

The Lakes and Their People



*A Collection of Legends from the Great
Lakes Region*

The First Nations of the Great Lakes region include the Ojibwe, Missisauga Ojibwe, Iroquois, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Ottawa Wyandot, Delaware, Menominee, Meskwaki Sauk, Sioux, Miami, and Shawnee tribes, who had inhabited this land for the past 10,000 years, or perhaps even longer. These tribes brought with them the first civilizations to our region, learned how to work with copper, to cultivate and work with the land while leaving it plentiful for the future. These tribes make the history, the myths, the legends of the Great Lakes region, and these are important things to remember.

This is a small collection of legends from the Great Lakes Tribes, with an emphasis on stories by the Ojibwe, Menominee, and Iroquois tribes.

Menominee: The Menominee have always found their home in Wisconsin. The tribe was mainly settled along the Menominee river. They were a friend to the French, often trading furs, and even standing by the French's side during a war with the Mesquaki tribe, also of Wisconsin. Following the end of the Revolutionary war, the Menominee were reluctant to make any peace with the United States, but eventually they were moved to reservations in Minnesota.

Iroquois: The Iroquois originally held territory in New York, south of Lake Ontario. While their territory slowly expanded to encompass much of the southern shores of Lakes Michigan and Erie, for the most part, the people still physically lived in northern New York. However, they were forced back into their original territories following wars with the Algonquin and British colonialism. And following the Revolutionary War, and the defeat of the British, with whom the Iroquois had sided, much of their territory was signed away to the United States, and many Iroquois retreated to their territories in Canada. Despite their American territory being taken, many different subgroups of Iroquois were able to remain in New York.

Ojibwe: The Ojibwe may have first been settled along the shores of the Atlantic Ocean or the Hudson Bay, though they eventually made their way inland. Their territory expanded from the shores of Lake Michigan and Huron, to a point north of the shores of Lake Superior. Over time and through various periods of war, the Ojibwe expanded their territory further east, west, and south, til they controlled most of Michigan and much of southern Ontario. During the fur trade, and the European Invasion, many Ojibwas stayed in their native territory, save for two small bands, which were moved onto reservations.



The Great Flood

Menominee

To take revenge on the Ana-Maqkiu who killed his brother, Manabush invented a ball game, and requested that another tribe play against the Ana-Maqkiu. At once, the chiefs of these evil tribes came out of the ground as bears, one grey and one white, and began to play. Manabush sat and watched the game progress through the day until night fell. Then he thought he would play a trick on the bears. So, he went to the middle of the field and turned into a tall tree.

The next morning, when awoken by the rising sun, the white and grey bear both saw the tree in the middle of the field, and began to argue. The white bear claimed that the tree had been there, while the grey bear claimed it had not. While they were arguing, Manabush took out his bow and arrow, and shot both of the bears, before transforming back into himself and running for a nearby sandbar.

The Ana-Maqkiu took the wounded chiefs back to their wigwam, and called forth a flood from the earth to kill Manabush. Before the flood could kill him, he snuck into the wigwam and killed the chiefs, and began to run once again. He ran faster and faster than the waters could rise, eventually reaching the top of a mountain, and the top of a tall tree which he commanded to grow taller. When the tree would rise no more, the Great Spirit commanded the waters to stop.

Now Manabush sat in his tree, surrounded by animals that had survived the flood. "Oh! Come to me, and be my brother, dive to the bottom and bring me some earth," he commanded them. First the otter tried, but drowned. Next was the mink, but alas, he was drowned as well. Finally, the muskrat took his turn, and Manabush waited.

When the muskrat reappeared, he too, had drowned, but in his claws was the tiniest bit of mud. Manabush breathed life back into the muskrat, as thanks for his help, and rubbed the mud between his hands. Then he threw it upon the water, and land sprung from where once had been waves, and the world was reborn.

The Legend of the Niagara

Ojibwe

There once lived, on the peak of a mountain, a father and his five daughters. From their home upon the summit, they could oftentimes see the glimmer of the sea on the horizon. On a bright day, the youngest daughter called to her sisters, "Come! Let us run to the sea, to play where the foam tips the waves, where the water crashes and roars!"

And so the sisters flew across the plains on the breeze, with wings of wind, moccasins of water drops, and robes of blue and the palest green. As they made their way to the sea, laughing and dancing all the while, they came through fields and hills and forest, until finally, the sisters reached a tall, jagged peak, from which they were afraid to leap.

The youngest looked down, and with a smile, cried, "Alas, sisters, we have come so far! Let's continue, else our father will laugh!" And her sisters smiled at her, and at once they leaped over the precipice, and floated gently down on their wings, laughing all the while.

Upon landing at the bottom, the sisters decided that it had been such fun to do the first time, and so they continued to jump and leap among the water and foam, and so named it Niagara Falls.





The Warrior Maiden

Iroquois

There were invaders to Iroquois lands, not white men, but a neighboring tribe, who burned the land at their leisure. The Iroquois hid from the invaders, while their homelands were wasted away at the hands of the people who did not belong. The tribe was safe in their hiding space upon a cliff in a cave, but they were quickly running out of provisions. The only options were to starve, or to look for food and risk being discovered.

One night, a young girl named Aliquipiso came forth and told the chief that the good spirits had told her of a way to trick the invaders. "Watch for me and be ready, for I will lead the invaders to the bottom of the cliffs, where you will be able to destroy them with sharp and heavy boulders." And so, Aliquipiso set out from their hiding space and made her way down into her homelands. She was captured by the invaders quickly.

"Show us where your people hide, and we shall adopt you into our tribe."

"I will not show you the way."

The invaders were not satisfied with this answer, and the young girl was tied to a tree stump and tortured with fire, as was the custom of the invaders. Aliquipiso showed great courage in the face of the fire, so much so that her captors were surprised. Finally, she pretended to weaken from the pain. "Please! Do not hurt me any longer! I will show you the way!"

When night came, the invaders bound Aliquipiso's hands, and had her lead the way. She had told them that her tribe was sleeping, that she would lead them to a secret passage that would take them to the heart of their camp.

She took them through the forest, through dense thicket and coarse underbrush, until she reached the base of the cliff. "Come close, and I will show you the passage."

The invaders huddled close around Aliquipiso, and suddenly she cried to the heavens,

"The enemies are here! Destroy them!"

Her tribe above destroyed the enemy below with stones and huge heavy boulders, freeing their land from the threat of invasion, and from any future threat from the invading tribe.

The Sun Snarer

Menominee

A boy lay weeping in the forest, for his brothers had not allowed him to hunt with them, and he felt that he'd been wronged. He lay under his beaver-skin robe, bow and arrows neatly beside, and wept, while the sun crept ever higher overhead. And the sun smiled down upon the weeping boy, and sent forth a ray of sunshine that burnt his robe so that he was no longer covered. The sun laughed, while the boy weeped stronger than before.

"Why have you treated me so cruelly?" he cried. "You have burnt my robe, when that was not deserved! Why must you treat me so!"

The sun merely smiled, and continued his journey across the sky.

So the boy picked up his bow, and his arrows, and his burnt robe, and ran home to his wigwam, where his elder sister discovered him weeping. He told her the details of how he had been wronged, before he turned and cried himself to sleep.

When he awoke, he asked his sister for a strand of her hair. Though a strange request, his sister obliged, and the boy thanked her. He pulled it gently, stretching it bit by bit, until it reached from the tips of his fingers on his left hand, to the tips of his fingers on the right.

He set out then, finding the path where the sun touched the earth, and found the place where the sun had burnt his robe the day before, and stretched the string across the path in a noose. When the sun reached the noose, it caught around his neck, choking him until he nearly lost his breath.

The sun's light went out, and he called out, "Help me, cut this sting before it kills me." All had given up, until the little mouse came forward. It was hard, because the string was burning hot, and embedded deep into the sun's neck, but eventually, the string was cut. The sun took in a great breath, and light returned.

Before he returned home, the boy looked up to the sun, and said, "There is no reason to be needlessly cruel; for it, you have been punished, and now you may go." The boy was satisfied with what he had done, and the sun burned him no more.





The Origin of the Pleiades

Iroquois

A large party of the Iroquois tribe were traveling through good hunting lands, until they came upon a large and beautiful lake. The resources around this lake were very plentiful, so the chief of the tribe settled them there for the winter.

All of the lodges had been built, and the hunting was prosperous, but as the autumn wore on, the children of the tribe grew bored. So, they took to dancing for their own amusement. There was little to do when they were settled, so the children found spots near the lake to play their game. Days passed, and the children were having a great deal of fun, when a strange man approached them. He was very old, dressed in white feathers, His hair glowed silver, and he gave them a quiet warning. "You must stop your dancing, or a great evil will befall you." The children did little to heed his warning, and he came to them again and again to warn them.

The children soon grew weary of their game, however, and one of the young boys suggested that next time they meet upon the lakeshore, they bring a feast.

Each of the children went home to ask their parents for a little food to bring to their meeting, but none was granted. Parents would prefer not to waste, and prefer their children to eat at home.

So when they next met, they met on empty stomachs. They would have been happy to eat before they began to dance, but that would not be the case.

One day, soon after this, the children once again found themselves dancing. But as they danced, they began to slowly rise up into the air. They were so empty and light without having had a meal before, that they began to float away. They did not know what was happening, but knew it was strange, and all agreed not to look back as they went up. A woman who saw the children floating away ran swiftly back to the camp, and their parents watched as the children flew high into the heavens, calling after them all the while.

And then the children reached the sky, and became the stars we today know as the Pleiades.

The Sleeping Bear

Ojibwe

A mother bear, named Mishe-Mokwa, lived on the western shore of the great lake with her two cubs. One day, early in the dry summer, a fire began in the forest they called home. The family looked for shelter from the flames as many places as they could, but there was none to be had. Finally, Mishe-Mokwa made the decision to set out into the lake. The journey seemed impossible, and their hearts were filled with fear, but the family began to swim.

After many hours, the flames had disappeared behind them, and the shoreline ahead had appeared. The journey was long and very difficult on Mishe-Mokwa and on her cubs. As they grew closer and closer to shore, the cubs fell further and further behind their mother, until they were no longer within her sight.

When Mishe-Mokwa reached the shore, she sat and watched the waves to wait for her cubs. She waited for long days and many nights. When the cubs still did not appear, Mishe-Mokwa lay down to sleep upon the shore, and wait for them forever.

Upon seeing this and sensing the mother's love and longing for her lost cubs, the Great Spirit Manitou caused her cubs to rise where they'd slipped underneath the waves, and named the new islands North and South Manitou. To honor Mishe-Mokwa, and allow her to maintain her vigil, the Great Manitou covered her with sand and thus formed the Sleeping Bear Dune.



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