

Ho-Chunk Stubbornness - They survived because of it

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Ho-Chunk history makes the year 1884 sound like on with little to celebrate.

While Wisconsin was being born as a state, the tribe that once controlled 10.5 million acres from Green Bay to Rock Island, Ill, was at its second stop on a 34-year trail of tears. By 1848, the tribe that numbered 5,000 in 1820 had been cut in half, ravaged by smallpox and starvation. The Ho-Chunk had been moved to a reservation in northern Minnesota to serve as a buffer between warring Chippewa and Sioux.

Tribe history notes that in 1848 the tribe "suffered from scurvy and would have starved if the trader had not extended credit.

Over the next 30 years, government policies moved the Ho-Chunk four more times. And with every move, some Ho-Chunks fled to their Wisconsin homeland, only to be rounded up by soldiers, herded onto trains, and sent west yet again. It is a history only two generations removed from people who are alive today, and a reason, said Ho-Chunk Nation spokesman Spencer Lone Tree, that some Ho-Chunks have mixed feelings about celebrating Wisconsin's sesquicentennial.

"We have two schools of thought on it," Lone Tree said. "There are those who want nothing to do with it, because they're still bitter about the past."

Lone Tree counts himself with those who want to look ahead to the future, and said that tribal dancers will participate in the sesquicentennial folk fair. Modern relationships with the state are further complicated by ongoing negotiations on gaming compacts and the Ho-Chunk's moves to buy land and put it in trust.

Nettie Kingsley, director of the Ho-Chunk Historic Preservation Department, said that requests for information about the tribe's history have risen this year.

"It's too bad it had to take the sesquicentennial to get people to wake up and realize" the tribe's place in history, she said. At the same time, she said she enjoys the chance to share the history of the Ho-Chunk people.

By historical accounts, relations between the Ho-Chunk Nation and Europeans began cordially enough in 1634, when Jean Nicolet landed at Red Banks on Green Bay, gun blazing, thinking he had discovered a route to China. The Ho-Chunks held a huge feast to welcome the explorer.

In the grand treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1825, the government recognized that the tribe controlled much of central and southwestern Wisconsin and promised no settlers would move into their lands without permission.

That respect was short-lived. Lead miners were already moving into southwest Wisconsin. Following an attack on settlers led by Red Bird, a Ho-Chunk warrior, the tribe agreed in 1829 to give up title to the lead district.

Another treaty followed the 1832 Black Hawk War - even though most Ho-Chunks sided with the United States - and forced the tribe north of the lower Wisconsin River, into what anthropologist Nancy Lurie said was then called "the barren heart of Wisconsin."

Soon, the government plotted to move the Ho-Chunk out of Wisconsin altogether. Wisconsin territory governor Henry Dodge wrote that the Ho-Chunk had become debased by contract with whites.

"I have no hesitation in expressing my opinion that the wretched remains of this people can only be saved by the humane and protecting policy of the government, by removing them," Dodge wrote.

The treaty of 1837 did just that. Told that the government just wanted to talk, the tribe sent a delegation of low-ranking young people to Washington. Henry Merrill, a Wisconsin pioneer who witnessed the negotiations, wrote in his memoirs that the interpreter lied to the Indians, telling them they had eight years to stay in Wisconsin, rather than the eight months in the treaty.

"At length, (the Ho-Chunk) yielded not to their judgements but to the pressure brought on them," Merrill wrote.

Lurie said that while earlier treaties were signed by members of the Thunder Clan (the civil chiefs) the Bear Clan (the police chiefs), the 1837 treaty had few signatories from the Thunder Clan and none from the Bear Clan.

"They were bilked," she said.

John T DeLaRonde, a soldier who participated in a 1840 roundup of the Ho-Chunk villages along the lower Wisconsin River, wrote of women who begged to be shot rather than taken from their homeland. Others pleaded for a chance to say farewell to their ancestors.

"They said they were going to bid good-bye to their fathers, mothers and children," DeLaRonde wrote in his 1876 memoirs. "The captain directed me to go with them, and watch them; and we found them on their knees - kissing the ground and crying very loud - where their relations were buried."

Ho-Chunk Ken Funmaker Sr., 65, heard his grandfather talk of the day soldiers arrived in his village, which was on the Mississippi River, near present-day Trempealeau.

"The soldiers rounded up the people and they burned everything," Funmaker said. "He was just a little guy. All they let him keep was a pair of (ice) skates."

The tribe lost many of its sacred religious items in the roundups; the name for one former village near La Crosse is "the place where the war bundles burned."

Probably the lowest point in history came in 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln ordered the tribe out of Minnesota to calm settlers' fears over a Sioux uprising.

The location of the new reservation, among ancient enemies in what is now South Dakota, prompted one of the largest returns to Wisconsin. Histories tell of Ho-Chunk carving canoes from cottonwood trees, and paddling down the Missouri, then back up the Mississippi, to get home to Wisconsin.

Still, they weren't safe. In December 1873, U.S. soldiers surrounded Ho-Chunks gathered for a religious festival and herded them, at bayonet point, into railroad cars. They were left on the plains of Nebraska with little shelter or food. Another 240 died of starvation that winter, and, when the survivors returned to Wisconsin in the spring, they found their belongings stolen or destroyed.

The following year marked yet another shift in Indian policy. The part of the tribe (known in Ho-Chunk as Wazijaci, or dwellers in the pine) that refused to leave Wisconsin was granted the right to buy 40-acre homesteads. The reservation tribe, which finally wound up on the Missouri River in Nebraska, became the Nebraska Winnebago or Norsajaci (Dwellers on the Muddy).

The history of the Ho-Chunk refusing to leave Wisconsin in the face of repeated expulsions says a lot about the national character.

"That's how we are that's why we act so stubborn," Funmaker said. "We didn't want to go away."

By buying back its traditional homeland, the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk now own more than 2,000 acres and have become a major employer, thanks largely to Casinos.

Ken Funmaker, who headed the tribe in the early 1980s (and whose sister, JoAnn Jones, led the tribe during its critical building period on the early 1990s) now runs the Ho-Chunk Wazijaci Language and Culture Program. Tribal customs also benefited from the tribe's stubborn ways. Because the Ho-Chunk lived in scattered settlements, they preserved their language and religion better than tribes subjected to missionaries and reservation schools.

Anthropologist Lurie said the Ho-Chunk managed to survive more than 150 years of government policy that alternated between views that disease or assimilation would get rid of the tribe.

Funmaker, though doesn't see the survival of the Ho-Chunk in Wisconsin as surprising.

"What if your people lived in their country and someone came and took it?" he said, "It's the only place you know. It's your homeland."