



Monday, November 14, 2011

Ho Chunk survey Summer effigy mounds; seeds scattered in park

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SUMNER - Town of Sumner officials, neighbors, representatives of the Ho Chunk Nation, members of the Fort Atkinson High School Environmental Club and other guests came together Saturday to survey newly identified effigy mounds and to help restore a prairie on former Native American powwow grounds.

The Town of Sumner Parks Committee arranged the event, with guest speaker Jay Toth, tribal archaeologist for the Ho Chunk Nation, explaining the significance of the mounds, created about 1,000 years ago.

The mound surveying and ceremony took place on an old farm located at N1480 Draves Road, while the prairie planting was held at nearby Carcajou Park, which served as a powwow site through the end of the 1800s.

When the first Anglo settlers came to the Lake Koshkonong area in the 1830s, they noted that the largest native settlement in the area was located on Carcajou Point, a limestone point that stuck out into the then-very shallow portion of the lake.

It was called "White Crow's Village" after the Ho Chunk chief who led the group that summered on Carcajou Point at that time.

When members of the Ho Chunk Nation were forcibly removed to Kansas after the Blackhawk War of 1832, they walked back to Wisconsin and settled mostly north of Madison.

Nonetheless, some groups returned to the Koshkonong area through the 1930s to fish in the spring and trap in the fall.

The area at the end of Carcajou Point was farmed for around 150 years; three years ago, the landowner donated roughly 4.5 acres of land to the Town of Sumner for use as a park.

Because of its historical significance, this area is listed on both the state and national Registers of Historic Places.

So far, little has been done with the land, but Saturday's seed-sowing ceremony marked the start of the process to return it to its native prairie, which the Native Americans maintained for thousands of years.

"This is all prairie," Toth said at the old farm site where several mounds were found. "This land is manmade - it was burned regularly to create the prairie."

Toth said that a lot of history can be discovered around Lake Koshkonong, including the mounds at this site.

"You are standing on a site that is more than 1,000 years old," Toth said, inviting guests to envision what the area looked like when the Ho Chunk used this as a gathering place.

In ways, it looked much different - no electric lines, no paved roads, no white farmhouses or red barns. But in ways, it looked much the same, he noted. The prairie, though overgrown, is still here. The mounds, though some have been damaged through agriculture or building, largely are still here. And the lake is still a local gathering place.

For many thousands of years, the Ho Chunk came to the Lake Koshkonong area to harvest the wild rice, which grew in the then-shallow, undammed lake, and to hunt the animals also drawn to the rice and water source.

"Swamps had a lot of diversity," Toth said. "They were the Walmart of those times."

Effigy mounds, Toth said, always are associated with water. They carry a religious significance too, as well as serving to bring people together, he said.



EFFIGY MOUND SURVEY — Town of Sumner officials, neighbors, representatives of the Ho Chunk Nation, members of Fort Atkinson High School Environmental Club and others came together Saturday to survey newly identified effigy mounds. Attendees also helped plant seeds to restore the prairie on the former Native American powwow grounds. The Environmental Club assists Kira Kaufmann with measuring and documenting one of the mound. Below, Katie Lowisz of the Environmental Club assists in sowing prairie seeds. — Daily Union photos by Pam Wilson.



He likened the mounds to a church with stained glass windows telling important stories from the Bible. The shapes of the effigy mounds tell something about the Ho Chunk culture.

And as an oldtime church is paired with a graveyard full of tombstones memorializing loved family members who have passed on, many of the mounds are burial sites, as well.

"They can no longer speak to you, but they speak to you through these mounds," Toth said.

Many of these mounds recalled stories from the stars above, or comets, Toth noted. The famous Native American warrior Tecumseh's name, "The Panther That Crossed the Sky," recalls a comet.

"Whatever they saw above, that's what they created on land below," Toth said.

The Native American game of lacrosse, called the Game of Creation, also has religious significance, Toth said, wielding a lacrosse stick to illustrate.

The French explorers who first encountered lacrosse commented on the game, which had an unlimited number of players and no "field," "court" or other boundaries.

This reflects the stars above, which seem numberless and stretch over vast space, and also plays into the Ho Chunk understanding of creation.

"NASA scientists recently discovered that the basis of DNA came from the comets and meteorites that acted as seeds of life, bringing life to this planet," Toth said. "In a sense, the Ho Chunk already knew this."

He said that the Ho Chunk culture, while semi-nomadic and different than that of the Anglo settlers, still was complex, and its mound-building accomplishments reflected that sophistication.

Toth also explained the difference between effigy and other types of mounds.

He said that some of the effigy mounds show clan symbols, such as bears and birds. He described a series of bear mounds near Wisconsin Dells that, when viewed from above, look just like bears walking through the woods.

"Conical mounds are like the stars in the sky, and linear mounds are meteorities," he said.

Many mounds started as burial mounds. Some were completed over the course of a couple of summers, but the layering of some mounds reveals that they took around 75 years to make.

Toth said it is sad to see how some mounds have been destroyed during the past century-and-a-half through plowing, building or digging.

"How you care for the mounds, how you care for the dead, says a lot about your society. One day, I won't be here and younger people will have to carry on," he said, expressing the hope that the mounds will be preserved and maintained.

John Molinaro, chairman of the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors, also spoke briefly, saying that Jefferson County once was covered with up to 1,000 mounds, with 500 along the shores of Lake Koshkonong alone.

Many remain today, although they might be unrecognized and overgrown.

Not all have been surveyed, but the county is working, along with smaller municipalities such as the Town of Sumner, to make sure that the remaining mounds are identified and preserved.

Close to three-dozen mounds are located on county-owned land, including 11 mounds in Jefferson County's Indian Mounds Park on the east side of the lake. There also are 10 conical mounds located in the Garman Preserve in the Waterloo area and there is at least one in Dorothy Carnes County Park west of Fort Atkinson.

"There are several here that we know of," Molinaro said of the mounds being surveyed Saturday. "There may even be more."

Molinaro said that the Jefferson County area is probably second only to the Madison lakes in terms of the prevalence of Native American mounds.

"There are also remnants in Indian Mounds Park of an ancient trail that they'd take from here back to the Mississippi area," Molinaro said.

The county board chair said that Lake Koshkonong was of vital importance to the Native Americans who lived here.

"That's why the Blackhawk War was fought here," he said. "Lake Koshkonong was very important land to them. They'd literally been coming here for thousands of years."

Also present was Kira Kaufmann, who has been researching effigy mounds in Wisconsin for the past decade. Assisted by students from the Fort Atkinson High School Environmental Club, she helped survey the mounds at the old farm site.

She said that new technology has made locating, measuring and studying such mounds much easier, even in overgrown areas.

"Now we're able to use ground-penetrating radar," she said. "We don't excavate them anymore."

She explained that since 1985, excavation has been illegal under Wisconsin law. The state's Burial Sites Preservation Act sets the assumption that all mounds have the potential for being burial mounds and thus cannot be excavated or built on.

From the old farm site, attendees traveled the short distance to Carcajou Park to learn a little about the history of this site before assisting in re-establishing a prairie there.

In 1832 when the Winnebago (the name by which the Ho Chunk Nation was referred to by the U.S. government for many years) Treaty was signed in Beloit, Chief White Crow brought the Rock River bands of Native Americans up to Carcajou Point, which became one of the largest Ho Chunk villages in the state with more than

