

THE REMARKABLE VIGIL OF CHIEF OWASIPPE

There are many legends regarding the lands, rivers and lakes of this area, but none more interesting than the legend surrounding the man whose name we have adopted for our camp.

Owasippe was the great chief of the Potawatomie Indians who occupied this land in the early part of the 19th century. Legend compares his great wisdom with that of Solomon's. The village over which the chief presided was on the flat at the foot of a hill near the Bishe-Gain-Dang (beautiful river in the Potawatomie language). The French trappers of the time knew the river as River Blanc. Today, we call it the White River.

The Bishe-Gain-Dang furnished the tribe with fresh water and a safe landing for their canoes. Both fishing and hunting were good and the wooded hills that surrounded them kept out the cold winter winds. They were also comparatively safe from attacks by hostile bands in the area.

Owasippe married late in life and when he became the father of two sons, he was overjoyed. As his sons grew, he taught them to find their way through the forest with the stars and the sun to guide them. He taught them to recognize the animals and the birds, the useful trees and plants, so that they might enjoy the full abundance around them.

Finally, the boys reached the age when they must prove their ability to become braves in the tribe. To earn this right, they had to undertake a great journey. They were required to spend several moons living in strange countries, surviving on what food they could find. If they could pass these tests with honor and courage, the tribe would officially recognize them as braves.

The boys loaded their canoes and set out. They followed the White River into White Lake and into the dangerous waters of Lake Michigan. They followed the shoreline south for many days and then turned north again until they came to a place called "Cheekahgaw," which means "place of wild onion." Today, we know that place as Chicago. To gain protection from hostile bands, the white men had built Fort Dearborn at the mouth of the river.

The sons of Owasippe stopped by Fort Dearborn and expressed friendly greeting in the name of their father. Here at Fort Dearborn, they remained for many days, making friends and trading with the settlers. Eventually, they knew it was time for them to return. Once again they set out on the perilous journey back to their beautiful valley.

When they failed to return after a reasonable length of time, Chief Owasippe became anxious. Every day, he would climb to the top of a high hill and sit for hours beneath a great pine tree, scanning the long marsh and watching for their reappearance on one of the many streams that wound through the tall grass. But they did not reappear nor could he learn news of their whereabouts. They might have drowned in the treacherous river or met enemies who tortured and killed them. Whatever happened, the two boys were never seen again.

There he sat day after day. Several weeks passed, but he refused to leave. His fellow tribesman and closest advisors brought him food until finally he refused to eat. Eventually, Owasippe succumbed to uncertainty and disappointment. His people found him dead beneath the great pine. Owasippe's people buried him in a sitting position on the spot where he died and covered his grave with a huge mound, as was worthy of a chief of his status.

In the early 1890's, three boys were following a trail near the mouth of Silver Creek when they noticed something that resembled the end of a canoe protruding from the bank. Hurrying back to town, they notified the village Marshall, who returned with the boys bringing men and shovels.

They unearthed two dugouts, each containing the skeleton of a teenage Indian. They also found the metal parts of a flintlock rifle, bits of decayed blankets, a copper kettle and a silver ornament.

It was apparent from the evidence that these youth were the missing sons of Owasippe. The two boys had apparently pulled their canoes up along the high bank for the night, and the river, constantly cutting into the earth, had caused the bluff to cave in, burying them where they slept. The spot was less than a mile from where Owasippe had sat watching.

When the remains of Owasippe's sons were found, the great pine by which Owasippe sat was still standing. By 1911, when Scouts began camping on these grounds, only a rotten log remained. Now, even that has disappeared. The mounds have been settled beyond recognition and the incredible legend of Chief Owasippe would have been lost except for the marker placed near his grave by the Boy Scouts of the Chicago Area Council.

Many Indian names have sacred meanings, and efforts have been made to learn the correct meaning of the Chief's name, but the Potawatomie language, being strictly oral, makes the matter difficult. Experts believe the name to be derived from the word "Awassisibi," meaning "one who looks beyond the river."

The courage and nobility displayed by the sons of Owasippe on their journey speak to the Scout virtues of Friendliness and Bravery, and their knowledge of the wilderness and ability to survive by their skills echoes the training of today's modern Scout laws.

It is said that the spirits of Chief Owasippe and his two sons still walk the trails of the Reservation and join with the many Scouts who visit us each year. On quiet nights, when all is still, those Spirits have been known to answer when called.