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## Historic trail system

November 25, 2015

J.C. CAVILL , Special to the Journal

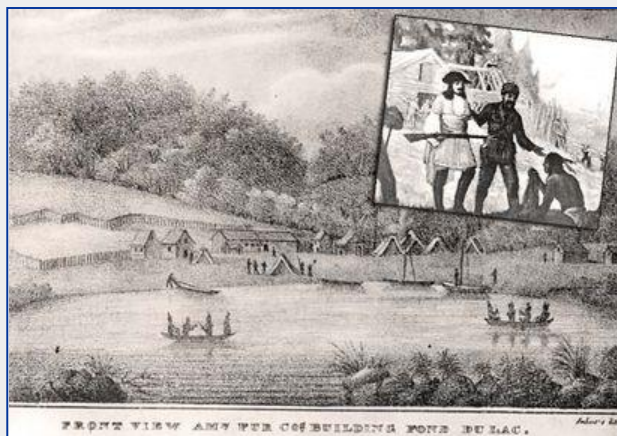
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By J.C. CAVILL

Superintendent, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs

Headquarters at Ashland, Wisconsin in the 1930s

### Article Photos



Above, the American Fur Co. buildings at Fon du Lac (no...)

From the archives of the J.M. Longyear Research Library.

Many hundreds of years ago, before Europeans came to live in this area, the Indians rarely traveled extensively on land except to portage their canoes from one body of water to another, thus cutting off considerable distance. Game was plentiful on the banks of rivers and lakes and so the Indians preferred traveling on water rather than on land.

The early Indian history of Upper Michigan is largely the history of the Chippewa or Ojibwa nation. Other groups contributing to this history were the Ottawa, Huron, Potawatomi, Menominee, Sauk, and Fox.

They are all of the Algonquin group, so classified because of the great similarity in languages. French explorers who learned the languages of the Huron and Ottawa found they could make themselves understood by other Algonquin groups.

Indian legend fixes the origin of the Ojibwa in the eastern part of the United States. By the end of the 15th century, they were at Chequamegon Point near Ashland, Wisconsin. To protect themselves from their enemies, the Ojibwa were forced to move to Madeline Island, one of the Apostle Island group.

They lived there for three generations or until about 1600 when they moved back to the mainland. Once again on the mainland, they were harassed by the Sioux. They soon departed for the region of Sault Ste.

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Marie, where they were visited by Nicolet in 1634.

While at the Soo the Ojibwa were subject to constant Iroquois raids. As a politically loose-knit nation, bands such as the L'Anse, Lac Vieux Desert, or Lac du Flambeau would often go off by themselves.

These were not mass migrations but rather a movement of a large portion of the nation. These bands had favorite regions such as Bay Mills, Keweenaw Bay, Ontonagon, Lac Vieux Desert and Lac du Flambeau in which they preferred to hunt. They maintained communication with one another along woodland trails.

When the Europeans arrived in the Lake Superior region, they traveled by routes already established by the Indians. Nicolet reached Sault Ste. Marie in 1634. His trail was by way of the Ottawa River and Lake Nipissing to the Georgian Bay.

He was stopped by fast water in the St. Mary's River, as were Raymbault and Jacques, the Jesuit priests, in 1641. By 1659, Radisson and Grasseilliers, two French fur traders, penetrated into Lake Superior and wintered at the head of Chequamegon Bay near Ashland.

The early exploration voyages of the French were government projects, and politics played an important role in the selection of the leaders. Many of the leaders were "gentlemen" and reports exist of men with powdered wigs whose body servants would spray them from time to time with perfume.

Naturally these explorers had to travel along routes such as the rivers and lakes, on which a large amount of equipment could be carried. It would have been impossible for them to follow overland trails.

Soon after the French arrived, a new type of man developed. This was the wood ranger. The wood ranger learned to live in the Indian fashion and could travel the trails with only a bag of corn and a sack of bear grease for food supplies.

The rest of his pack consisted of a blanket and perhaps an extra pair of moccasins. Unfortunately, most of these men were illiterate and left no record. The official explorers gave them little credit in their reports but a fairly accurate map of the Upper Peninsula region had been published before the official discovery visit of Nicolet to the Soo in 1634.

The Jesuit missionaries and the fur traders began establishing missions and trading posts in the Upper Peninsula. Marquette established a mission and a stockade at the Soo in 1668. Jesuit missionaries Menard and Allouez had established missions at L'Anse and La Pointe four years before this.

The traders and Jesuits had one common cause, which was to restore peace among the Indian tribes. The protection of the French and the possession of firearms gave the Ojibwa a feeling of security from their enemies.

This led to the establishment of more permanent camping grounds throughout the Upper Peninsula and to the establishment of a system of trails connecting these grounds.

The trails assumed a greater importance now because an active commerce began to be carried on between the traders and the Indians. The Indians traded furs for guns, ammunition, knives, axes, cloth, trinkets, and liquor. In 1694 the Northwest Fur Company was established and commerce began in earnest. It is recorded that in 1699, two hundred canoes laden with furs passed Mackinac Island.

Many of these trails can still be seen. Although numerous trails branched off in all directions, some of the more important ones are the routes for the highways we use today.

The Indian War Trail was used by the Ojibwa in times of strife with the Sioux. The War Trail ran east of the Montreal River and on to the Porcupine Mountains, then to Ontonagon to the Copper Country and from there to L'Anse and Marquette.

Another famous trail was the Moccasin Mike Trail. This trail extended from the mouth of the St. Louis River, down to Wisconsin Point, then along the southern shore of Lake Superior to La Pointe, Bayfield,

Ashland, Ontonagon, and the Copper Country. A branch of this trail led south along the Montreal River to central Wisconsin and was the route of fur traders from Lake Superior to Green Bay.

This trail was the land route east and south and was much used by the early missionaries, traders and pioneer settlers. It became the regular mail route between all south shore points.

Many of the old Indian trails have become permanent highways. One of these led from Chequamegon Bay to Lac du Flambeau and now is part of our present US 2 highway, which runs through Hurley, Ironwood, Bessemer, Wakefield, and Marenisco where it turns south to Lac du Flambeau. It is possible that this old trail intersected the L'Anse-Lac Vieux Desert trail near Watersmeet. The Indians called this trail Ka-ke-way-wa-jwie-me-con, meaning "over the ridge trail."

East and west travel was generally by boat along the shores of Lakes Michigan and Superior. With few exceptions, Indian trails handled north and south travel. Exceptions include the Marquette-L'Anse Trail, which US 41 follows very closely, and the L'Anse-Ontonagon Trail, which is the path of the present highway there.


Sault Ste. Marie was at the intersection of three important trails. The St. Mary's River Trail followed the river to DeTour and was important because of the fast water.



The old Mackinac Trail led south to St. Ignace, and another trail ran westerly along the Lake Superior shore to Whitefish Point. From Munising there was a trail to Escanaba following the drainage of the Whitefish River which empties into Little Bay de Noc near Rapid River. Another trail ran from Munising to Manistique and followed the drainage of the Indian River. These courses eliminated heavy grades.

L'Anse was a converging point for trails leading to Marquette, Ontonagon and Lac Vieux Desert. Many portions of the Lac Vieux Desert Trail can still be traveled. Another trail led from Copper Harbor through Hancock and Houghton and intersected the L'Anse-Ontonagon Trail near Lake Gerald. A trail also led south from Ontonagon to Lac Vieux Desert.

This system of trails furnished overland transportation for the Indians for centuries. It was readily adapted during succeeding centuries for commerce and travel by all who came to the Upper Peninsula and developed into much of our present highway system.

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