



Canku Ota



(Many Paths)

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Myths and Legends of Wisconsin's Waterfalls - Part One

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It was the belief of the old Indians of Wisconsin that the waterfalls, which occur in some of its streams, were the creations of powerful spirits. Some falls were the dwelling places of spirits, the water forming a curtain to hide their secret medicine making and incantations from the eyes of man. Nenibozho, hero-god of the Chippewas of the old northwest, constructed the waterfalls in northern Wisconsin to prevent the beavers, upon whom he was waging war, from obstructing the flow of some of the rivers.

In the mythology of the Winnebago the waterfalls, like the springs, lakes, streams and rapids, were associated with water spirits. The knowledge of the care of such places was within the province of their water spirit clan. Water was sacred to them as it also was to wolf clan of this tribe. Tobacco and other offerings were made to these spirits at their dens or retreats. Ulysses S. White, a Winnebago, gives their name for a waterfall as 'nee-ho-har-nee-la' and says that the falls were the homes of the water spirits. John V. Satterice, aged savant of the Menominee, gives their name for a waterfall as 'nay-pay' or 'pa-pay-nan-no.' Rough rapids were named 'pak-qua-tick', meaning 'where the water falls.' Falls were sometimes spoken of as 'talking waters,' they were hallowed shrines, from the spirit 'voices' in the falling water the Indians received inspiration and encouragement. The Chippewa name for a waterfall is 'ka-ka-bi-ka.' Another name sometimes used in speaking of waterfall is 'pangissin,' meaning 'it falls.' In their home country of northern Wisconsin are some of the most beautiful and interesting waterfalls in the state.

Indian fairy-folk, commonly spoken of as 'Little Indians,' frequent the vicinity of waterfalls. The Chippewa's name for them is 'munidogewazas,' or 'little manitou (spirit) men.' Sister M. Macaria, St. Mary's School, Odanah, in a recent letter to Charles E Brown (May 24, 1938) mentions these fairy-folk. "These little men roam about near bodies of water. Bad River Falls in the Bad River is one of their favorite haunts, Marble Point is another, and the Apostle Islands are one of their main 'stomping grounds.' They may be seen from a distance, but to approach them is an impossibility. These little men give great power if dreamed about." An old Chippewa traveling years ago over the trail from Lac Courte Oreilles country to Lake Superior, saw a gathering of these 'puckwidjinees' near the base of a waterfall. They were dressed like Indians, apparently holding council. He very wisely did not attempt to approach them.

The Miami Indians, who in 1670-71 had a village on the Fox River near Portage, Wisconsin, had a legend recorded by C.C. Trowbridge: (from Meeameer Traditions, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1938)

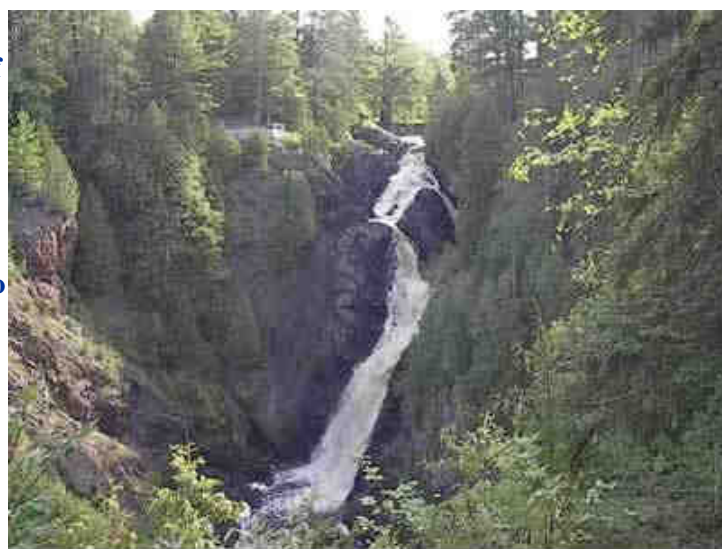
"Very many ages ago one of the Tahingwazau, Young Thunder or son of the Thunder, went to the falls of the Niagara for the purpose of destroying the Munetoo that reigns in that tremendous work of nature, but after a very long and severe conflict he was overpowered, made prisoner, and remains there to this day. His brothers, ten in number, armed

with war clubs set out to rescue the captive Thunder spirit. They were half birds, half men. They came upon a Miami hunter, and they transformed him into a similar shape to their own and he accompanied them. Arriving at the waterfall they attacked the Munetoo, an immense horned black serpent, at the entrance of his cave, but the blows of their war clubs had little effect on him. The Miami Indian then tried his club on the monster and killed him. The great noise of the water, caused him to be carried a great distance where he fell to earth unconscious. The Thunders revived the fallen Indian. They removed the head and the horns of the monster and went away. They searched in vain for their prisoner brother. They thanked the Miami for his assistance and changed him to his former shape. He returned to his village where he told of his adventure and was ever after esteemed as a great warrior."

Wisconsin Waterfalls

Such myths, legends and stories as it has been possible to obtain from the Indians and other sources about the many beautiful waterfalls in Wisconsin are interesting and deserve to be recorded for the use of the students of Wisconsin Indian folklore and ways.

Big and Little Manitou Falls. These waterfalls are located in Pattison State Park 12 miles south of the City of Superior in Douglas County. "The Black River at this point flowing Northward to Lake Superior, breaks over the trap rock ledge in a series of two falls, the first or Little Manitou Falls, about 30 feet in height, the second, Big Manitou Falls plunges into a mountainous gorge with a sheer drop of 165 feet. This beautiful park was the gift to the State of Wisconsin given by Martin H. Pattison, a former member of The Wisconsin Archeological Society. This largest and most beautiful waterfall in Wisconsin is dedicated to the Great Spirit, Gitchee Manido, and was according to the Chippewa Indians, one of his greatest creations. "Out of its thundering waters," writes Fred L. Holmes (Alluring Wisconsin), "Came the voices which held the Indians in superstitious awe. No alter of Nature could have a more artful setting to inspire its visitors with veneration. Against such natural wonders the early missionaries among the Indians had to contend."



Big Manitou Falls is the highest falls in Wisconsin at 165 feet it is the 4th highest falls East of the Rockies. Located 12 miles South of Superior Wisconsin in Pattison State Park on the Black River.

"Waters of the Black River, approaching the falls, seem to sense the compelling mystery of the fearful plunge and hurry faster as each step of the precipice is neared. On the crest of the brink the waters roll and toss, but momentarily are transformed into a white spray that turns more vaporous down the glide. The receiving basin seethes and foams like a boiling cauldron. The gorge below is very narrow for a short distance and the walls are twisted forms indicating volcanic origin."

In this foaming cataract several spirits lived. Some times, say the Indians, one could hear their voices or war songs above the roar of the Falls of the Great Spirit. Woe to those who in years past paid no heed to the warnings or commands of these spirit voices. The 'Little People,' puckwidjinees, have also been seen near this waterfall. Little Manitou Falls. A mile of winding Black River separates Little Manitou from Big Manitou Falls. Interfalls Lake, a fine body of water surrounded with a forest of white and Norway pine, lies between them. Several fine rapids are in the stream below the lake and between its inlet and Little Manitou Falls. Big Manitou falls over the rocks in a very long sheet of white water; Little Manitou is separated into two sheets of tumbling water by a great rock surface between. The Little Manitou, like its sister falls, is also sacred to the Great Spirit. In its vicinity the Chippewa deity Nenibozho (Winnebougjou) sometimes rested when on his hunting expeditions. Because of his custom of resting here, the two parts of this 35-foot fall are sometimes referred to as the 'blankets of Nenibozho.'

Copper Falls. This waterfall is located in Copper Falls State Park is described and illustrated in a recent folder issued by the Wisconsin Conservation Commission. "Four miles from the city of Mellen in Ashland County is located an area containing one of the most remarkable series of cascades, waterfalls and gorge scenery in the Lakes State region. For years Copper Falls has been known as a recreational place"

"The Bad River, rising on the divide between the Mississippi and St. Lawrence watersheds, flows north into Lake Superior. At the point where this stream breaks over the Keeweenaw Trap Ledge occurs this series of waterfalls.

Here the river plunges into a most scenic gorge, only to be joined a short way down by the sheer plunge of waters from the Tylers Fork, flowing into the Bad River from the east. The principle falls on the Bad River, because of the 'copper colored' rocks which flank it, has long been known as Copper Falls; the spring fed falls and cascades on Tylers Fork are known as Brownstone Falls. The river has carved its way through the solid wall to form a last bit of rocky grander before it flows out into the more gently sloping plains below." Copper Falls is 40 feet and Brownstone Falls 30 feet high. The waters of the Bad Rive are of a deep coppery color.

Copper Falls has been a resort of Indian people for at least several centuries. Indian arrow points and pieces of native worked copper are reported to have been found on the campsites in the vicinity. The Indians have a legend that the color of the stream and both the waterfalls is due to the blood of warriors who fell in an early conflict between the Dakota and the Chippewa. It does not explain how the stream could have retained its color for at least three hundred years. Here, according to another Indian belief, was one of the sources of the copper which Nenibozho (Winnebougou), the giant mythical blacksmith, used in his forging of implements for his red children.

A little story of Brownstone or Tylers Falls is that an Indian girl, Nessobagak (Clover), was seen by a Windigo (giant). He wished to possess the maiden. One day he pursued her through the forest. She fled before him until she could travel no more. Seeking a hiding place she went behind the waters of this fall. There he could not smell her or reach her and she escaped. The fall was called by her name.

Amnicon Falls. "One of the most beautiful spots in Wisconsin is Amnicon Falls in James Bardon Park, Fourteen miles south of Superior, where the Amnicon River spills a silvery cascade down the stair steps it has carved in living stone" (Milwaukee Journal). The Amnicon, a narrow ribbon of water at this place, follows a rather tortuous course over the pitted rocks, then falling over a low rock wall to a lower level. Pine trees and a pine forest are here.

The name Amnicon is derived from the Chippewa word 'aminikan', meaning spawning ground. This stream was one of those up which Amik, the spirit beaver, tried to escape to avoid the cultural hero, Nenibozho (Winnebougou). When prevented from ascending the Brule River, Amik tried the Amnicon.

Fred L. Holmes has written on this waterfall, 'The volume of water is small but the sight of the white mist of many hues above a channel of immutable rocks pleases the eye and stirs the imagination.'

Davis Falls. This waterfall is on the Pike River near Amberg in Marinette County. It is a turbulent cascade with rock surrounding that is very rugged and picturesque. The Pike (Kinoje) River is a tributary of the Menominee River and flows in a southeasterly direction to reach that Wisconsin-Michigan boundary stream. West of Amberg, it forks, these fork having sources in the northwestern corner of Marinette County.

The late Potawatomi chief, Simon Kahquados, furnished this legend about Davis Falls. An Ottawa hunter once found himself on the banks of the Kinoje. He had wandered far in his hunting and the close of the day was approaching. He was very tired from his walking in the brush. He knew that he was a long way from his camp and he believed himself lost. He sat down on the rocks near the riverbank. He had not rested long when he heard a voice speaking to him. It came from the waterfall. It was a friendly manido addressing him and giving him directions where to go to reach home and friends. When he had rested he took the advice of the water spirit and found a forest trail by which he returned safely to his home. The manido was Kinoje, the Pike a water deity.

Potato River Falls. This attractive waterfall is located at Gurney on the Potato River, in Iron County. This is a more or less fan-shaped or spreading fall, the water flowing over a terraced rock incline. In midsummer this scenic wonder is at its greatest beauty. The water is thin and veil-like and the rockwork setting makes the scene a very impressive one. A Chippewa Indian gave this little legend of Potato Falls. Nenibozho was hungry after a long tramp. He called upon the trout in the stream to provide him with food. They turned a deaf ear to him and would not respond. Nenibozho became angry. He wove a net of bark fiber, which he weighted with stones and spread over these rocks in



Amnicon Falls

the hope that he might catch some of this inhospitable fish. But the wily trout pouring down the stream in large numbers soon tore his net to shreds. All escaped and the hero-god went hungry. The waterfall is the remnant of Nenibozho's seine.

Hardscrabble Falls. This attractive waterfall tumbles down a rocky incline in the wild and rugged hardscrabble area of Barron and Rusk Counties in northwestern Wisconsin. It is the least known of our falls. This region has been proposed for preservation as a state park. "Besides swift running stream and unusual rock formations, there are many acres of virgin maple forest, with unspoiled floor cover with wild flowers and ferns. In past years Indian fairy folk or "Little Indians" have been seen by Chippewa near this waterfall. It has been said that these dwarf aborigines were the first to discover and make use of the red pipestone found at various places in the Barron quartzite range and that from them the Chippewa people learned of the quarry locations. In some of these places Indian hunters have heard the noise made by their stone hammers when parties of these little folks were engaged in quarrying the stone for pipe and ornament making.

Rock Falls. Off Highway 141 (the route from Manitowoc to Green Bay) near Maribel in the northwestern corner of Manitowoc County are the Rock Falls of Devils River. These are low but beautiful falls, the water flowing in a cascade over terraces of limestone strata. Some of the rock has cracked into blocks. Pretty pools are below the cascade. The singing water, the stone terraces and the growth of birch and other trees on the river bank makes this a Wisconsin beauty spot well worth visiting. Devils River, or Spirit River, the former Potawatomi residents of this region remember as the scene of some of the exploits of Wisaka. This fall he constructed and here he planned and dreamed of an undertaking that would benefit his Indian children. His singing is heard in the water to this day.



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