

Ho-Chunk and Winnebago Explained

As explained in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections Vol. III*

As written in 1857

by

John Gilmary Shea

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The Ho-Chunk tribe was referred to as.....

- The Algonquins called them the following:
Ouinibegouc, Ouninipegouec, Ouenibegoutz, as coming from the ocean or salt water.
- Nicolet called them more properly "*Gens de mer*" and "*Gen des Eaux de mer*".
- Hurons called them *Aweatsiwaenr-rhonons*.
- Sioux called them *Otonkah*.

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The Ho-Chunk tribe referred to themselves as

- *Wau-chon-gra*
- *Otchagras*
- *Horoji* (Fish Eaters), *O-chun-ga-raw*

Gallatin, in his *Synopsis of the Indian Tribes*, states that the French called the tribe *Otchagras*, but the tribe referred to themselves as *Hochungohrah*, or the "*Trout Nation*". In Schoolcraft's *History of the Indian Tribes*, iii 277, iv 227, they are spoken of as calling themselves the *Hochungara* and *O-chun-ga-raw*. The same work adds, on good authority, their earliest historical tradition relates to their once living at the Red Banks of Green Bay, and they once built a fort; "an event that which appears to have made a general impression on the tribe;" and that it is eight or nine generations since they lived at the Red Banks.

"*The Otchagras*," says Charlevoix in his Historical Journal, in 1721, "who are commonly called the *Puans*, dwelt formerly on the borders of the bay, in a very delightful situation. They were attacked here by the *Illinois*, who killed a great number of them; the remainder took refuge in the river of the *Outagamis* which runs into the bottom

of the Bay. They seated themselves on the borders of a kind of Lake [Winnebago] and I judge it was there, that living on fish which they got in the Lake in great plenty, they gave them the name of *Puans*, because all along the shore where their cabins were built, one saw nothing but stinking fish, which infected the air. It appears at least, that this is the origin of the name which other savages had given them before us, and which has communicated itself to the bay, far from which they never removed. Sometime after they had quitted their ancient post, they endeavored to revenge the blow they had received from the *Illinois*; but this enterprise caused them a loss, from which they never recovered. Six hundred of their best men were embarked to go in seek of the enemy; but as they were crossing Lake Michigan, they were surprised by a violent gust of wind which drowned them all." Charlevoix adds, "the *Ochagras* have lately come and seated themselves near us, and have built their cabins about the *Fort*" at Green Bay."

The French called them *les Puants* (*The Stinkards*). The tribe referred to the French, ever since they came to this country, as *Mau-quo-pin-e-no* (*Good Spirits*), as if they regarded the French as a higher order of beings than themselves.

As explained in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections Vol. IV*

As written in 1858

by

Rev. Alfred Brunson

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The following is an excerpt from a paper read by Rev. Alfred Brunson of Prairie du Chein before a Ministerial Association held at Viroqua, September 7th, 1858 and appeared in the *Viroqua Expositor* the following January.

"*Winnebago* is the name given them by the Algonquins, which means "fetid." It was because they were said to have come from salt water, which the Indians style *fetid water*. This name,

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however, is corrupted. *Weene*, means filthy, or fetid, *be* translates to water, *go* gives it character(?). *Weene-be-go*, is the name of water in a marsh that is scented or filthy, and the Algonquin race gave this people this name because they were said to have come from salt water, or marshes. *Ouinnebago* is the French spelling".

"The tribe called themselves *Ot-cha-gras*, but were nicknamed by the French voyagers *Puants* (*Puants a la Baie*), fetid, probably translating the Algec into French and no less than *ten* different names are given them by different writers."

An Excerpt From

An Abstract View of Ho-Chunk History

Prepared by the Ho-Chunk Nation Department of Heritage

Preservation:

Division of Cultural Resources

Ho-Chunk or "The People"

From 1634 to 1963

Three Hundred Twenty Eight Years of Feast or Famine

Land Occupations and Cessions

Ho Chunk occupied lands not only in Wisconsin, but in Iowa, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska and Illinois. History tells us that the Ho Chunk held title to more than ten million acres of the finest land in America.

Before 1634, the Ho-Chunk people enjoyed abundant hunting, gathering, and gardening. From the Red Banks near Lake Winnebago to the waters of the Mississippi and south along the Fox, Wisconsin, and Rock Rivers, the "People" lived and thrived, practicing their cultural ways. . . the ways of their grandfathers. Then they met the French trader Jean Nicolet and the missionary Marquette near the Red Banks in 1634. They traded with the French, and that supplemented their sustenance, and provided tools, guns, iron pots

and pans and other European goods. This way of life continued for over 150 years, until the settlers began reaching Wisconsin.

Winnebago was a name given by the Sauk and Fox, who called the people *Ouinepegi*, or People of the Stinky Waters. The Ho Chunk traveled and lived extensively along the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Rivers where fishing and edible vegetation was bountiful, the shores fertile for gardens, and the waterways convenient for travel.

The name *Ouinepegi* was heard as Winnebago by the government agents, and was the name the United States government took for the Ho Chunk people. This remained the official name of the Nation until the Constitution Reform in 1993, when the Ho Chunk reclaimed their original name.

In 1836, the Ho Chunk were removed from the choice land of southern Wisconsin to make room for the miners that were fast taking over the land. The area was also in demand for the lush farmland of the various river valleys. This land was taken from the Ho Chunk for a pittance, and the people were forcibly removed to northeastern Iowa. Within ten years they were moved to the northern Minnesota territory. Here they served the United States government by being a buffer between the warring Lakota/Dakota and Ojibwe. Unfortunately, the Ho Chunk had to endure attacks from both tribes. By this time they were imploring the United States government to move them to better land near the Mississippi. Due to white resistance, the Ho Chunk were moved further west. By 1859, their reservation was reduced from 18 square miles to 9 square miles. In 1863, the Ho Chunk were again moved, this time to a desolate reservation in South Dakota, a land so different from the lush forests and hunting grounds they were familiar with in Wisconsin.

Through various treaties, eventually the entire Wisconsin homeland was ceded, as the Ho Chunk were removed to various scattered parcels of land. Throughout eleven removals, the Ho Chunk continued to return to Wisconsin. Finally, the United States government allowed the Ho Chunk to exchange their South Dakota

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reservation for lands near the more friendly Omahas of Nebraska, who willingly released part of their reservation so that the Ho Chunks could become their neighbors. The Nation split, with part of the tribe returning to Wisconsin, and part moving to the reservation in Nebraska. Those tribal members who stayed in Nebraska on the reservation are today known as the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Edward P. Smith, in his report of Indian Affairs, expressed much frustration in trying to "civilize" the "Winnebagoes" and keep them on the Nebraska reservation. The Ho Chunk people longed for their lush gardens of Wisconsin, the lands where their grandfathers and grandmothers worked, lived, and were buried. This was home to them. The people continued to return to Wisconsin, and in the winter of 1873, many Ho Chunk people were removed to the Nebraska reservation from Wisconsin, traveling in cattle cars on trains. This was a horrific experience for the people, as many elders, women and children suffered and died.

Once it was apparent that part of the Nation was determined to stay in Wisconsin and refused to move to the Nebraska reservation, families were given 40-acre homestead plots, and encouraged to farm and assimilate. (Please see Treaty History) Both the Wisconsin and Nebraska Ho Chunk (Winnebago) were engaged in efforts to produce crops from the land. The Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner encouraged farming and assisted by providing farm equipment and incentives such as a (minimal) salary. White foremen were hired to help teach the people to operate the equipment. At the same time, the United States government was busy building Indian schools to teach sewing and industrial arts to the tribal children. It was important for the United States government to assimilate the tribal people, or in the words of the Indian Commissioner "civilize the people," as soon as possible.

The Red Banks

The Ho-Chunk are a Siouan-speaking people whose presence in present day Wisconsin was known to the French at Quebec as

early as 1616. According to oral tradition they originated at the Red Banks, generally assumed to be a site on the Door Peninsula on Green Bay, where they were located at the time of French contact in the 17th century. Their language is related to the Chiwere branch of Siouan that includes the Ioway, Oto, and Missouriia who acknowledge having broken off from the Ho-Chunk and moved west. Ho-Chunk can be glossed as either *Big Voice* or *Big Fish*, Ho being a homonym; the translation *big* really means *ancestral* or *primordial*. They also are closely related linguistically to the Quapaw, Omaha, and Ponca.

At the time of French contact, the Ho-Chunk constituted a Siouan island among Algonkian speaking neighbors such as the Menominee, Ojibwa, Ottawa, and others. Scholarly agreement has not been reached as to their place of origin before entering Wisconsin and their archaeological antecedents in the state, but many traditional cultural attributes point to affiliations with the "Mississippian" cultures of the Southeast. A less tenable claim has sometimes been made that they were affiliated with the effigy mound expression of the "Woodland" archaeological tradition.

First European Contacts

The Ho-Chunk came to French attention as the Winnebago ("ouinepego" – variously spelled), the name by which they were known to their Algonkian speaking neighbors, meaning "*Stinking Water*", because of their residence on Green Bay with foul smelling marshy areas and spring die-offs of fish. The French called them *Puan* or *Puant*, that translates into English as *Stinkard*. Because of their warlike reputation and hostile rejection of trade with the French via Ottawa middlemen, Samuel de Champlain, commandant of New France on the St. Lawrence, sent Jean Nicolet in 1634 to meet with the Puan and bring about peaceful relations between them and the Hurons and their Ottawa and other allies to facilitate French expansion and the fur trade farther west.

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Nicolet is said to have met with a throng of 3,000 to 5,000 people but while his landfall is popularly believed to have been at a large fortified village at Red Banks on Green Bay this is not established as fact by any means and more than a half-dozen other landfall sites have been proposed by various writers.

The Jesuit account of the meeting, written in 1643, nearly a decade after Nicolet's journey and a year after his death, says Nicolet addressed a number of "tribes." These probably included the Menominee, traditional friends and allies of the Ho-Chunk, who occupied the east side of Green Bay, across from the Ho-Chunk on the Door Peninsula. Although various writers have suggested that Nicolet explored beyond the Ho-Chunk region and might have been away more than a year since his presence back in Quebec is not recorded until late 1635, the skimpy Jesuit account indicates he left shortly after the great meeting and wintered among the Hurons before eventually getting back to Quebec.

French and English Competition for North America

Nicolet's mission was all but forgotten for some thirty years because Iroquois hostilities prevented the French from following up on his initial overtures to the western tribes. In the late 1660s Nicolas Perrot, French trader and emissary, and the Jesuits finally established French secular and religious hegemony in Wisconsin. By this time, the Ho-Chunk had suffered devastating defeats at the hands of their enemies and famine and epidemic diseases that reduced their numbers from an estimated 5,000 people or more to less than 1,000. They had become more tractable and intermarried with their Algonkian neighbors and former enemies. Adapting to the fur trade during the French and British regimes in Wisconsin, their population increased and they began expanding West to Lake Winnebago and along the Fox-Wisconsin and Rock River systems toward the

Mississippi. Abandoning the Green Bay area, they established some 30 villages and laid firm claim to a large portion of southwestern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois. They accepted the British as allies after the defeat of the French in North America and allied with them in the American Revolution and, particularly, the War of 1812 when they responded to message of the Shawnee Prophet and his brother, Tecumseh, to unite against the Americans.

American Succession

Part of the tribe signed their first treaty with the Americans in 1816 pledging loyalty and peace. In 1825 a great inter-tribal treaty at Prairie du Chien began describing the various tribes' boundaries, laying the groundwork for treaties of cession-land sales that soon followed. By this time American settlers were pouring into Wisconsin, largely attracted by the lead mines in the southwestern corner of the state, giving rise to hostile encounters such as the Red Bird incident of 1827 near Prairie du Chien. In 1829 the *Winnebago*, as they were then designated by the government, ceded about a third of their land, mostly in the lead region in Illinois. In spring of 1832 when the Black Hawk War broke out with the Sauk leader endeavoring to reclaim land along the east bank of the Mississippi in Illinois, the Winnebago were divided in their loyalty. Those closest to and intermarried with the Sauk sided with Black Hawk while those north of the Wisconsin River were allied with the Sauks' enemy, the Santee Sioux, and helped bring Black Hawk in to surrender at Prairie du Chien. The bands in the Madison-Portage area tried to remain neutral. The tribe was unable to hold out against the pressure of white settlement and ceded their remaining Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin land in the fall of 1832. As partial payment they received new land on which to settle in eastern Iowa, the Turkey River or Neutral Ground Reservation.

The bands living in the northwest portion of their homeland, bounded roughly by the Wisconsin, Mississippi, and Black Rivers, tried to keep their land and in 1837 agreed to send a delegation (that explicitly had no authority to sell land) to Washington to talk about

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the matter. They were forced into a treaty of cession and the terms were misrepresented to them. They thought they were buying time to renegotiate, that they had 8 years before they had to move; the treaty reads "eight months." The people resisted the treaty and hid out.

Meanwhile the Neutral Ground was unlivable as the Ho-Chunk were caught in the cross-fire of the Sioux and Sauk contesting for the land. The Ho-Chunk were moved to two locations in Minnesota and then to South Dakota by Executive Order after the Sioux uprising in Minnesota of 1862 (in which the Ho-Chunk took no part). Some rejoined the Wisconsin hold-outs but most found their way to the Omaha Reservation in Nebraska where a reservation was created for them in 1865. The government periodically rounded up the "dissidents" in Wisconsin and moved them to wherever the "treaty abiding faction" happened to be located. In 1874, after the government extended the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862 to Indians, the Ho-Chunk were able to claim homesteads up to 80 acres in their homeland and were designated a separate tribe with their own roll, continuing under federal jurisdiction like the Nebraska branch. In 1875, the Evangelical and Reform Church responded to Ho-Chunk requests for teachers and began a school and mission about 7 miles from Black River Falls, WI. The boarding school operation was moved to a new, larger building in Neillsville, WI in 1921. Lutherans established a mission and school at Wittenberg, WI in 1884 and ministered to the local Ho-Chunk as well as Oneida, Stockbridge-Munsee, and Menominee. Ho-Chunk children also attended the government boarding school at Tomah, WI.

The Wisconsin people developed an itinerant economy. Putting in gardens at their homesteads, they harvested strawberries, cherries, potatoes, beans, etc. and cranberries for white growers, returning home at intervals to care for and harvest their own gardens. In the fall and winter many men trapped fur bearing animals for sale. They sold handcrafts, primarily black ash splint baskets at roadside stands or through retailers and about 1913 many found summer employment as dancers at Wisconsin Dells that also offered a major outlet for craft sales.

After WWII, crop work was increasingly mechanized and many people found it hard to get employment; federal Indian policy in the 1950s, dedicated to destroying the federal-Indian relationship, made it increasingly difficult to get educational and other assistance. The American Indian Chicago Conference of 1961 attracted Indians across the country to work for a change in policy. The Wisconsin Ho-Chunk were inspired to organize under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 to better their now impoverished circumstances. The Nebraska branch had been organized since the 1930s but at that time the IRA seemed irrelevant to the then self-sufficient Wisconsin Ho-Chunk although as a federally recognized tribe they were qualified to adopt it. A volunteer group formed the Wisconsin Winnebago Acting Business Committee and developed a constitution and framework for elective government but then encountered unexpected federal resistance to organizing under the IRA. Overcoming enormous obstacles the tribe voted overwhelmingly in favor of their constitution in 1963. Since then the tribe has acquired 100s of acres of tribal trust land for new housing in the communities at Black River Falls, Wisconsin Dells, Tomah, Wisconsin Rapids and Wittenberg, has launched a half dozen successful gaming operations and other enterprises, and supports programs regarding tribal health, welfare, and cultural and language concerns. They also support non-Indian causes and are actively involved in ecological and historical site protection.

The Constitution was revised to meet new challenges and in 1994 the tribe officially changed its old, Algonkian bestowed name to be known by their own name the Ho-Chunk Nation.

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More on the Legend of the Red Banks
Excerpts from
Wisconsin Historical Collections, Volume II
by
Charles D. Robinson in 1856
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Upon a high bank, on the eastern shore of Green Bay about 12 miles north of town, is an interesting earth-work, bearing a singular resemblance to military defences [sic] of modern times. Its walls at one time, must have been some seven feet in height, or thereabouts, having a ditch or moat on the outside, and provided on its three exposed sides with regular bastions. Its fourth side fronts on a precipice of perhaps one hundred feet in height, whose base is washed by the waters of Green Bay; and leading down this steep bank impassable at any other immediate point, is what seems to have once been a protected passage of steps cut into the clay, and perhaps covered with bows of trees. This was the communication from the fort to the water; and standing here now, it needs but little fancy to see those grim warriors of the olden time filing down their covered way, with less of the pomp, and more of the nerve of the mailed knights of feudal days, issuing from their rock-bound castles.

In or near, the centre, are two parallel walls, about twenty-five feet long, which were probably united at the ends, as there is some appearance of it now. It is very difficult to imagine the use of this part of the structure, unless it was to protect valuables, or such inmates of the fort as were incapable of aiding in its defence. Had the place been constructed in these days, it would have made a magazine of the most approved kind. A few rods (a rod is 16.5 feet in length) to the north, outside the walls, and on the very brink of the precipice, is what was once, apparently, a look-out (a high mound of earth), a few feet high, now half carried off by the wearing away of the cliff. To the southward and eastward of the fort, occupying some hundreds of acres were the planting grounds of the people who inhabited the place. Large trees now over-grow the ground, yet the furrows are as distinctly marked as if made but last year, and are surprisingly

regular. The whole work is admirably placed, and would do credit to the forethought and judgment, so necessary in correct military positions of modern times.

This is the only ancient earth-work, it is believed, which possesses an undoubted history or tradition, and that is but the history of its fall. When and by whom it was built, there is no story---nothing but the persistent declarations of the Indians of the vicinity that it was the work of red men, long, long ago. The tradition which follows is related by O-kee-wah, or *the sea*, an Indian woman now living near the Red River, on the eastern shore of Green Bay, and who, beyond doubt, is upwards of 100 years of age. She sat over a wigwam fire, only a few nights ago, and related this story, while the light of other days faintly illumined her wrinkles face as she marked out in the ashes the plan of the campaign, and as she told of the long days of desperate fighting, in which her ancestors were engaged, her withered arms seemed nerved with the strength of youth, like the old soldier, who

-----"Shouldered his crutch
And fought his battles O'er again."

"It was long ago," said O-kee-wah --- "I was so high --- placing her hand about three feet from the ground, when my grandfather told me the story. The *Sauks* and the *Outgamies* lived in the old fort at the Red banks. They had lived there a long time, and had their planting ground there, and ruled the whole country. The forests eastward were full of deer, the waters of the Bay were full of fish, and they possessed the whole. We (the *Menomonies*) lived over the Bay (at the Menomonee River), and we sent down the lakes, inviting the other tribes to come up and help us drive out the Sauks and Outgamies. They came in canoes -- the *Chippewas*, the *Pottawattamies*, the *Ottawas* and many more. You see how wide this bay is; their canoes stretched half way across; the bay was half-full of canoes, and each canoe was full of fighting men; they sent their greatest braves. They landed here at the Red River, after coming across the Menomonee, and for two miles along the beach their canoes were so thick that no more could be crowded in. From here

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they all went, in the night, to the Red Banks. They had bows and arrows, and the heads of the arrows were flint. Silently they paddled along until they came to the fort, and then the canoes were stationed all along in front, out of reach of arrows from the shore. A part of the warriors staid [sic] in the canoes, and a part went on shore and formed a line around the fort, so that, with those on shore and those on the water, it was completely surrounded, and there was no escape for the people inside. So cautiously was this all done, that of all within that fated fort, but one discovered it. A young woman, whose parents lived within the walls, had that day been given, against her will, to be the wife of one of the Sauks living in the immediate vicinity. In the night she ran away from his wigwam and went home, passing on her way the lines of the besiegers. Rushing into the fort, she awakened her family, with the cry, 'We are all dead!' The father laughed at her story, and laid [sic] down to sleep again."

"Just before daylight the battle began, and it lasted many days. The besieged fought bravely, standing in the trenches within the walls, and blood was up to their ankles. They had no water, for the supply was cut off by the party on the beach. They tried in every way to obtain it. Vessels attached to cords were let down to the water by night, but the cords were cut before they could be drawn up. 'Come down and drink!' cried the Menomonies; 'here is plenty of water, if you dare to come down and get it.' And they did go down many times. These taunts, and their great necessity, made that narrow way the scene of many desperate sallies, but all to no purpose. The besiegers were too strong".

"The heat of the burning sun, and the dreadful suffering for the want of water became intolerable. Some rain fell once, but it was only a partial relief for those who were perishing in sight of that sparkling water which was almost in their reach. At length one of the youngest chiefs, after fasting strictly for ten days, thus addressed his companions: 'Listen!--last night there stood by me the form of a young man clothed in white, who said, I was alive once---was dead, and now live forever; only trust in me, now and always, and I will deliver you. Fear not. At midnight I will cast a deep sleep upon your enemies. Then go forth boldly and silently, and you shall escape."

"Thus encouraged, and knowing this to be a direct revelation, the besieged warriors decided to leave the fort. That night an unusual silence pervaded the entire host of their enemies, who had been before so wakeful. So in silent, stealthy lines, the wearied people passed out and fled. Only a few, who disbelieved the vision, preferred to remain, and were massacred with fiercer barbarity than ever, when the next morning the besieging tribes awake from their strange slumbers to find their prey was gone."

Note:

Books researched for this article: *Wisconsin Historical Collections*--- Volume III, IV, X, XIII and XIV.....Volume X contains an index for Volumes I thru X