

# Indian/Colonial Point's Shameful Past

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*The following is an article written by Record-Eagle staff writer, Mike Norton, dated August 20, 2000.*

***It should be noted:*** Norton states that after the Burnout, Burt Lake Band members moved to Cross Village. ***In truth--most did not go to Cross Village but took up residence with nearby friends and family members. Most of those who did travel to Cross Village, as Norton states, returned. Please see Burt Lake Band Tribal Historian, Alice Littlefield's account in "What Happened After the Burn Out?"***

## INDIAN/COLONIAL POINT'S SHAMEFUL PAST

**Indian Point - This two-mile peninsula at the northwest corner of Burt Lake has been called by at least two names. The old maps call it Indian Point, a name reflected on the road that runs along its eastern shore. Other maps refer to it by the name it was given by the real estate developers - Colonial Point. And that, too, seems fitting when you drive past the colony of summer homes along the water's edge, steering around the well-tanned joggers and dog-walkers as you go.**

**From a historical perspective, both names are equally to the point. This place, once thoroughly Indian, was forcibly colonized a century ago in one of the most shameful and least-publicized episodes in Michigan history. There are no historical markers to tell the tale; only a series of unmarked white crosses on a bluff above the water along Chickagami Road, decorated with artificial flowers and sprigs of cedar.**

**This is the old St. Mary's Cemetery, the only remaining sign of a village that served as the social, religious and cultural center of the small Burt Lake Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. These were no "backward savages;" they were hard-working Catholics who farmed, fished, and drew paychecks as lumberjacks and millwrights for local logging operations.**

**And this land was theirs, not by some vague aboriginal right or a promise from far-away Washington. They had bought and paid for it themselves under the white man's own laws. In 1836, the federal government had promised them a 1,000-acre reservation around Burt Lake; when it failed to deliver on that promise, the Indians pooled their money and bought Indian Point for themselves, deeding much of it to the state of Michigan in the belief that they were creating a tax-free reservation.**

**Until John McGinn came along.**

**McGinn was a timber speculator with friends in high places, and he had his eye on the Point. Using loopholes in the state's land acquisition laws, he "bought" the land at an illegal tax sale in 1900, and a few days later - while most of the male villagers were in town getting their paychecks cashed - he moved in with Cheboygan County Sheriff Fred Ming.**

**Herding the women and children out into the cold autumn rain, they doused their houses with kerosene, set them on fire and ordered everyone off.**

**The homeless Indians walked 35 miles in the rain to the mission settlement at Cross Village, the closest place where they could find shelter. Three years passed before the state admitted the land had been taken from them through fraud, but it refused to restore their property; instead it offered them swampy property that wasn't suitable for farming. Eventually some of them moved a few miles north, to Indian Road, where a second St. Mary's Church was erected in 1908 around a settlement that came to be called Indiantown.**

**Robbed of their land, the Burt Lake Band has been thwarted elsewhere, as well. Unlike other Michigan tribes, the small 650-member community has no revenue-generating casinos or high-priced Washington lobbyists. They've been fighting since the 1930s to win federal recognition for their existence as a tribe - a goal that has consistently eluded them.**

**"We're still here," says [then] tribal director Gary Shawa. "We haven't gone away."**

**In the tribe's office, a turn-of-the-century storefront in nearby Brutus, Shawa speaks softly and carefully, avoiding public comment where he can and choosing his words carefully when he can't. He and his fellow community members must walk a delicate line among a host of state and federal agencies and other, larger Indian tribes, and they can't afford to have their intentions misunderstood.**

**Sheriff Ming went on to become one of the area's big political success stories, enjoying a career in Lansing as both a state representative and a state senator. McGinn was less fortunate; he never got to chop down all the towering red oaks on what eventually became Colonial Point. In fact, it was one of the few areas in the state where substantial logging never took place, and became a popular resort colony.**

**Then, in 1985, history tried to repeat itself. To the horror of the neighbors, a sawmill purchased the forested interior of the little peninsula and announced plans to harvest the old-growth trees and ship them off to Germany as laminate. This time, however, it was the local residents who had the better political connections. They banded together with the Little Traverse Conservancy, the Michigan Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, the University of Michigan and the state Natural Resources Trust Fund and bought the land.**

**Now known as the Colonial Point Memorial Forest, the 300-acre interior has become something of a poster child for the local land conservancy movement. Now part of the University of Michigan's Biological Research Station, it's used for educational programs and low-impact forest ecosystems research, but is open to anyone who wants to walk, jog or rest in its shadowy depths.**