*"You can't start with 1950 — it goes back a **lot** further than that."*

Kathleen Brightwell
October 2, 1978

The Indian Village at Plum Grove

Alfred Andreas' monumental *History of Cook County* states that Plum Grove was the location of an Indian burial ground—a place where Indians paid annual visits as recently as 1945.[1] This assertion has always encouraged the belief that Indians did indeed camp in the Rolling Meadows environs. It is difficult to determine where Andreas obtained this interesting bit of information, since documentation was not stressed by early historians. Weston Goodspead's *History of Cook County* cites the same general information. Although it is not safe to assume Goodspead received the information from a good source, we can surmise that he quoted Andreas' book.[2]

The presence of the hilly ground—in direct contrast to the surrounding flatland—led the early writers to speculate as to the origin of the mound. Some said that the last Indians in the area told the first white settlers of a burial mound. One rumor puts this burial ground at what is now the northwest corner of the intersection of Old Plum Grove Road and Algonquin Road. Kathleen Brightwell, a contemporary authority on the North American Indian, and a local resident, asserts that the mounds are but "a few half-grown hills," thus discouraging the glimmer of hope for serious anthropological study in this area.[3] Although the suspicious mounds looked like shallow man-made trapezoids, is it what remains of an Indian burial mound? Perhaps . . .

While the authorities continue their investigations into the existence of any permanent Indian villages or structures in our sector, the rich and documented history of the northern Illinois Indians cannot be disputed.

The most important tribe in the area was the Potawatomi. They were a tribe of the Great Algonquin Federation—a proud and strong people. By the late 1600's, this tribe had become too large to operate efficiently, and it broke into smaller groups which settled throughout all the Indian lands. One rather large group of Potawatomi warred with the Illinois tribe at Starved Rock in 1769 for possession of land in northern Illinois. After a short but bloody battle, the Potawatomi were victorious, and spread northward.

Frances Barker, writing in 1902 about her life during the 1830's, remembers an Indian campground some miles west from her home on the Des Plaines River. Occupied every autumn for about six weeks, this campground was a stopping place between the Indians' summer and winter camps. Mrs. Barker reminisced that the Indians made a "picturesque appearance, even to the young eye, with their blankets of all colors, though not so very bright or clean, and with their papooses and camp fixtures swinging on their shoulders." She noticed that women always carried the biggest loads.[4]

The old maps of the area show a village in Plum Grove Woods and traces of encampments are found to this day. In the early part of this century, Plum Grove School children on nature walks frequently found Indian arrowheads and beads in the area.[5] In more recent times, children playing in the fields surrounding Central Road School have found arrowheads.

Plum Grove was an established camp. It was close to Salt Creek and it provided trees for building the "long houses" which were characteristic of the area tribes. Each house was up to 150 feet long, and accommodated an extended family. Each segment of the family had its own portion of the house, with its own smokehole—not unlike a townhouse of today. The trees of the area provided logs for the frame and the bark of the elm tree (indigenous to the area) lined the walls. The roof was constructed from mats woven from reeds and cattails of the nearby marshy creek. They were woven so tightly that rain and snow could not penetrate the house.[6]

We owe a great debt to the Indians who inhabited this area. Most of our modern highways originated from Indian foot trails, which were followed by pioneers and settlers, and later became our roads and highways.

The first European contact with the Indians came in the 1600's, when Jesuit Father Jacques Marquette and layman Louis Joliet, his companion, visited the area. It was not until the late 19th Century, however, that long-term relationships were formed between the red man and the white man.

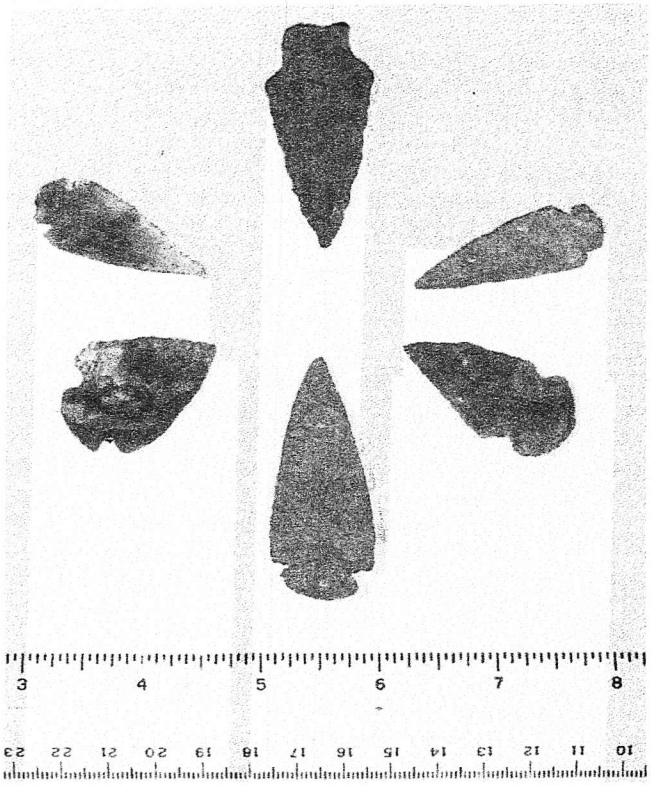
The American Fur Company, headed by John Jacob Astor, was responsible for the first business dealings between the two cultures in our area. Astor sent his first traders to the Chicago area in 1817 for the purpose of gathering as many beaver pelts as they could—with no regard for the needs of the Indians. These pelts were coveted by the Eurpoean hat-making industry, and brought high profits from continental buyers.

John Kinzie operated one Chicago post for Astor and Antoine DeChamps handled the other. These two early settlers used the rivers as highways, often traveling from Chicago to the Des Plaines River, and then to the Illinois River, stopping along the way to make friends and to trade with the Indians. Although their cultures were vastly different, Kinzie and DeChamps developed a mutual respect with the Indians. Each helped to provide for the needs of the other. The Indians, however, soon became dependent upon the white man, and became vulnerable to his whims. Credit far beyond the ability to pay was extended to the Indians. As the years advanced, the abundance of beavers disappeared, making it difficult for the red man to repay his debts. They began to sell their land in small tracts and used the money to repay creditors. A vicious circle soon developed, in which the Indians quickly became both land and money poor. A once proud people, who had depended on the land for sustenance, began begging and stealing from the farmers who had ventured onto their land.

It did not take long for influential men in Washington, who knew the settlement of the prairie land could not begin until the threat of Indians was removed, to begin drawing up treaties. At first, the government attempted to purchase the land outright. However, the concept of private ownership was so foreign to

the Indians that they were hesitant to enter into this kind of legal agreement. Small cession treaties were negotiated and when the Indians were paid for giving up small tracts of land, the government helped settle their debts and relocated many of them to the "Far West."

Collection of Kathleen Brightwell



These arrowheads were found in the playground of Central Road School in the early 1960's by Joe Brightwell and Eddie Lachner. Most of the arrowheads found in this area and in Plum Grove were made of either grey or a very dark rock. To this day, artifacts continue to be found in the lesser populated areas of Rolling Meadows.

By 1830, the last great tract of Indian land east of the Mississippi River was the region north of the Ohio River and west of Lake Michigan. Consequently, the city of Chicago was a natural place to hold treaty negotiations. This village by the lake was quickly becoming a center of population—crowded with many whites eager to exploit the red man. Additionally, there were Indian tents pitched everywhere. As the final treaty negotiations were made, the white man promised not to go beyond the Mississippi River, and the Indian promised not to return east of that line of demarcation. Annuities were agreed upon, allotments for new villages were given and a method for relocation was established. In all, seventy-seven Indians affixed their marks to the Chicago Treaty of 1833, which was also signed by forty-six military and civil witnesses.[7] This treaty deeded all this important land to the United States Government, thus ending Indian possession of land in northern Illinois.

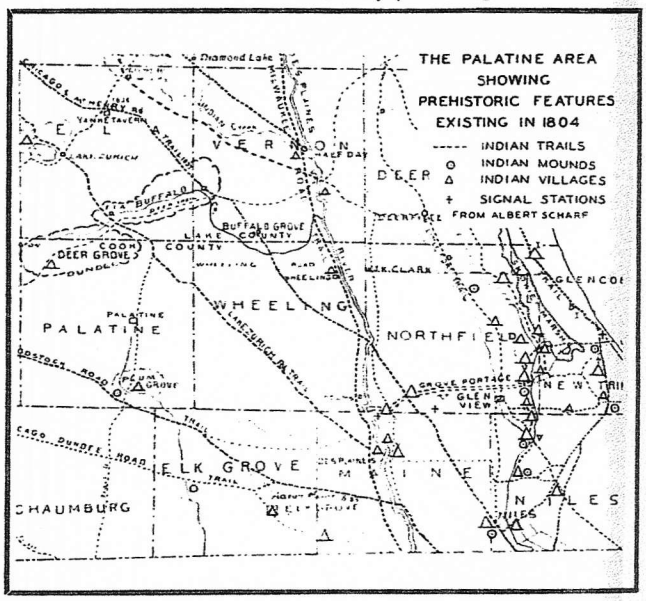
Under the terms of the treaty, the Indians had three years to vacate the land. A.S. Vail of Momence, the government agent in charge of removals, painted a bleak picture of that last westward migration. He observed the dehumanization in which the Indians were rounded up like cattle and forced to travel west under extremely trying conditions. For the old, it was a sad parting. For the young, one would like to hope it was nothing less than an adventure.[8]

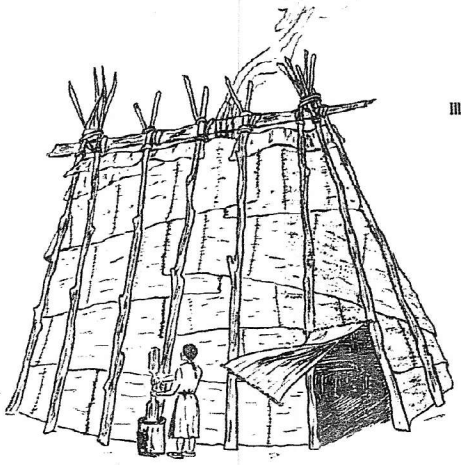
What happened to the Potawatomi tribe was chacteristic of what happened to many others. They could not stand in the way of pioneer expansion; the reason is clear—they simply lacked the power. And it was power, not justice, that ultimately decided who would have the land. Some government officials attempted to be fair to the Indians, providing for cash settlements and land in another part of the United States. But injustices arose not so much from deliberate intent, but rather from the inability of both the government and the citizens to work out a practical system of coexistence with the Indians.

Even after 1835, when the Indians were supposed to have vacated the land, small parties were frequently seen in the vicinity of the old villages. The compulsion to have "one last look" at the graves of their fathers and at the villages of their youth was extremely strong. Soon, all the old trails were cut off by the pioneers' fences, and the unmarked graves were plowed under. The history of these Indians is now only a memory in the prairie lands.

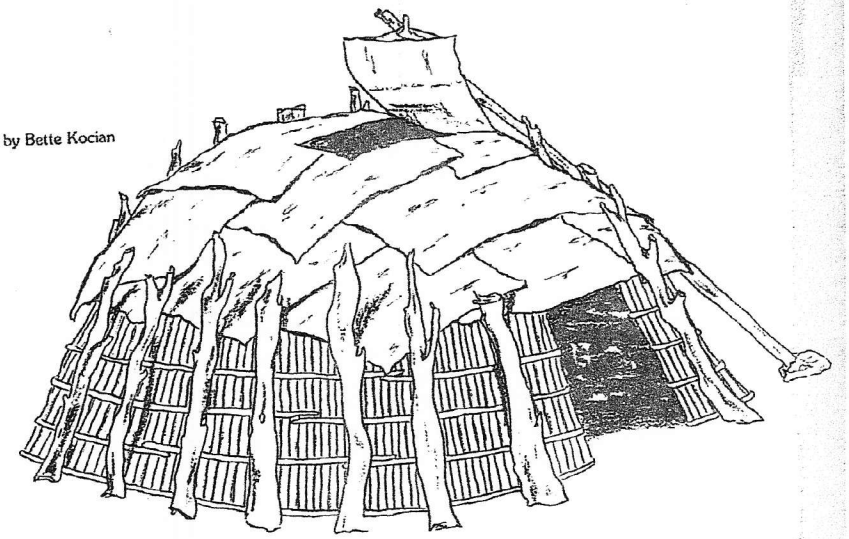
The Indians gave up their land for 15¢ an acre, and the government offered it for settlement at a price of $1.25 per acre. By 1834, the great quest for land in Illinois was well underway.[9]

Courtesy of The Chicago Historical Society



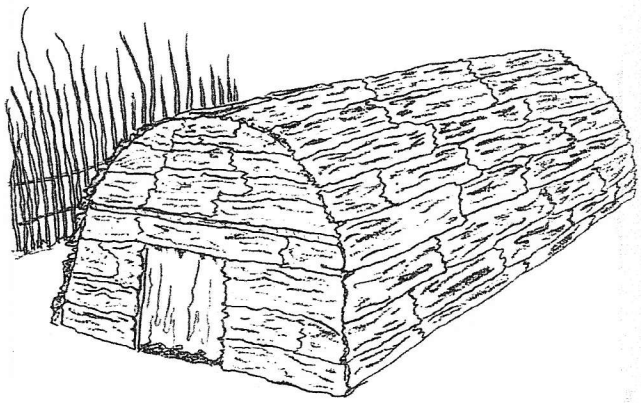


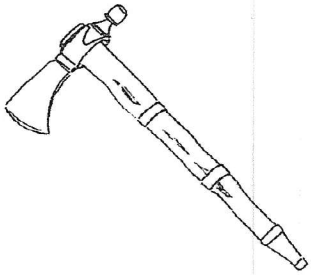
Illustrated by Bette Kocian



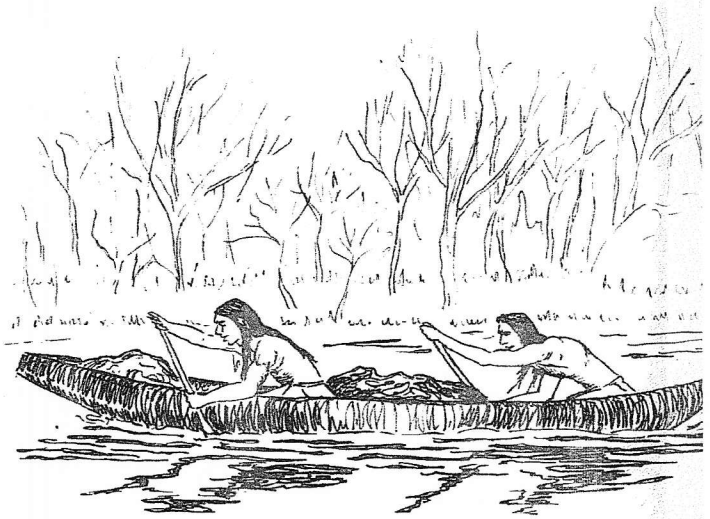
Long houses were characteristic of the Woodland Indians of this area. Here, three examples of the type of homes built in the wooded groves show how well the families could be protected from the elements.

The Potawatomi brave was not a particularly handsome Indian. However his strong features, weathered by long periods of exposure to the sun, wind and snow were indicative of his forceful personality.





Potawatomi pipe tomahawk.



Rivers and creeks of the area provided a means of quick transportation for the Indians who were eager to trade with the white man.