

THE HISTORIC INDIAN VILLAGES OF THE PEORIA LAKE REGION

HARRY L. SPOONER

Peoria, Illinois

Peoria Lake is an expansion of the Illinois river about twenty-one miles in length. The village of Chillicothe is located at its upper end and the cities of Peoria and East Peoria at its lower end. From time immemorial, this region has been a favorite haunt of the aborigines. Before the coming of the white people, the lake was circled by villages and camps of prehistoric peoples.

After these left the country, the Illinois valley was successively peopled by Shawnees and Illinois, and later by the allied tribes of Pottawatomies, Ottawas, Chippewas, Kickapoos, Winnebagoes, Miamis, Sauks, and Foxes. Quite likely some time elapsed between the prehistoric occupation and the building of villages along Peoria lake by the historic tribes. In the Peoria lake region, however, I include not only the immediate vicinity of the lake, but a few miles up the river and a few miles west of the lake. This territory then includes several villages whose residents were closely united with those on the lake and who usually acted in concert with the latter.

Little information is available of an early Shawnee occupation, but there is some evidence that a group of Shawnees had a village between the present villages of Rome and Mossville.

Following the Shawnees, the groups making up the Illinois confederacy occupied the valley for a period of two centuries or more. Tradition says that the Illinois had a large village on the east side of the head of Peoria lake, where they were attacked by a large body of Pottawatomies from the Wabash while they were holding a religious festival and were unarmed. Most of the Illinois were slain and the Pottawatomies took away everything of value that the Illinois possessed. This is supposed to have happened about 1635. After the expulsion of the Illinois from this region in 1769, the Pottawatomies had a village at or near this same site.

The first the white people really knew about the Illinois villages, however, was in 1673, when Louis Joliet and Father

Marquette came up the Illinois from the Mississippi. There is no definite evidence that there was a permanent village on Peoria lake at this time. The explorers stopped somewhere along the river at a camp of Peoria Indians and Father Marquette baptized a child there but he does not say it was on Peoria lake. If it were here that he stopped, it must have been a temporary camp of the Peorias, as he himself says the next year, 1674, that the only village on the Illinois river was that called Kaskaskia, nearly opposite Starved Rock, near modern Utica.

Peoria lake was called by the Indians Lake Pimitoui, meaning "there are plenty of fat beasts there." This explains why no villages had been built. The Illinois tribes used this region as a hunting ground and had not built a permanent village because this would frighten and disperse the game. That this region was used as a hunting ground is proved by statements of La Salle, who, on two occasions, in 1680 and again in 1682, found the big village at Kaskaskia deserted and its inhabitants hunting around Peoria lake, their camps being at its lower end.

There is no definite record of an Indian village on the lake until 1692, when Tonti and La Forest built the second Fort St. Louis below the "Narrows," and moved here from Starved Rock. Some of the Peorias remained at Kaskaskia but the big majority of the inhabitants there followed to Peoria, where they built a large village. Here Father Gravier built a chapel and converted many of the Indians, including Rouensa, the head chief. The Peoria village contained 300 cabins, or 1200 fires, which would mean a village of approximately 6000 people.

At this time the Illinois tribes living at Peoria were the Kaskaskias, Peorias, Moingwenas, Coiraccantanon, Tamaroa, and Tapouara. The Peorias and Coiraccantanon together were as numerous as the other four tribes. Peoria continued to be the only village on the lake until after the Illinois were driven from the region by the allied tribes.

The village was divided in 1700, when the Kaskaskias, in spite of the protests of the Peorias and Moingwenas, moved to southern Illinois and founded a new village, which they called Kaskaskia after the old one near Starved Rock.

In 1705 the Indians at Peoria murdered a French soldier and the Peoria chief, Mantouchensa, was ordered to Montreal to make amends. He refused to go and the governor-general of Canada withdrew all traders from Peoria. With their withdrawal, most of the French inhabitants and some of the Indians left the place. These included Father Gravier, who had been wounded by an Indian.

Six years later, the Peoria chief, Kolet, was visiting at Cahokia and heard Father Marest preach. Kolet was converted and induced Father Marest to re-establish a mission at Peoria. This was done in 1712 and the same year a garrison and a trading-post were again re-established. The village was now repopulated by both French and Indians.

In 1715 and again in 1718, the Illinois at Peoria helped in a war against the Foxes. In 1722 the Peorias captured the son of a Fox war chief and burned him at the stake. The Foxes retaliated, drove the Peorias to the top of Starved Rock, and after a battle, compelled them to give up eighty of their women and children as the price of saving their lives.

Most of the Peorias at both Starved Rock and Peoria, in fear of the Foxes, abandoned their homes and joined their kinsmen at Kaskaskia on the Mississippi, leaving central Illinois to the control of the Foxes. These, however, made no attempt to form a permanent village on the lake. In 1730, they attempted to march east and join the Iroquois. They were detected in the act by the few Peorias who had remained around Starved Rock. The latter sent word to the French commandants at St. Joseph, Fort Chartres, and the Wabash, who responded and practically annihilated the Foxes. Two years later the Peorias who had gone south returned and took up their residences again at Peoria.

In 1736 some of the Peorias took part in a battle with the Chichasaws. By this time their number had dwindled to about 250. During the next 27 years, life for them was comparatively tranquil and the population increased to 700, according to

a French official report, which gave the population and also said that the post at Peoria yearly produced 250 bales of peltries.

The final exodus of the Peorias took place in 1769. In this year a Peoria Indian killed Pontiac, the great Ottawa chief. In retaliation, the Ottawas enlisted the aid of the Winnebagoes, Kickapoos, Pottawatomies, and Miamis and attacked the Peorias, whose number had been augmented by the other Illinois tribes, who had gathered at the old Kaskaskia village. After a fierce battle, the Peorias retired to the top of Starved Rock, where 1200 of them, of which 300 were warriors, were starved to death, only a few escaping. Those who were not present at the siege, being mostly the old men, the squaws, and children, fled the country, one group going to Vincennes, Indiana, and the rest joining their kinsmen at Kaskaskia and Cahokia.

With the destruction of the Peorias by the allied tribes, the latter now took possession of the rich lands formerly held by the Illinois. This explains why, when the first white settlers came to the Peoria lake region, they found Pottawatomies, Ottawas, Miamis, Sauks, Foxes, and Kickapoos, occupying villages but short distances from each other. In fact, many villages were made up of members from several of these tribes.

Just how many villages there were of the allied tribes in the Peoria lake region is uncertain. About 1778 Jean Baptiste Maillet, a trader in the French-Indian village at Peoria, built a new village one and a half miles lower down the lake. Within a few years the rest of the French followed. The old village was given to the Indians, who inhabited it until the log buildings rotted down. This village was supposed to have been between the present Caroline and Hayward streets in Peoria in the vicinity of where the old pottery ruins now are.

The Kickapoos early took advantage of the situation in the region and they settled at Peoria, making it their headquarters for a considerable period. About the same time a Pottawatomie chief named Wappe came from the Wabash and settled at what is now Tiskilwa but was better known as Indiantown and later as Comas' village. It is located on the Bureau river a few miles northwest

of Chillicothe. It became a large village, having at one time 300 lodges and 1500 inhabitants.

Within the next few years, several other villages were established, either on the lake or in close proximity to it. The principal of these were: Gomo's village on Senachwine creek near the present village of North Chillicothe; Senachwine's village, a half mile north of the village of Putnam; Black Partridge's village at the Big Springs, north of the village of Spring Bay, on the east side of the lake; Crow's village, at the mouth of Crow creek, directly across the river from Chillicothe; Markwhet's village, near Lacon; Shick Shack's village at the mouth of Clear creek; and a village at Sparland. Some years later Little Deer's village was settled near Gomo's village and Pamawatam established a Kickapoo village at Mossville. The other villages were predominantly Pottawatomie although members from several tribes were interspersed with them. Shortly before 1812, the Piankashaws built a village a half mile from Peoria. The site of this is not known but the writer believes it to have been on the east side of the lake near the Dixon fish ponds.

In 1781 Senachwine and some of his followers joined an expedition that captured the fort of St. Joseph, in Michigan.

In 1794, many of the Indians of the Peoria lake villages fought against General Wayne in the battle of the Fallen Timbers. Among the Peoria lake chiefs who took part were Black Partridge, Gomo, and Senachwine. In the treaty of Greenville the next year, the Indians ceded to the United States a small piece of land at Peoria.

By this time the Illinois Indians had made several cessions of land to the United States. The last of these was made by the Peorias in 1818.

In 1810 the Shawnee chief, Tecumseh, visited the villages of Gomo, Black Partridge, Senachwine, and Comas, as well as the Indians and French at Peoria to induce them to join him in a war to exterminate the white population, but they were all opposed to his plan.

In 1811 Governor Edwards sent Captain Levering to the Peoria lake region to demand the surrender of some Indians who had stolen horses and murdered

settlers in southern Illinois. He met all the tribes in council and they finally promised to deliver the murderers when they caught them.

The next April Gomo, Senachwine, Black Partridge, Shick-Shack, and Little Deer attended a council at Cahokia called by the governor. Pledges of friendship were made but the peace did not last long.

The people in the south part of the state did not think very highly of the Indians at Peoria. About this time they made a petition to Governor Edwards to establish a fort or block house "at the seditious village of Peoria—the great nursery of hostile Indians and traitorous British Indian traders."

In a letter to Secretary of War Eustis of May 6, 1812, Governor Edwards said that the Indians were concentrating their forces about Peoria, and, with five days' previous notice, could rally a force of 1000 warriors, independent of any assistance from the Prophet, chief of the Winnebago village on Rock river. On June 23 he addressed another letter to Eustis saying he had just had a communication that stated the Indians "around Peoria are now not less than 700" and that they could reach Kaskaskia within four or five days. In another letter in August, the governor said all the Indians had tendered their services to the British and were only awaiting directions from them.

In the summer of 1812 Tecumseh sent emissaries again to the Peoria lake region and met the tribes in council at Gomo's village. They offered the Indians a large sum of money if they would join the British. They also pointed out the importance of capturing Fort Dearborn at Chicago. Although the chiefs did not approve of this, many of the young men left at once for Chicago. Black Partridge followed and tried his best to avert a clash. When he found it impossible, he did not join in the terrible massacre that followed the evacuation of the fort, but rather, saved several white people from death and later was active in securing the release of white prisoners.

Two months later more emissaries appeared in Peoria to get the Indians to attack Fort Wayne and Fort Harrison. They visited Gomo's and Black Partridge's villages but were threatened with death if they did not leave.

In the fall of 1812 Black Partridge's village was destroyed by Governor Edwards while the warriors were away on a hunt and Black Partridge himself was on the Kankakee securing the release of Captain Helm, a prisoner from the massacre at Fort Dearborn. About thirty Indians, young and old, were killed, most of them being old men and squaws. Several papooses were slain, one soldier inhumanly running his bayonet through a little child and holding it high over his head. Upwards of 4000 bushels of corn were destroyed besides a prodigious quantity of beans and dried meat, pumpkins, tallow, and peltry. Eighty head of horses with their trappings, about 200 brass kettles, a great quantity of a variety of silver and Indian ornaments, guns, bags of gunpowder, flints, etc., were brought off. The houses, all strong and well built, some large enough to accommodate fifty persons, were burned.

Immediately after burning this village, a party was dispatched to Peoria, who burnt a village lately constructed by the Miamis within a half mile of Peoria.

A little later, Captain Craig burned the French village at Peoria because the governor accused the French of harboring the Indians who marauded in the southern portion of the state. Some of the women and children were left at the burned town without food or shelter while the men were all taken away on the boat as prisoners. In this extremity, Gomo, who had been watching from the woods, furnished these homeless people with food and canoes and they went down the river, where they arrived after several days and much suffering, at Kaskaskia. No tale of Indian savagery is more replete with inhuman and cruel acts than the destruction of Black Partridge's village and of Peoria by a supposedly civilized governor of Illinois.

The result of these affairs was to make the Indians more fierce than ever against the Americans. Black Partridge and a body of followers now harassed the settlements in the south and killed several white settlers. While there they learned that the governor was planning another foray on the Indian villages around Peoria, so they returned to their homes.

In September, 1813, General Howard arrived at Peoria lake. The Indian scouts had discovered his coming and all the

people from all the Indian villages deserted their own villages and collected at Comas' village at Tiskilwa. Howard sent Captain Christy to Gomo's village and burned it, together with a quantity of corn. Christy went up the river as far as Starved Rock and then came back to the mouth of Bureau creek. He sent a detachment under Lieut. Robinson to go up the creek and find the Indians. They went seven miles and then, seeing a number of tracks of Indian ponies, became scared and retreated to the boats, reporting they had not seen any Indians. It was lucky for Robinson that he did not go the three miles further to the Indian village as the Indians were lying in ambush. The probabilities are that none would have escaped alive as the warriors were ten to one and many of them mounted, while the troops were on foot.

General Howard built a fort at Peoria, called Fort Clark. He was attacked by Black Partridge while building it, but the Indians were repulsed. Black Partridge could not get most of the Indians to aid him and so gave up the struggle. Black Partridge, Senachwine, Comas, Shick-Shack, Crow, and Gomo went to St. Louis and signed a peace treaty after which Fort Clark was abandoned.

From this time, the Indians of Peoria lake were generally peaceable. The only ones who were not were a handful of disreputable Indians from Tiskilwa under the half-breed, Mike Girty. This gang murdered a considerable number of white settlers during the Black Hawk war.

In 1814 an old preacher named Wigby preached to the Indians at Senachwine's village and Senachwine was converted. In this same summer a French Canadian trader, Jacques Jarret, stopped at Crow's village to trade. He had a young American named Ford as his clerk. Some of the Indians made Ford a prisoner and were going to kill him. Jarret finally effected his ransom by giving the Indians a large quantity of goods.

Antoine Des Champs, a trader for the American Fur Co. in 1816 met more than 1000 Indians at Peoria and gave them presents as an inducement to trade with his company.

In 1827 General Lewis Cass, general Indian agent for the Northwest, met the Peoria lake Indians in council at Crow's

village in an effort to prevent them joining with the Winnebagoes in a war on the white settlers. He was successful and pledges of friendship were made.

In 1830 a great feast was held at Tiskilwa, called by Black Hawk, to induce the Pottawatomies to join him in a war against the whites. Senachwine made answer to Black Hawk in a speech which has been copied and re-copied as one of the finest pieces of Indian oratory in existence. His speech ruined Black Hawk's prospects.

A short time after this, Senachwine died suddenly on his return to his village from a short horseback trip. He was buried on the green knoll back of his village, where his grave may be seen to this day. In 1937 a marker was erected there to his memory.

The winter of 1830-31 was known as the "winter of the deep snow." During this winter many acts of kindness and heroism were done by both the Indians and the whites for each other. The Indians at Black Partridge's village kept at least one white family from starving during that winter, dividing everything they had with the whites.

John Hammet, a pioneer settler on Senachwine creek, describes the Indian village at Sparland at this time. He says they had about 30 acres of corn and pumpkins, the finest he ever saw. The corn was planted in hills, like sweet potatoes, the hills being arranged in perfectly straight rows and squares, while the several grains in each hill were planted with like geometrical precision. The hills were circular, two feet in diameter, and one foot high, the top

being flat, and they stood about six feet apart. There were 30 to 40 stalks in each hill, planted in circles, the stalks being about six inches apart. It was the small eight-row variety, was carefully cultivated by hand, and thus treated, grew to magnificent proportions and matured early, escaping the fall frosts which nipped later varieties.

During the winter of 1831-32, the Indians around Lacon started to move west of the Mississippi. They first collected their dead upon the frozen river, packed in wooden troughs. When this was done, all hands joined and with a mighty push they moved across the river.

In February, 1832, another council was held at Indiantown by Black Hawk but he was no more successful than before. The Tiskilwa Indians, knowing they would not be safe in a war between Black Hawk and the whites, bade farewell to their beautiful village and moved west of the Mississippi.

The Indians who were left around Peoria lake gave no trouble during the Black Hawk war. By 1837 nearly all of them had moved across the Mississippi.

For the first few years, some of them used to return occasionally to look on the scenes of their youth and the graves of their ancestors, but with the fencing up of their trails and the plowing over of their villages and graves, the visits ceased. Today, of all the villages in the Peoria lake region, Senachwine's is the only one where the exact spot occupied by the Indian cabins can be pointed out. William Wheeler now owns the farm and keeps the grave of Senachwine intact, while he can show one just where the Indian cabins stood.