

# MENOMINEE RANGE MEMORIES 1: EARLY HISTORY OF THE BADWATER INDIAN VILLAGE

By William J. Cummings, Menominee Range Historical Foundation Historian



**Capt. Thomas Jefferson Cram included the location of the Badwater Indian Village on his *Corrected Map of the Country Along the Proposed Boundary between Michigan and Wisconsin* in his report to Congress in December, 1840. [William J. Cummings]**

The earliest printed documentation found to date regarding Native Americans inhabiting what became Dickinson County, Michigan, is found in a written report submitted to Congress by Capt. Thomas Jefferson Cram in December, 1840.

Congress had commissioned Cram, a member of the Corps of Topographical

Engineers in the War Department, to determine the boundary between Michigan and Wisconsin in 1840, appropriating \$3,000 for the survey. Except for the southern shore of Lake Superior, this land had not yet been surveyed.

Capt. Cram submitted his written report of his findings in December, 1840, along

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with a map on which the Badwater Indian Village was located. President Martin Van Buren submitted the report to the Senate on February 1, 1841.

A portion of Cram's interesting description of the "Menomonee" (Me-Ne-Ca-Ne) River notes:

"The country adjacent to the upper part of the Menomonee [*sic*], for about thirty miles on both sides, has an exceedingly desolate appearance; all the timber, which was once pine, has been consumed by fire, as far as the eye can reach, all around on every side...Within the burnt district there is a part of the river called "Bad Water," where there is an Indian village and planting-ground; the people of this village are called, in English, "Bad Water Indians." Potatoes only are cultivated here; it is too far north for corn to ripen before the coming of frost."

The Badwater Indian Village was located in the SW ¼ of Section 29, T41N of R30W on the Menominee River. Cram's report verifies its existence in 1840, but how much earlier a Native American settlement was located at this point is unknown. The inhabitants were part of the Ojibwe tribe, often referred to by English writers or speakers as Ojibwa or Chippewa.

In Volume II of Raphael Pumpelly's *My Reminiscences*, printed in 1918, the famed German explorer noted that in 1867:

"Instead of going up the Michigamme I set out with a light bark canoe for a rapid voyage down the Menominee to its mouth, and thence by rail to Marquette. We started from a little isolated Indian village called Badwater. Here some Indians had built several log huts in the midst of some hundreds of acres of fertile land – all of it, except three or four acres, covered with a grand forest. They raised some of the northern maize called 'squaw' corn, and the women showed with pride some fine potatoes.

"I had been there before, and they knew me, and when I appeared there now they exclaimed: 'Bid-vey-vey-Gizjek! Bid-vey-vey-Gizjek!'

"When I asked what they were saying, one of my Indians said that was the name they had given me. It meant 'Sounding Sky.'

"'Why do they call me that,' I asked.

"He asked the old man of the group. I saw an expression of sadness on the faces about me as the answer was given:

"'These Indians try do same as white man. They make house and plant crop. They think they always live here. The land is good, heap fish, heap deer, heap beaver, and mink and marten, heap fur. Now they say they see you take all land. They think you take their land. Yes, they heap sad.'

"'Well,' I said, 'what has that got to do with the name they call me?'

"'They think you thunder that come before storm.'

"'So I was the 'rumbling of the coming storm.'

"The tract was an odd numbered section, and I told him to tell the Indians that no one could take that during the next few years, and that I would not take it from them; and I added that I would try, if possible, to have it secured to them once and for all.

"They were very grateful. After a consultation among themselves an old squaw went off and came back with a gift. The group gathered near, as she proudly handed it to me. It was a freak of three potatoes united to form a veritable phallus. The old men smiled, and the women, old and young, giggled. My interpreter said, 'They say this bring you heap papoose.' In return for the mascot I made them all happy with tobacco."

Another early explorer, F.W. Hyde, of Clintonville, Wisconsin, reported on his

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travels through the area in 1867 in the *Proceedings of the Lake Superior Mining Institute* in 1917 in an article titled "Reminiscences of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan" as follows:

"...After remaining in the woods until Christmas [1867], and being afraid of the deep snows coming on, we decided to start for civilization. Taking a southerly course through the woods, we reached the Menominee river, a few miles north of Bad Water, an Indian village, where there were between one and two hundred Chippewa Indians living. It being a bitter cold day, we stopped at one of the wigwams to get warm and see if we could get something to eat. Having a small allowance of flour with us, we made the squaw understand we were hungry and wished her to bake us some bread, which she readily did, also cutting a nice sirloin of venison and cooking it with boiled potatoes and onions. She soon placed before us a dinner that would do justice to the most expert feminine cook. Leaving Bad Water we took the Indian trail that lead down to Sturgeon falls. That night we camped on the pine plains near Lake Antoine.

"The next morning, after crossing the lake, we missed the trail, and for this reason again took our course through the heavy forests, crossing over the high ridge where the City of Iron Mountain is now located. After leaving the plains south of Lake Antoine the country became rolling and was covered with heavy growth of white and Norway pine, with very little underbrush. There were thousands of deer and this whole section of country resembled a sheep ranch. Late in the afternoon we reached the Menominee river at Little Quinnesec Falls. Traveling down the river on the ice until long after dark we came to an Indian camp. Obtaining permission, we stayed with him over night. The Indian[,]

who could talk some English, told us there was a lumber camp just below the Sturgeon Falls, which was about two miles down the river. This was the farthest up the lumbering had been. Leaving the Indian early the next morning we soon reached the lumber camp, where we had breakfast. From there we were three days reaching Menominee."

On May 23, 1879, George Frederick Seibert, who became one of Iron Mountain's first druggists, noted in his journal of an early trip to the area:

"...We passed several wigwams and entered one to examine its structure and found it nothing different internally from those examined by me before. As I have not described one before I'll try to do so now. A number of straight poles with crotches at the apex (is good) are cut and then leaned inwards against one center post. Perhaps a small tree or a pole put into the ground. Across these or piled onto them are placed either cedar bark taken from the trees by cutting a circle clear around the tree about a foot above the roots and another four feet to six feet above the first one, then split down, or hemlock boughs are cut and piled up around the poles leaving a hole above for the 'exit' of smoke and another opening left in the side for a door. This with a few balsam boughs spread around constitutes a wigwam. There is another kind made by bending small trees into about the following shape and tying them."

Seibert was probably describing the Badwater Indian Village in his journal entry.

Reports regarding activities at the Badwater Indian Village or its residents appeared sporadically in the columns of contemporary newspapers.

The reader needs to be mindful of the attitudes of many residents of the area at the time these articles were written and the

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frank editorial comments often inserted in these contemporary newspaper articles

would not be acceptable by today's standards.



This photograph shows an Ojibwe family in front of their wigwam at Watersmeet, Michigan. The view, copyrighted by R.J. Kingsbury, an Antigo, Wisconsin, photographer, in 1908, also contains the inscription "The Blind Beadworker" and "Flambeau". [Internet Image]

In the July 12, 1884 edition of *The Florence Mining News* it was noted that "Some of the circus sharpers beat Edwards, a poor Indian, out of a small sum of money."

In the same issue a brief article stated that "Farmer Miller, near Bad Water, has a nice little nook in the woods. He has nearly 23 acres cleared and says crops never

looked better. The animals of the forest and the Indians are his only neighbors."

In the September 6, 1884 issue of *The Florence Mining News* under a headline reading "An Indian Funeral" it was reported that "Negaunee's son ran from Badwater to Chicagon Lake, about twenty miles, on Tuesday night, to inform his red brethren and sisters that Jim Tenagon's wife was dying of consumption [tuberculosis]."

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“On Wednesday a delegation of bucks, squaws and papooses started for Badwater on foot to assist at the funeral. They stopped in Florence to lay in stores for the ‘festivities.’

“A funeral among the Indians in this region is a grand affair, celebrated by a week of dancing, drinking, eating, fighting and yelling. They discount the most approved Irish wake.”

In the November 19, 1887 edition of *The Florence Mining News* under a headline reading “A Mixed Marriage” a reporter noted that Joseph Baker, a young Frenchman, was united in marriage with Checota, “a full blooded Indian maiden” at 1:30 p.m. on November 15 in Justice Huff’s office. Such mixed marriages were not common.

The bride was identified as “the comely daughter of ‘Egonetic’, a well-known Badwater Indian, and ‘Paltier’, his wife.”

Checota “was born at Badwater Indian village, on the Menominee River, near Spread Eagle Lake, some seventeen or eighteen summers ago. She cannot speak a word of English but understands the French language perfectly.

“Mr. Baker was born at Green Bay and is 23 years of age. He is a miner and is employed in one of the mines at Iron Mountain.

“The young couple first met with each other last summer and the acquaintance soon ripened into love.

“The ceremony was witnessed by Jerome Decota, of Badwater, and John M. Saxton, of this city [*Florence*]. The former is a son of Decota, a veteran trapper who is known throughout the entire northern country.

“‘Old Decota,’ as he is always called, is supposed to be the oldest person living in the United States. He is 120 years of age and is said to be hale and vigorous as most

men of 60 years. The veteran trapper lives at White Rapids on the Menominee River.

“Mr. Baker and his dusky bride will make their home at Iron Mountain. Asked by a MINING NEWS reporter as to whether the couple would be obliged to be remarried according to the Indian custom, an old Badwater Indian replied: ‘No, that is not necessary. An Injun in Injun fashion, but when a white man marries a squaw the marriage ceremony must be according to the white man’s fashion.’”

A hunting accident involving Samuel Negaunee, “an Indian residing at the Badwater reservation”, was reported in the August 6, 1896 issue of *The Iron Mountain Press*.

Negaunee “was mistaken for a deer by some other illegal hunter last Friday night and peppered with buck and fine shot. It seems that Sam was also engaged in violating the game laws at the time, his headlight being mistaken for the eyes of a deer. The wounded man was brought to St. George’s hospital, where an examination proved his injuries to be not of a very serious nature.”

An article in the August 27, 1896 edition of *The Iron Mountain Press*, taken from *The Florence Mining News*, noted that “two Iron Mountain gentlemen, D.A. Graham and A.E. Robbins, discovered an Indian burial ground on the island in North Lake, Spread Eagle.

“While they were excavating a cellar for a small building, last Friday, a quantity of human bones were [*sic – was*] found.”

A headline in the February 6, 1902 issue of the *Iron Mountain Press* read: Indian Is Frozen to Death.

“Jerome Dakota, an Indian formerly living at Badwater, was found frozen to death last Friday [*January 31, 1902*]. He spent the day here and started for home late. He must have fallen asleep and was

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found dead on the road in the morning. Deceased was about eighty years old and a well-known trapper and guide, making his living that way.”

Louis Tramontin must have been the first person to happen upon Jerome

Dakota’s frozen body along the road. Tramontin “relieved” Dakota of his shotgun which was donated to the Menominee Range Historical Museum during Iron Mountain’s centennial celebration in 1979 and is now featured in the gun exhibit.



**Menominee Joe (left) and Jerome Dakota, Indians from the Badwater Indian village, paddled their birch bark canoe near Eagle Island in the Spread Eagle Chain of Lakes, Wisconsin, during the summer of 1896. The canoe is similar to birchbark canoes sold by the Badwater Indians at a cost of one dollar per foot. [Walter Weber]**

Again quoting from *The Florence Mining News*, *The Iron Mountain Press* noted in its May 15, 1902 edition that “a party of Badwater Indians, four in number, brought in twenty wolf hides, Thursday morning, and received the handsome sum of \$120 in bounty money from County Clerk Pontbriand.

“The hides were all of young wolves and it is a fact and has been a matter of comment on previous occasions that all hides brought in for this purpose have been young ones, showing that the clever Lo [Indian] has either a wolf farm somewhere in the forests or else keeps tab on the wolf dens and plucks the same when the right

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moment arrives. Either plan reflects credit on the cunning of these dusky financiers, and show conclusively that they are not degenerating in this particular characteristic.”

The headlines in the January 13, 1910 issue of the *Iron Mountain Press* read: Aged Indian Dead: John Negaunee Meets Violent Death in Baraga Co.: His Wife, Daughter and James Wawasong [*sic*] Jailed at L’Anse; Former Resident Badwater.

According to the accompanying article, “John Negaunee, a veteran member of the band of Indians who made their home at the Badwater reservation, about two miles north of this city, some ten or fifteen years ago, was killed at Assinins, Baraga county, on New Year’s day, and his wife and daughter Maggie and Jas. Wasuwasong [*sic* – *Wawasong*] have been jailed at L’Anse charged with his death.

The account of the incident quoted from *The L’Anse Sentinel* was included, containing the following particulars:

“John Negaunee, 83 years of age, who lives with his wife and daughter at Assinins [*sic* – *Assassins*], was killed on New Year’s day, and as a result, Mrs. Negaunee, his daughter Maggie, aged 30 years, and James Wawasong are being held in the county jail. James Wawasong’s story of the crime is related as follows:

“Mr. Negaunee was out of the house on the day above named, and sometime during the afternoon James came down to the house, having with him a bottle of alcohol. The women and James proceeded to make merry. Shortly after Mr. Negaunee came in, and the story runs to the effect that he objected to the young man’s being there. Another tale is to the effect that his wife demanded money of the husband.

“At any rate, the women got into a tussle with Mr. Negaunee and threw him down.

While he was down the girl jumped on his head, when Mr. Wawasong pulled them off, and after this the victim was quiet. This tussle happened about five o’clock in the afternoon.

“When it came time to go to bed, the women went to pick Mr. Negaunee up and found that he departed from this life. Dr. R.S. Buckland, of Baraga, conducted the post mortem examination; the inquest has been postponed for about two weeks.

“This is as far as the case has gone yet, but the officers are steadily working and expect to obtain more information, if such is to be had.”

Two weeks later, in a follow-up article appearing in the January 27, 1910 issue of the *Iron Mountain Press*, reported the following:

“The inquest of John Negaunee, who died on New Year’s night at Assinins [*sic* - *Assassins*], was called by Coroner William Hugo, at the Baraga town hall. Mrs. Negaunee, daughter Maggie, and Jas. Wawasong, who were present when the old man died, were on hand and gave their testimony.

“Dr. Buckland Testified that Negaunee had several bad bruises on the head, but these could not have proved fatal to him. He also said that Negaunee was troubled with paralysis, which might have resulted in his death.

“Wawasong testified that all implicated in this death were intoxicated on the day mentioned and while Negaunee was mixed up in a fight with his daughter, Maggie, the blows he received on the head could not have killed him.

“After reviewing the testimony the jury rendered a verdict to the effect that they could find no reason to detain the prisoners, and they were discharged.”

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