5 - Otsego County Library.
8. I was working at the State Park when a camper digging a fire pit uncovered a fine arrowhead - He rushed up the road to give it to me and in the process dropped it and it broke into two pieces. It is a part of our collection today. One of very few Indian objects in our possession.
9. Hinsdale - Archeological Atlas - 1931 - Map 14 - Otsego Library.
10. U.S. Congress, Senate, Report of the Acting Superintendent of Indian affairs in Michigan; Conditions and Prospects of the Northwest Indians - 25th Congress, 2nd session 1838 Wm H. Granlund collection.