

What Happened After the Burnout?

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Although several accounts of the 1900 Burnout of the Burt Lake Band at Indian Point mention that Burt Lake families sought refuge in Cross Village, that information appears to be, at best, only partly true. The extensive documentation collected by the team working on federal re-acknowledgment (Patty Marks, Barbara Madison, Steve Austin, and me) has provided a more complete view of the Burnout and its aftermath. The narrative submitted by the research team in May, 2005, provides this summary:

“... following the Burn Out many of the members of the Burt Lake Tribe moved from Colonial Point to Indian Road and the surrounding area. Having no money and no place to live, they were granted housing on the property of those tribal members who already resided on or near what they refer to as Indian Trail ... Local land records show a number of homes being built on the Nongueskwa and Massey homesteads. ... The census and other town[ship] documents also show that tribal members displaced by the Burn Out were allowed to camp and eventually build on land owned by other tribal families who held title to property on Indian Road (“Social and Political Relationships,” Narrative Notebook, p. 27).

This summary is based on newspaper accounts published soon after the Burnout, eye-witness accounts published later, and interviews conducted with Burt Lake tribal members. Some of the most extensive information was supplied by Irene Train Mosser, teacher at the Burt Lake Indian School in 1900, who recounted her memories in the Petoskey News Review (Feb. 26, 1970):

“It was also in October that (Mr. McGinn) the new owner took over his property. One morning we arrived at school to find the Indians’ household goods piled all over the school yard and several of the families making their homes as best they could in tents and crowded in with the one family which lived in a house near the school. ... The new owner’s henchmen, led by the County Sheriff, had driven the Indians out of their homes on the Point, set their possessions outside, poured kerosene on the floors and burned down the houses. Only the church had been spared ...

“One little Indian pupil, who was crippled, was carried to school each day by her old, grizzled grandfather. When she failed to come for several days, some of the pupils accompanied me one noon to visit her. We found her ill in her home ... a one-room hut ... so dark and noisy with crowded living. We were shocked to see anyone existing in such quarters.”

The movement to Indian Road is also described in an account of the history of St. Mary’s Church published in a pamphlet issued on the 75th anniversary of the St. Clement Church in Pellston: “The present location of the Indians resulted after the Indians had been dispossessed of reservation rights on Indian Point. ... In 1900, white men forcibly moved the Indians and their belongings out on the road and set fire to their homes. Twenty-five Indian families were left homeless. With no place to go, the Indians moved out to ‘Indian Road’.” Interviews with Margaret Nongueskwa Martell conducted in recent years confirm that several burned out families were taken in by the Nongueskwes and allowed to build houses on their land. This is also indicated by census data collected in 1910 and 1920.

It is also clear that at least some families left the Burt Lake area. In *The Crooked Tree: Indian Legends*, published by John C. Wright in 1917, a photograph is included of “Negonee, 106 years old” with this caption: “This aged woman walked from the Indian village at Burt Lake, when it was burned by order of the sheriff, to Middle Village, where she soon after died.” We do not know if the age Wright attributed to Negonee was accurate, but the information about her was repeated in a later publication, *The Pageant of Tuscarora*, with a different photograph of her.

In contrast to the tale of Negonee, *The Pageant* also includes a photograph of the Joseph Parkey family, taken in front of their house in 1904. According to the caption, the house had been dismantled and moved to land nearby prior to the burning of the village (Robert C. Sager, 1975). This information has been confirmed by Joseph Parkey's descendants.

The idea that all residents of the village left the Burt Lake area was propagated by later, sometimes fanciful, accounts. For example, a *Detroit Sunday Times* article from March 11, 1956, imagines that "The reservation dwellers drifted, penniless wanderers, to the four corners of the state." The *Petoskey News-Review* stated: "Homeless, stripped of their lands and possessions, the Indians migrated elsewhere in a state now all owned by the white man" (March 13, 1956). A radio news story the same year indicated that the Burt Lake Indians moved to the Harbor Springs vicinity, citing Mose Gibson and Jim Needo, neither of them members of the Burt Lake Band, as their sources (WCBY, Cheboygan, March 15, 1956).

In 1981, the *Cheboygan Observer* wrote, "Some of the Indians walked to Cross Village, 30 miles away. But others moved a few miles and started another settlement. ... Some of the descendants still have homes at the new site, called 'Indianville' on the county map" (Dec. 21). Although this account correctly described the movement to nearby Indian Road, it mentioned Cross Village rather than Middle Village as a destination for some families. Two later articles by Simon Otto repeated the Cross Village story, but without indicating the source of the information (*Petoskey News-Review*, July 27, 1992; *Cheboygan Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1993). The second article by Otto incorrectly stated that the Burnout occurred in 1890.

The Cross Village version of the story was reproduced in the October Burt Lake Band Newsletter, without any mention of the relocation of families to Indian Road. The inconsistencies in the newspaper stories described above are typical of accounts that appear many years after an event, and indicate why historians try to find documentation as close to the date of the event as possible, from persons who had an opportunity to observe what went on first-hand. An effort is then made to find confirmation from several independent sources. This process has led the research team to conclude that although some families may have sought refuge in Middle Village, Harbor Springs, or Cross Village, the core of the community was reconstituted on Indian Road, where the Burt Lake Indian village thrived for several more decades.

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