



Canku Ota

(Many Paths)



An Online Newsletter Celebrating Native America

November 1, 2003 - Issue 99



Myths and Legends of Wisconsin's Waterfalls - Part Two

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Published in The Wisconsin Archeologist Volume 18, Number 4 - 1938 (Pages 110-120)

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Waterfalls of the Wolf River

Bear Trap Falls. This interesting small waterfall is located a short distance north of Keshena on the West Branch of the Wolf River on the Menominee Indian Reservation. A description of this fall was written by Charles E. Brown after he visited this locality August 27, 1928. "At this pretty spot, now a tourist picnic ground, a clear spring fed spring flows over a low wall of red granite rock which is six or seven feet high. The locality in the forest is very attractive. The stream at the falls is narrowed by the rock outcrop, which extends out from the shore to a width of only 25 feet. The water in tumbling over the rock wall outlines white water in quite a perfect form of a white bear having a length of about 12 feet. This image can be seen at all times of the day but shows best at dusk or in the early morning."

"Naturally there is an Indian legend to explain the presence of this likeness of bruin in the waterfall. Accordingly to the Menominee, a big bear in approaching this spot saw an Indian fishing in the stream below. Not wishing to be seen by him he entered an opening in the rock wall of the waterfall. After going into this opening for a short distance he was unable to proceed farther or to retreat and was imprisoned there. The Indian in going to the fall saw the form of the 'spirit bear' outlined in the white water. The rock wall gives forth a hollow sound. This to the Indians appears to confirm the impression that here is a cave there. One old Indian informed us that if one wishes success in fishing in the stream it is well to first make a tobacco offering to the spirit bear of the Bear Trap Falls.

Rainbow Falls. Of the several interesting waterfalls along the course of the turbulent Wolf River on the Menominee Indian Reservation, Rainbow Falls is generally conceded to be the most beautiful. Phebe Jewel Nichols has given a brief description of this fall in a recent booklet (Tales From An Indian Lodge). "Rainbow Falls is one of the Great Spirit's Talking Waters. It is about three miles south of the village of Neopit. To see to the best advantage the famous scintillations, rainbow-like because of the rock formations under the falls and the peculiar light and shadow producing an environment of dense evergreens forest, walk down the curving thickly treed shoreline as far as possible and look up and back to the magnificent waters, tossing their prismatic spray down into the foaming eddies, spreading out and flowing on around immense rocks, mossy logs, ancient rock rooted trees with a short oaf ageless potency and serenity, you will feel unmistakably in the presence of majesty. Perhaps you will sense the mystery, which only the forest know -- You may think of how, before the white man came, Indians sought this waterfall, beat their resonant prayer drums, meditated, listened for the Voice, and went away the better for the soul sinewing

moments in this sanctuary."

Big Eddy Falls. Mrs. Nichols has also given a good description of this Wolf River waterfall and of the Menominee Indian belief concerning it. This is quoted in part. "Huge granite rocks border the falls, lie in flat emergence at the edge of the shores and rise in the midst of the powerful water or jut out over it. You may walk out upon these rocks and stand in the very center of the wonder, and magic and music, which is the charm of Big Eddy. Everywhere is the great voice of the falls, of deep sonority, over-toned with the lyrics delicacy of the splashing foam which fades away into the faint rippling of the eddies."

"In sharp contrast to the immense ageless boulders and mighty vociferous waters is the wide and gentle green sward which stretches from the neighboring wooded slopes to the bank above the falls. Smooth and lawn-like it wears the expression of a specially 'prepared place.' The Indians will tell you about the greensward on moonlight nights. They will tell you that there the spirits of joyous children come to dance and play when the moon is high, that they scamper on the cool grass and flit out onto the rocks, dip their dainty feet in the spray, and laugh and sing. There are Indians who will tell you they have seen them. And may will tell you they have heard their tinkling voices."

Sullivan Falls. Near this Wolf River waterfall a Menominee hunter one night saw 'fireballs' floating about in the darkness. Regarding them as evil things he left the locality as quickly as he could. One followed him for some distance into the forest but did him no harm.

Smoky Falls. Mr. Holmes gives a brief description of this waterfall. "Smoky Falls is a little Niagara - a lovely place to stop for an hour or more. The green waters are tossed into a mist which the sun changes into rainbows." To this place, according to Menominee belief, the hero-god Manabus in old times often came to smoke his great pipe. From this legend the waterfall takes its name. Sometimes a flock of ducks would fly from the bowl of the pipe. An Indian who chanced to observe this one-day put the pipe stem in his own mouth but only troublesome mosquitoes emerged from the bowl. They were so voracious that they nearly caused his death before he escaped from them.

Keshena Falls. This low but attractive waterfall of the Wolf River is at the Keshena entrance of the Menominee Reservation. A monster black hairy snake once lived in the deep water of the river below the falls. One day an Indian girl went to get some water from the stream. When she dipped her bark bucket in the water, she was seized by this water monster and carried away to his den. Her father learned of her kidnapping by this demon and went to an Indian shaman for help. This man provided him with a powerful medicine, which enabled him to go beneath the water and rescue his daughter from the den where she was imprisoned. She was unhurt and her parents and relatives rejoiced at her safe delivery. This legend was told to Charles E. Brown years ago by the late Reginald Oshkosh, who then had a refreshment and souvenir booth near the falls.

The Indian village of Keshena and this waterfall take their name from Keshi'ne (Josette), who was born about 1830 and succeeded Shu'nien (Silver) as chief of the Menominee. The name Keshi'ne signifies 'the swift-flying,' and originated in a dream of his father, who, in a vision, thought he saw the air filled with eagles and hawks. These were representations of the Thunder party and were flying swiftly by. (From 14th Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology, Part 1, page 59)

Another story of Keshena Falls was collected by Alanson Skinner and John Satterlee.

"Old Campau, when a boy, fasted to see what the gods had in store for him. He lived with his parents on a side hill opposite Keshena Falls (Kakap'akato), and there he fasted for eight days. On the eighth night, the sacred underneath monsters who lived under the center of the falls appeared to him and their chief spoke to him, 'Look yonder and you will see your reward for fasting.'"

"It seemed to the youth that he could see the whole earth lying clear before him and he bent his steps to the rock the monster indicated, walking on the ice. When he arrived he found a sacred kettle which looked as bright as a coal of fire, but the appearance of the kettle has changed since then. It is a bear kettle from the god beneath, which he feeds from when a sacrifice is made to the powers below."

"On the ninth day of the fast, the god told Campau, who was then very hungry, to go a short distance and there he would find what the gods had granted him. He obeyed, and at the spot he found and killed a large bear and made sacrifice and called his companion and ate the flesh. The sacred kettle was hidden at first as it was too great and sacred to be shown about."

"When the faster was asleep, he heard the chief of the powers below singing to him and he received instructions concerning his duties towards the powers. He had to fill the kettle with whiskey to sacrifice to them. In the spring when the maple sugar was first made, he had to fill it with sugar, for the underneath bear likes sweets as much as those on earth. When the offerings were ready he had to call his friends to give a feast in honor of his guardians and at this feast he would sing."

'All of the chiefs (of the powers below) have given me to know.'

"Spring sacrifices are still made in the kettle by descendants of the original owner." (Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, V, XIII, page 486.)

"In swamp-holes, lakes and rivers, under waterfalls, and in lonely hills may be found stray horned snakes, bears, panthers, and in modern times, dogs, hogs, and horses." (Material Culture of the Menomini, Page 53.)



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