OJIBWE CHIEF BUFFALO AND THE SANDY LAKE TRAGEDY

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What's inside this educational guide:

KECHEWAISHKE (GREAT RENEWER/BUFFALO)

CHIEF BUFFALO'S CONNECTION TO DULUTH

The land in northeastern Minnesota was ceded to the Federal government by the Ojibwe in 1854. In that treaty, Chief Buffalo requested a parcel of land "to provide for some of his connections that have rendered his people important service." That parcel of land is in downtown Duluth around Lake Avenue and Superior Street. The land was given to Benjamin Armstrong who was a trusted interpreter and played a significant role in getting the treaty negotiations started. That parcel of land was the subject of the first court case in St. Louis County in Minnesota.

Chief Buffalo was a respected leader of the Ojibwe of what is now LaPointe, Wisconsin. He was a great hunter and had strong oratory skills. Both these skills earned him the respect of Ojibwe from other Bands of Ojibwe. He was a signatory on treaties in 1825, 1826, 1837, 1842, 1847, and played a major part in the Treaty of 1854. The 1854 Treaty of LaPointe created permanent homelands and secured hunting, fishing, and gathering rights for the Ojibwe in Minnesota.

Background

Chief Buffalo was born around 1759 and died on September 7, 1855. The Ojibwe kept no written records of births, deaths, etc., around that time. Ojibwe of that era would know in what season they were born and would track how many winters old they were. Surviving another winter was seen as an accomplishment and a sign of strength. He was born into the Loon Clan and was a hereditary chief. Clans are a traditional form of Ojibwe government and each clan has responsibilities associated with it.

Chief Buffalo was recognized as the principal Ojibwe leader in 1849 when President Zachery Taylor signed the 1849 Removal Order. The Removal Order canceled the hunting and fishing rights of the signers of the 1837 and 1842 Treaties. Its primary intent was to remove the Ojibwe westward past the Mississippi River. The Ojibwe leadership realized that resistance would result in many deaths. They saw that the Ojibwe people were starving. In 1852, they decided instead to travel to Washington D.C. to request a meeting with President Millard Filmore. On that trip were Benjamin Armstrong, Chief Buffalos' adopted son, and Vincent Roy, an Ojibwe fur trader for the Hudson Bay Company and the American Fur Company. He was born in Leech Lake and had posts in the Duluth area (Fond du Lac), Lake Vermilion, and made trips to Mackinaw to help supply the Bois Forte Ojibwe. His younger years were spent at LaPointe, Wisconsin, where he met Chief Buffalo.

Chief Buffalo Gravesite-Madeline Island, Wisconsin
Photo by Michele Hakala-Beeksma

Benjamin Armstrong was born around 1820 in Alabama. He left home at age 13 to be a horse racing jockey. He eventually moved north to become a fur trader, farmer, and Ojibwe-English interpreter in the Northern Wisconsin area. There he gained the respect of Chief Buffalo and became a trusted interpreter and counselor. Armstrong was adopted by Chief Buffalo and married into the family. Armstrong helped lead trips to Washington D.C. in 1852 and 1862 to meet with the Presidents who were in office at the time.

Sandy Lake Tragedy

In October 1849 the Assembly of the Minnesota Territory approved an agreement calling for the removal of Ojibwe people living along the southern shores of Lake Superior. It also called for the annual annuity payments from the Treaties of 1837 and 1842 to be paid in Sandy Lake, Minnesota, in 1850. In addition to removing the Ojibwe, the Assembly wanted to bolster the economy in the area of St. Paul, Minnesota. The plan was to get the Ojibwe to come late in the fall so they would have to winter over at Sandy Lake. It was thought that they would then stay in the area and use their Treaty money to buy goods with local businessmen. The agreement was sent to Washington D.C. to be ratified by President Zachery Taylor. Thousands of Ojibwe arrived in Sandy Lake in October 1850. There were inadequate rations and payment was not authorized until December 1850. In that time, as many as 167 Ojibwe died from an outbreak of measles, lack of sanitary conditions, and lack of food. After receiving their payments, the Ojibwe started for their homelands. An estimated 230 more died on the way home.

It was this tragedy that prompted Chief Buffalo and other Ojibwe leadership to plan a trip to Washington D.C. to ask that the Removal Order be rescinded and that permanent lands be set aside for the Ojibwe people.

'WHEN WE LEFT FOR HOME WE SAW THE GROUND COVERED WITH THE GRAVES OF OUR CHILDREN AND RELATIVES'

- CHIEF BUFFALO

"TELL HIM I BLAME HIM FOR THE CHILDREN WE HAVE LOST"

- AISH-KE-BO-GO-KO-ZHE (FLAT MOUTH), DECEMBER 3, 1850.

The Sandy Lake Memorial in Sandy Lake, Minnesota

1852 Trip to Washington D.C.

In April 1852, Chief Buffalo, Benjamin Armstrong, Vincent Roy, O sho ga (LaPointe Band), and other sub-chiefs set off in a birchbark canoe for Washington D.C. They went by canoe as far as Sault St. Marie where they boarded the steamer *Northerner* to Buffalo, New York. Then they went by rail to Washington D.C. At each stop they made, Armstrong circulated a petition among non-Natives to protest the Removal Order. The petition was then presented to President Filmore at their meeting. When the delegation first arrived in the capital, they were turned away. With help from Senator James Briggs from New York, they met with the President. Chief Buffalo had brought a pipe specially made for the meeting and each of the men present took turns smoking. At this first meeting, the petition was presented and they set up a second meeting. At the second meeting, President Filmore assured them the Removal Order would be rescinded and there would be a Treaty negotiation at LaPointe, Wisconsin, in September 1854. It was this Treaty that created permanent land reservations for the Ojibwe to reside on. It also guaranteed hunting, fishing, and gathering rights for the Ojibwe. It specified monetary payments and schools for some reservations.

Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma

Benjamin Armstrong
, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

This is the pipe brought to Washington, D.C., and smoked by the delegation and President Filmore. The pipe was given to Ben Armstrong and kept for many years by his descendants. It was returned to the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in 2010.

1852 Trip to Washington D.C.

The Vincent Roy Jr. Account of the 1852 Trip.
In browsing the online catalog of the Wisconsin Historical Society archives this spring, I discovered the society had some of Vincent Roy Jr.'s, papers. The catalog description mentioned a fur trade journal, a description of early ships on Lake Superior, and manuscript biographies of Roy from some Catholic priests. Roy, who was raised in an Ojibwe-French mix-blood family, was a fur trader and government interpreter in his early years. Still a young man at the time of the Treaty of 1854, he lived into the 20th century and was notable for several reasons including making multiple trips to Washington with Ojibwe delegations, being the namesake of Roy's Point in Red Cliff, leading area mix-blood Ojibwe in the cause of the "half-breed land claims," and being one of the earliest and wealthiest settlers of Superior. He was a commanding figure in the Catholic Church and Democratic Party of Wisconsin, and there is a lot of information about him.

His first Visit to Washington, D.C. - The Treaty of La Pointe.
At the instance of Chief Buffalo and in his company Vincent made his first trip to Washington, D.C. It was in the spring of the year 1852. Buffalo (Kechewaishke), head chief of the Lake Superior Ojibways had seen the day when his people, according to Indian estimation, were wealthy and powerful, but now he was old and his people sickly and starving poor. Vincent referring once to the incidents of that time spoke about in this way "He (Buffalo) and the other old men of the tribe, his advisers, saw quite well that things could not go on much longer in the way they had done. The whites were crowding in upon them from all sides and the U.S. government said and did nothing. It appeared to these Indians their land might be taken from them without them ever getting anything for it. They were scant of food and clothing and the annuities resulting from the sale of their land might keep them alive yet for a while. The desire became loud that it might be tried to push the matter at Washington admitting that they had to give up the land but insisting they be paid for it. Buffalo was willing to go but there was no one to go with him. He asked me to go with him. As I had no other business just then on hand I went along."
(Sources: Cournoyer or Mr. Roy to V.) [Vincent Cournoyer was V. Roy's brother-in-law]

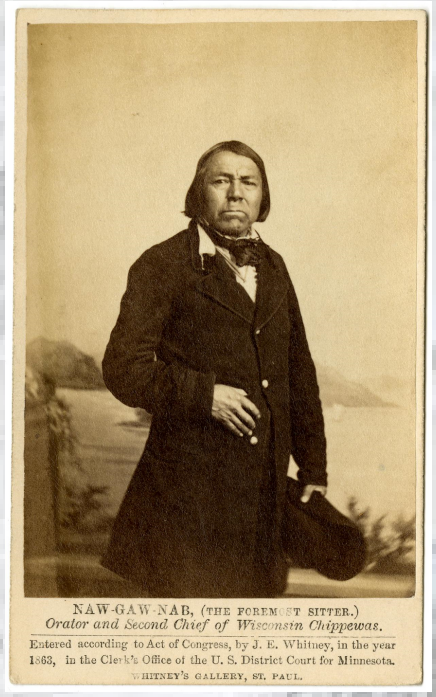
Source-
https://chequamegonhistory.wordpress.com

Vincent Roy Jr.
(*From Life and Labors of Rt. Rev. Frederic Baraga* by Chrysostom Verwyst: Digitized by Google Books)

1854 Treaty Negotiations

The day following the council was opened by a speech from Chief Na-gon-ab in which he cited considerable history.

"My friends," he said, "I have been chosen by our chief, Buffalo, to speak to you. Our wishes are now on paper before you. Before this it was not so. We have been many times deceived. We had no one to look out for us. The great father's officers made marks on paper with black liquor and quill. The Indian can not do this. We depend upon our memory. We have nothing else to look to. We talk often together and keep your words clear in our minds. When you talk we all listen, then we talk it over many times. In this way, it is always fresh with us. This is the way we must keep our record. In 1837 we were asked to sell our timber and minerals. In 1842 we were asked to do the same. Our white brothers told us the great father did not want the land. We should keep it to hunt on. Bye and bye we were told to go away; to go and leave our friends that were buried yesterday. Then we asked each other what it meant. Does the great father tell the truth? Does he keep his promises? We cannot help ourselves! We try to do as we agree in treaty. We ask you what this means? You do not tell from memory! You go to your black marks and say this is what those men put down; this is what they said when they made the treaty. The men we talk with don't come back; they do not come and you tell us they did not tell us so! We ask you where they are? You say you do not know or that they are dead and gone. This is what they told you; this is what they done. Now we have a friend who can make black marks on paper. When the council is over he will tell us what we have done. We know now what we are doing! If we get what we ask our chiefs will touch the pen, but if not we will not touch it. I am told by our chief to tell you this: We will not touch the pen unless our friend says the paper is all right."



Naagaanab (Foremost Sitter)- Fond du Lac Band

From"Early Life Among the Indians, Reminiscences from the Life of Benjamin G. Armstrong" 1892

Photo courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

Photo Album

Waabojiig (White Fisher) - Gull Lake Band

Akiwenzii (Old Man) - Lac Courte Oreilles Band

1854 Treaty of the LaPointe Signatories.
41 chiefs signed.

Giishkitawag (Cut Ear) - Ontonaagon Band

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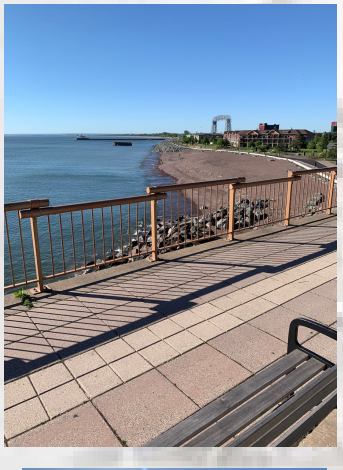
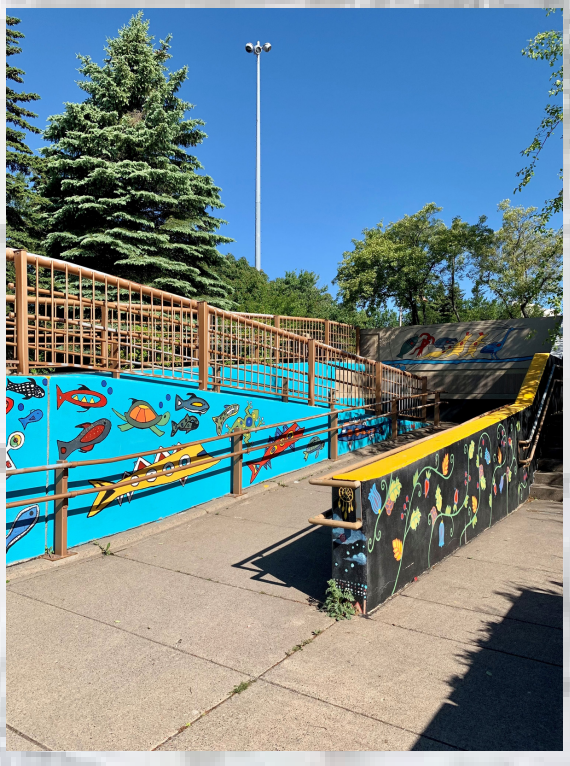
Gitchi Ode' Akiing

Gitchi Ode' Akiing is the Ojibwe translation of Grand Heart Place. In Ojibwe culture, the heart is the place of truth. To speak from the heart is to speak the truth. The re-naming of this park in downtown Duluth is significant to Ojibwe people. It honors our past relationship with treaties. It also recognizes that Ojibwe people are the original inhabitants of this area and that we are still part of the community. There is a tendency to believe Ojibwe and other Native people only live on reservations which isn't true. It helps the Native people to feel "seen" in a world that often dismisses or overlooks them. It restores Native peoples feeling of respect and self-worth.





Photos by Michele Hakala- Beeksma
Artwork by Moira Villiard