

Native People

Prehistoric Heritage

The native American heritage of Adams County is thousands of years old. The tradition of the Ho-Chunk people holds that they have lived here for as long as anyone has and archaeological evidence supports the view that humans have inhabited the central part of the Wisconsin River Valley for over 10,000 years.

Although rare, specimens of the oldest style of stone tool making--Clovis points--have been found by local collectors. Much more common are stone points--"arrowheads"--dating back 5,000 years and most common are those from the Early Woodland period which began about 2,500 years ago.

These finds include both stone tools and pottery and number in the thousands. They indicate that people of some culture and practical skills have lived in central Wisconsin for many thousands of years.

The most widespread evidence of prehistoric people living in Adams County takes the form of the earthworks known as "burial" or "effigy" mounds. When first surveyed between 1913 and 1916, a total of 666 mounds were counted in the county. Since American settlers had been plowing

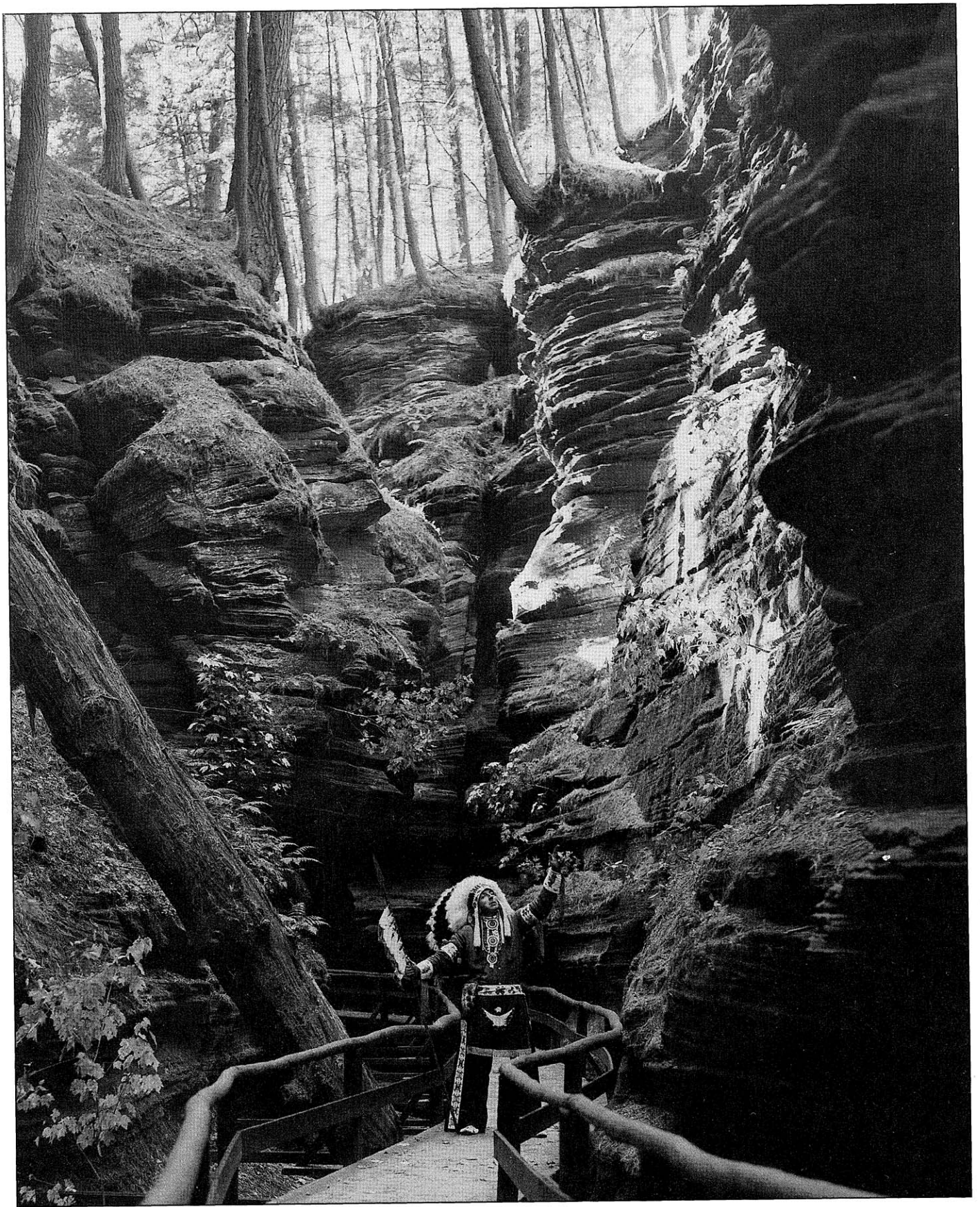
fields, building roads and dams and otherwise working the land for seventy years by then, it is quite likely that many more mounds once existed.

The mounds, which were constructed between 1,500 and 1,000 years ago, took many shapes and sizes. Many were conical mounds that resembled half-scoops of ice cream as big as a round hay bale. Others were linear, up to five feet high, ten feet wide and stretching as far as a football field. Many more were in the shape of animals: cat-like "panthers" with long curving tales, blocky bears, bison or turtles; birds with wings outstretched for hundreds of feet.

Some mounds were used to bury tools and other implements, others became graves for people, while many showed no signs of any purpose other than to stand on their own.

When the American settlers arrived here, few of them were curious about the mounds. The Ho-Chunk and Menominee people living in the county at the time knew little about them. With all the upheaval that had taken place in Indian culture since the first arrival of Europeans in Wisconsin in the late 1600s, it is not surprising that memories of the moundbuilders were lost. Despite that loss, the

Above: These mounds in Strong's Prairie, now beneath Petenwell Lake, were among the 600 effigy mounds tallied in the county in 1916. Following Page: Roger Tallmadge, who established the Winnebago Public Indian Museum in Dell Prairie, to preserve the Indian heritage of central Wisconsin. (Courtesy, H.H. Bennett Studio)



Oshkosh, the Menominee leader who kept a hunting camp in northern Adams County.



mounds do reveal something about the nature of the people who built them. Far from being poor, struggling and simple, they possessed culture, religion and organization enough to be the first people in the county to build sizable structures that were more than basic shelter from the cold and the rain.

Another important relic of prehistoric times is the rock art on Roche-A-Cri Rock. Pictographs

(paintings) and/or petroglyphs (carvings) are present on the northwest side of the rock, in a cave-like shelter on the southwest side and--most prominently--on the south face.

The art consists of groups of vertical lines, zig-zags, "turkey tracks" that may represent human figures, bird-like shapes, crescents that may stand for canoes, the moon or the sun during an eclipse. The most prominent figure resembles a man with a wavy line reaching out from his head to a bird figure near by. All of the ancient artwork is riddled by erosion and marred by graffiti that dates from the 1840s to the 1960s. Some of the names carved or painted on the rock are identifiable as county residents, pioneers and modern.

Archeologists who have studied the site are not able to precisely date the artwork. By comparing it to similar work at other locations, the experts suggest that the petroglyphs were carved prior to the year 900 A.D. while the pictographs were painted after 900 A.D., perhaps as late as 1600.

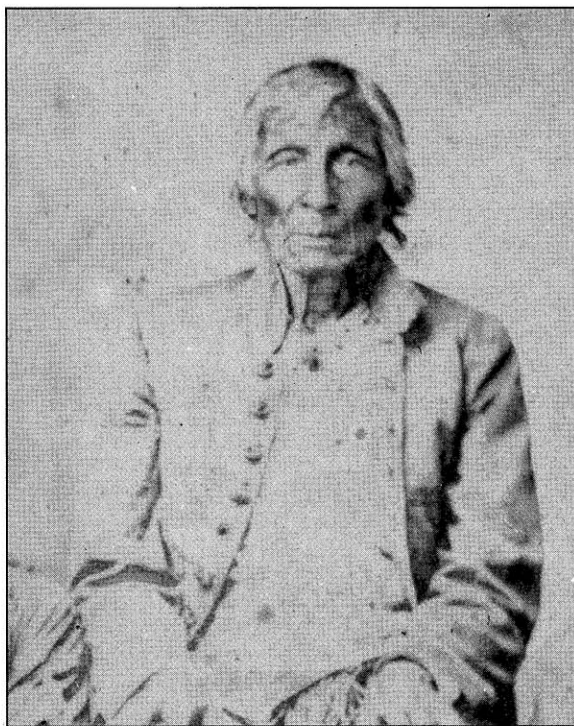
The meaning of the artwork is equally a matter of speculation. Prehistoric people used rock art for spiritual, historical and political purposes. They kept records, identified families, clans and individuals, and told stories in the stones. What it meant to the artists who created it may be unknown, but, the rock art, like the lost effigy mounds, tell us that people of culture and spirit lived in this area long before historians were present to write about them.

Menominee and Ho-Chunk

The Indians most closely associated with Adams County were the Menominee and the Ho-Chunk. While the ancient home ground of the Menominee was in eastern Wisconsin north of Green Bay, by the late 1700s they had moved to the vicinity of Lake Winnebago and up the Fox River Valley to Portage. In the early 1800s, Oshkosh, the Menominee leader after whom the city is named, had a hunting camp in the wetlands now submerged by the waters of Petenwell Lake. This camp was probably in what is now Juneau County, but in order to reach it, Oshkosh and his band had to pass through Adams County.

By the 1830s, the estimated population of the Menominee was no more than 3,000 people who lived in small villages and camps between the

Yellow Thunder, the Ho-Chunk leader who refused to abide by the treaty mandating the removal of his people from Wisconsin.





Wisconsin River and Lake Winnebago. In one of these villages in southern Adams County, Jared Walsworth made his home in 1838.

In 1836, the Menominees signed the Treaty of the Cedars which opened up the Wisconsin River north from Nekoosa to lumbermen and led to the creation of the Pinery Road through Adams County. In 1848, the federal government persuaded the Menominees to sign off all their land in Wisconsin. Although the terms of this treaty were later altered so the Menominees could retain a reservation in northern Wisconsin, they had relinquished control of Adams County. Their departure opened the land to American settlement.

The story of the Ho-Chunk is not as simple. They had an older claim than the Menominee to land in central Wisconsin and more of them were living here when American settlement began. They too were coerced into signing a treaty that said they would leave Wisconsin but, unlike the Menominee they did not have the opportunity to renegotiate it. Instead, many Ho-Chunk resisted federal attempts to forcibly remove them by laying low in the less settled parts of Adams, Juneau, Wood, Monroe and Portage counties. It is these people who play a part in many settlers' stories and whose descendants reside in the county today.

Four times between 1844 and 1873, Ho-Chunk camps were raided by federal marshals. Men,

women and children were loaded onto steamboats or railcars and shipped to reservations in Minnesota and Nebraska. Four times, Ho-Chunk people led by Yellow Thunder returned to central Wisconsin. By the mid-1870s, the government gave up its attempts at removal and instead extended the terms of the Homestead Act to Indians. A few Ho-Chunks--Decorahs, Goodbears, Winnishieks--used the act to acquire land in Adams County. In 1900, census takers counted 53 Indians in the county. The actual number was probably larger, as many Indians lived in hard-to-reach places and had good reason to avoid anyone from the government.

In the late 1800s, as tourism developed at Wisconsin Dells, Ho-Chunk baskets, beadwork and other craft items were among the first and most popular souvenirs sold to visitors. By 1919, local Indians were performing at the original Stand Rock Indian Ceremonial across the river in Juneau County. In 1929, when Stand Rock founders Glenn Parsons and George Crandall dissolved their partnership, Parsons managed a dance troupe at his Indian Trading Post on River Road in Adams County for a few years. In the years since, Ho-Chunk people have played a larger role in the tourist industry and in all aspects of county life. In 1990, the Indian population of Adams County numbered 125.

The Decorah family, in Strong's Prairie about 1900, were among the Ho-Chunk people who remained in Adams County.



Ho-Chunk dancers performed at a pow-wow that brought visitors to Friendship in 1907. The Stand Rock Indian ceremonial at Wisconsin Dells had its origins in such gatherings.

Why the Winnebago Are The Ho-Chunk

For as long as they could remember, the people who called themselves the Ho-Chunkgra lived in the southern half of Wisconsin. They met their first European in 1634, when French voyageur Jean Nicolet traveled west from Montreal in search of the fabled Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. He had heard of the Ho-Chunkgra as the "People of the Sea" who lived along the route and who, he hoped, would guide him all the way to China. Instead, they greeted him hospitably and, perhaps, guided him up the Fox River.

The Algonquin Indians who accompanied Nicolet, had their own name for the Ho-Chunkgra. They called them the Winnebago. The French furtraders who came a few years after Nicolet called the Ho-Chunkgra, *les puans*, or "stinkards" after the strong, sulfur smell of the water at Green Bay. The English traders who followed the French preferred the Algonquin name and so the Ho-Chunkgra passed into the historical record as the Wisconsin Winnebago Indians.

They remained the Wisconsin Winnebago until November 1994, when they chose to once again be known by the name they had always called themselves—the Ho-Chunkgra—conveniently shortened to Ho-Chunk. It is not a new name. Instead, it is the oldest name of the native people of the Dells area and the first name they gave to themselves.

(Reprinted from *Others Before You, The History of Wisconsin Dells Country*, 1995.)