A lot happened before 1836

By Crawford B. Thayer

Many fascinating things happened in Fort Atkinson before the arrival of Dwight Foster, the first settler, on Nov. 10, 1836.

For example, 10,000 years ago, Fort Atkinson was still covered by a North American sheet of ice one mile high, a slow-moving field of ice called the Wisconsin glacier... which has receded back toward the North pole to get another load of rocks and sand.

The first humans arrived in the Fort Atkinson area about 8,000 years ago, when the glacier began to melt. Their ancestors had entered the American continent by crossing the land bridge between Russia and Alaska across the Bering Strait.

The first passersby were nomadic foragers (10,000-4,000 B.C.) who had to chase their food such as elephant-like mastadons and woolly mammoths.

Later native Americans learned to survive by staying near one place. These sedentary hunters and gatherers (4,000-1,000 B.C.) lived on seasonally available food such as deer, migratory waterfowl (especially around Lake Koshkonong) and a variety of nuts and roots.

Next, these people living in Fort Atkinson settled down to become pioneer gardeners (1,000 B.C.-1,000 A.D.) growing maize, squash, beans and pumpkins.

They are the people we may know best, for between 500 and 1,000 A.D. this effigy mound culture constructed long- (linear) mounds, round (conical) mounds, and picture (effigy) mounds shaped like birds, turtles, bears, panthers and deer.

The location of the many mounds built here is shown in an exhibit at the Hoard Historical Museum.

A unique exception to the many mounds is the famous panther effigy intaglio located on Riverside Drive between the Robert Street bridge and Rock River Park. The intaglio is a mound of reverse, formed as a depression dug in the earth — is one of the two intaglios which still exist worldwide.

Following the mound builders were village farmers (1,000-1,000 A.D.) who were similar to the Woodland Indians we know today — woodland because Fort Atkinson is situated in woodland country, rather than prairie, mountain or arctic.

In Fort Atkinson then, the land west of the Rock River (Mississippi) was covered with trees — neither thick nor very tall — and there was no underbrush to obstruct the view. The trees seemed like an irregular orchard and continued on the south side of the river. In spring it was literally covered with flowers, including ladyslipper and honeysuckle.

Most of the trees were hurr oak; here and there would be a white oak towering high above the rest like a sentinel overlooking them all. It was a beautiful country.

In Fort Atkinson, Indians who lived on the west side of the Rock River were Winnebagoes, while those on the east side were Potawatomies. Potawatomi Chief Kewaskum, for instance, had his summer village where the Koshkonong Mounds Country Club is located today, and "Koshkonong" is a Potawatomi word meaning "the lake we live on."

One exception was Maneater's Village. He was a Winnebago, but his village was located on the east side of the river where it enters Lake Koshkonong. White Crow's Winnebago Village was located on Carcajou Point, the west bank.

Juliette Kinzie, wife of the sub agent for Indian Affairs at Port Winnebago in Portage, was the first white woman to see Lake Koshkonong and Maneater's Village, which she described as follows:

"Maneater's Village was a collection of neat bark wigwams, with extensive fields on each side of corn, beans, and squashes, recently planted, but already giving promise of a fine crop. In front was a broad blue lake, the shores of which, to the south, were open and marshy, but near the village would something far away to the north, were bordered by fine lofty trees. The village was built but a short distance below the point where the Rock River opens into the lake . . ."

And she spoke of her party, returning to Port Winnebago from Chicago, in the spring of 1831, as it crossed Rock River to today's Black Hawk Island.

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'We came to fight Indians, not build stockades': Dodge

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"... we dismantled, and the men commenced the task of unsaddling and unloading. We were soon placed in the canoes, and paddled across to the opposite bank. Next, the horses were swum across; after them came the carriage. Two long wooden canoes were securely lashed together side by side, and being of sufficient width to admit of the carriage standing within them, the passage was commenced. Again and again the tottering barks would sway from side to side, and a cry or shout would arise from our party on shore, as the whole mass seemed about to plunge sideways into the water, but it would presently recover itself, and, at length, after various deviations from the perpendicular, it reached the shore in safety."

In her book Wau-Bun ("Early Times"), Kinzie also tells how they got across Mud Lake by riding piggy-back on husbands and Indians.

The Indians lived in harmony with nature (and at war with anyone who moved in on their hunting grounds) for 8,000 years before the real trouble started in 1832, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue and misnamed all of the inhabitants "Indians" because he thought he had landed in India.

The arrival of the boat people from Europe put pressure on the native Americans to get out of their way or die. Black Hawk's ancestors, for example, got pushed from Montreal, Canada, to Saginaw, Mich., to Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, Wis., to Saukemuk (at today's Rock Island, Ill.).

Black Sparrow Hawk, leader of a small "British band" of Sauk and Fox Indians, was forced out of Saukemuk in June 1831. His women had difficulty in digging up the Iowa sod to plant their corn, so they said in effect, "Let's go home again." Black Hawk agreed, and crossed the Mississippi River back into Illinois on April 5, 1832. The Black Hawk War had begun.

President Andrew Jackson ordered Brig. Gen. Henry Atkinson to pursue Black Hawk, and force him to get out of the United States (by crossing the Mississippi into Louisiana, Purchase Territory). Atkinson's U.S. Army Infantry troops and a State militia chased Black Hawk up the Rock River, but couldn't find him.

Atkinson's army of 3,500 troops, including 96 Potawatomi guides, went through Fort Atkinson on Friday, July 6, 1832, and camped at Burnt Village at the junction of what today are County Highways M and N near Cold Spring on the Dean Yandry farm. And they ran out of food.

Atkinson dismissed unbrigaded units, including that in which Abraham Lincoln served. On July 9, someone stole Lincoln's borrowed horse, "Speedwell." A historical marker at the Cold Spring wayside commemorated this event.

How did he get home? "... the generous men of our company walked and rode by turns with us, and we fared about equal with the rest."

The rest of the army was sent for food. Atkinson asked Col. Henry Dodge (in charge of Michigan Territory or Wisconsin militia) to build a stockade to protect the supplies that would soon arrive. Dodge replied, "Sir, we did not come to build fortifications. We came here to fight Indians!" So Atkinson sent Dodge and his squadron along with the other troops to Fort Winnebago to get food.

This left behind only the U.S. Army Infantry (no horses) under the command of Col. Zachary Taylor. These troops built the stockade, starting construction on July 11, 1832, and completing it only days later, by July 16.

Here's a queer quirk of history: While 23-year-old Abe Lincoln (who was to become our 16th president) was on the trek home from Cold Spring, Zachary Taylor (who was to be our 12th president) built Fort Atkinson because Henry Dodge (who was to become the first and last governor of Wisconsin Territory) told Atkinson to build his own fort. When Taylor was elected president in 1848, Dodge failed to become vice president in the same election on the third or "Burn Burners" ticket.

The stockade was made of trunks of trees, the larger of which were split in half, with a trench or ditch dug three or four feet around the entire enclosure. The tree trunks were then stood up on end, in the ditch, close together, the dirt shoveled back into the ditch and trampled down, leaving the tree trunks, or pickets, sticking up about eight feet above the ground.

The stockade, which probably contained five or six acres, was built along Rock River near the former Ell May house in the 400 block of East Milwaukee Avenue.

On Tuesday, July 17, 1832, Atkinson wrote to his commanding officer:

"Whilst lying here we have thrown up a strong stockade work flanked by four block houses, for the security of our supplies and the accommodation of the sick. I shall garrison it with a few regulars (sick) and 150 to 200 volunteer troops under an Army officer."

The first death in Fort Atkinson was that of David W. Dobbs, a private in Capt. R.B. Mason's Grenadier Company of the 1st Regiment, U.S. Army Infantry. He died on July 20, 1832.

Dobbs was 31 years old, had a dark complexion, brown hair and stood six feet tall. He was originally from Patrick County, Va. It was thought by early settlers that he was shot by an Indian from across Rock River while fishing. Buried on a hill (Continued on page 6)