



The Mitten

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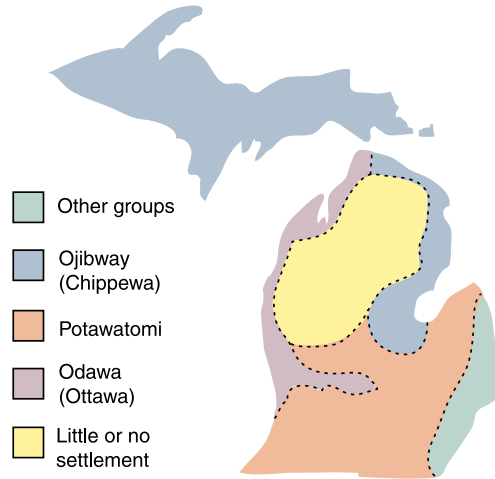
SEPTEMBER 2001

THE THREE FIRES

The three tribes most commonly associated with Michigan are the Ojibway (Chippewa), the Odawa (Ottawa) and the Potawatomi. These three tribes were like members of a family. The Ojibway were the “older brothers.” The Odawa were the next born and the Potawatomi were the “younger brothers.” These three tribes formed the Three Fires Confederacy, also known as the Anishinabek. A confederacy is a loose-knit **alliance** that promotes common interests.

Ojibway means “to roast ‘til pucker’d up” and describes the unique style of moccasins these Native Americans wore. The Ojibway, a tribe of around 30,000 people, lived along the southern shores of Lake Superior and western Lake Huron. The Ojibway were excellent hunters and fishermen.

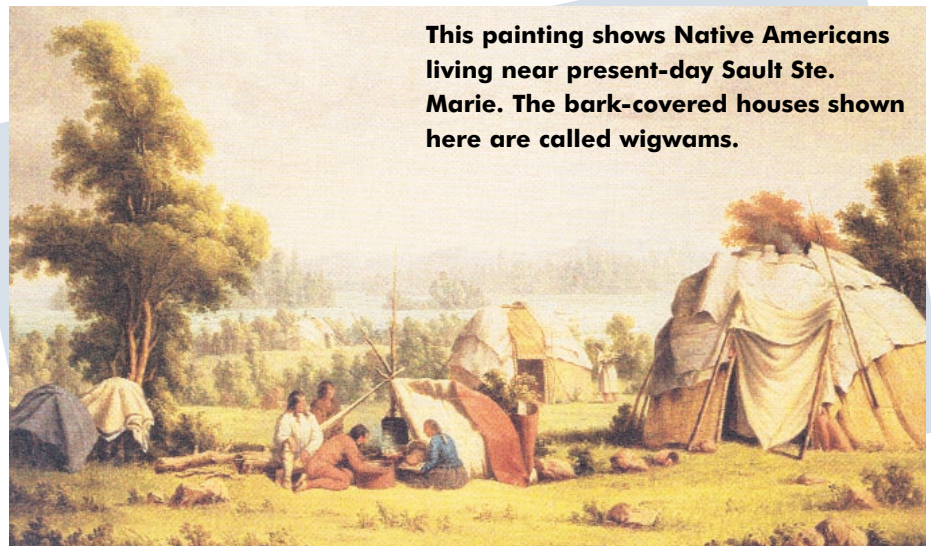
Odawa means “to trade.” The Odawa were skilled



traders. They also made excellent bark canoes that helped them trade all over North America. The Odawa lived along the eastern shores of Lake Michigan. When the

French arrived in the Great Lakes the Odawa had around 3,000 people.

The Potawatomi were called “the people of the place of the fire.” They were some of Michigan’s earliest farmers. The Potawatomi grew squash, corn, melons, beans and tobacco. Their villages were larger and more permanent than those of the Ojibway and Odawa. There were about 4,000 Potawatomi living in Michigan during the mid-1600s.



This painting shows Native Americans living near present-day Sault Ste. Marie. The bark-covered houses shown here are called wigwams.

Native American Life

In the mid-1600s, nine Native American tribes lived in the Great Lakes area. They totaled around 100,000 people. The largest tribe was the Huron, who lived in the region between Lakes Erie, Ontario and Huron. Tribes living in the area that is now Michigan included the Three Fires: the Ojibway, the Odawa and the Potawatomi. Other area tribes were the Menominee, the Sac (also Sauk), the Fox, the Winnebago and the Miami.

Each tribe was different, but they all shared three beliefs: 1) Spirits were more powerful than men; 2) Nature—the land, animals and plants—belonged to everyone and 3) No one had the right to run another person's life.

Everyone living in an Indian village worked. Women and girls did most of the chores. They tanned (softened) animal skins, wove fishnets, chopped wood, grew crops and cooked. Men and boys hunted and fished. They made bows and arrows, traps, wooden tools and canoes.

Unlike Native Americans who lived on the **Great Plains**, Michigan Native

Americans did not live in tepees. Most lived in dome-shaped houses called wigwams. **Saplings** were stuck into the ground and tied together to create a frame. Sheets of bark taken from large trees were placed over the saplings. When a family



State Archives of Michigan

moved to a new place, they rolled up the bark covering and took it with them. They left the sapling framework behind.

Michigan Indians obtained food in many ways. From the forests and lakes they gathered berries, nuts and wild rice. They grew

corn, beans and squash in gardens. They also hunted. Men and boys used traps and snares, as well as bows and arrows, to take bear, moose, deer, wolf and fox.

Michigan Native Americans did not wear feathered headdresses. They wore their hair long. Sometimes they braided their hair. In the summer, Native Americans wore only a **breechcloth** and moccasins. During cold

weather both men and women wore fur hats, moccasins, **leggings** and shirts.

Women also wore knee-length deer-skin skirts.

Today, many places in Michigan have Native American names. The

word Michigan comes from an Indian language. "Michi" means great; "gane" means lake or

water. But Native Americans gave Michigan more than names. They taught Michigan's first white people how to live in the wilderness, make canoes and hunt.

The birch-bark canoe was a remarkable invention. The canoe was strong, waterproof and lightweight.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE THREE FIRES



† The MUSEUM OF OJIBWA CULTURE in downtown St. Ignace has exhibits on the Native American ways of life. The museum's resident Chippewa artist, Ron Paquin, demonstrates how he makes birch-bark canoes and baskets. For information, write to 566 North State Street, St. Ignace, MI 49781. Telephone (906) 643-9380 or visit on-line at www.stignace.com/attractions/ojibwa.

The MICHIGAN HISTORICAL CENTER offers exhibits on Native Americans in the Great Lakes area. On display are arrowheads, trade goods and a birch-bark canoe. The museum is located at 717 West Allegan, Lansing, MI 48918. Telephone (517) 373-3559, TDD: (800) 827-7007 or visit on-line at www.sos.state.mi.us/history.

The Creation of Sleeping Bear Dunes

The people of the Three Fires had many stories about how the world was created by the Great Manitou, or Great Spirit. One of the stories is about how North and South Manitou Islands and Sleeping Bear Dunes were made.

A mother bear and her two cubs lived peacefully on the western shore of Lake Michigan. They ate berries and fish and drank from the

lake. The mother bear taught her cubs to be thankful to the Great Manitou for all things.

One summer night there was a big thunderstorm. Lightning set the forest on fire. The mother bear gathered her cubs and jumped into the lake to escape the flames. All through the night they swam toward the distant shore, away from the fire. The cubs grew tired.

First, the younger one sank beneath the waves, then the older cub disappeared.

The mother bear could not save them. She made it to shore and fell into a deep sleep on the beach. As she

Places in Michigan with Native American names

MICHIGAN = great lake

CHEBOYGAN = Chippewa water

KALAMAZOO = reflecting river

ISHPEMING = heaven

MUNISING = island in a lake

PETOSKEY = rising sun

ESCANABA = flat rock

slept, the Great Manitou whispered to her. "Because you always remembered me with thanks, I will take you to the Land of the Spirits. Your cubs are already there."

The Great Manitou created two islands to honor the brave bear cubs. He called them North and South Manitou Islands. The Great Manitou then covered the mother bear with a blanket of white sand. Today she rests under Sleeping Bear Dunes.



What Did You Learn?

BONUS:

Which Native American group was known as skilled traders?

- a. Potawatomi
- b. Menominee
- c. Odawa

1. *What does the word Potawatomi mean?*

- a. people of the place of the fire
- b. growers of corn
- c. big lake

2. *What did Native American women and girls do?*

- a. make bows and arrows
- b. tan animal skins
- c. catch fish

3. *Most Native Americans in Michigan lived in houses called _____.*

4. *The _____ Indians lived in southern Michigan and were good farmers.*

Vocabulary WORDS



Great Plains: Prairie land in the middle United States

breechcloth: Square leather pieces worn over the front and back of the hip area

leggings: Leather pants

alliance: People joined together in purpose or beliefs

saplings: Young trees

The Mitten is produced by the staff of Michigan History magazine, which is part of the Michigan Historical Center. The Michigan Historical Center is part of the Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in Michigan, the department also includes the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, the Library of Michigan, the Michigan Film Office, and the Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural Affairs.

For more information, contact Michigan History at (517) 373-3703 or visit us on-line at www.sos.state.mi.us/history/mag

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Find the following
**NATIVE
 AMERICAN**
 words

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 OJIBWAY
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 POTAWATOMI
 THREEFIRES
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