

The Tribes of the Three Fires

By Martin Johnson

They called themselves the Three Fires. They were the Ottawa, the Potawatami and the Ojibwa. Westland might have been where they once held their tribal meetings.

Based on oral tradition (Native American didn't keep written records) the three tribes came from the eastern seaboard some 700 years ago to escape the fierce Iroquois and to find better lands for their growing population. They settled in the area around Mackinaw. While they were three distinct tribes, they shared a similar dialect and many cultural beliefs. It was during this time that tribal leaders established the confederacy of the Three Fires. The name was taken to signify the three tribes and was established to provide the tribes with protection from other indigenous people who sought to inhabit the region. Perhaps it was the Potawatami who hosted the meetings of this confederation, as one translation of their name is "Keepers of the Sacred Fire."

Sometime around the 1400s the Potawatami moved southward and began to inhabit lower regions of our state. Yet even after the move, the meetings of the Three Fires confederation continued. Representatives from each of the three tribes would travel on foot and by canoe and come together on a regular basis to trade goods, to visit, to share stories and to hold sacred ceremonies. Where exactly they met is unknown and the passage of centuries has eliminated any physical evidence. Oral tradition holds that one of the meeting areas was in Westland where the Rouge River and Tonquish Creek come together. While none of their villages are known to have stood within the Westland boundaries, it would have been a good spot for those who traveled by land. Many trails followed the high ground along natural landmarks such as rivers. It would be along these same routes that escaping slaves from the south would seek freedom via the Underground Railroad.

The Potawatami in Michigan lived a simple but hard life. They hunted rabbits, deer, bear and game birds. They fished in the Rouge and raised corn and melons. We know of their presence by artifacts such as the arrowheads they left behind. While not common, they have occasionally been found. In an article in the Westland Observer several years ago, one area farmer talked about how, as a youth in the 1920s, would find arrowheads along Tonquish Creek. The Westland Historical Museum also has a collection of arrowheads that was donated by another area resident.

The legend of the Three Fires reminds us that the story of Native Americans didn't start or end in Michigan. The Three Fires name can be found in such diverse locales as Walpole Island in Ontario and in Iowa and Oklahoma. Places where they moved or were forced to move to during their history.