

The Baraboo Valley's First Visitors

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

For years this column has presented Eben and Roseline Peck as the first visitors to the Baraboo Valley. On other occasions I have listed dam builders Abe Wood and Wallace Rowan as founders, depending on the known facts when I was writing.

As every history writer knows, a column that is fresh and accurate one day may be corrected by new facts the following day or month or year. There are many columns which I would like to rewrite in the light of new information!

Such is true with the question of who were the first white visitors to these Native American lands. Some tales credit Berry Haney, the first settler on Sauk Prairie, saying he was the first to penetrate the foreboding bluffs and view Devils Lake. But, did he continue into the valley?

There is no better source for local history than William Canfield. In his Second Sketch, he devoted two pages to the saga of five hardy residents of Prairie du Sac crossing the bluffs and crossing the river.

The Trailblazers start out

It was in October, 1839 that the adventure began. The new 1837 Treaty with the Native Americans had become effective, opening up the area north of the Wisconsin River to settlement. It was not known if the

local tribes had been informed, so the undertaking contained some element of risk.

Their probable trail began at the southern foot of the Baraboo bluffs via what became known later as the Burma Road. Perhaps it was first an Indian trail. It branches south from the South Shore Road to Devils Lake, but is a dead end road now due to the Badger plant.

Finding their way through thick underbrush, they came to the Baraboo River near the present Circus World grounds, crossing and entering the Indian village of chief Calimine. We've heard of the chief before, as Eben and Roseline Peck are said to have made the same crossing and visit. The Pecks were repulsed, but the five adventurers from Prairie du Sac report being warmly welcomed.

Visiting the Indian Villages

At the village the visitors were "much amused at seeing the Indians playing at cards and horse racing. Some of them would stake their last string of wampum on a single chance at the cards. The game we could not understand."

Proceeding upstream about five or six miles they came upon the village of Chief Dandy. Here "we were received with marked displeasure, many of them gathering around us and making much noise and confusion. After some parley, we succeeded in restoring quiet, and afterwards purchased some corn to feed our horses. "

With night coming on, the weather turned rainy, and they slept with no shelter but their blankets on "the most disagreeable night of my life. It was very chilly...pitch-dark...we were drenched to the skin, blankets and all." Eventually a fire was made, the clothes were dried, and they "returned back down the river, proceeding

back to the more hospitable lower village, and dining with the chief.”

The Return Home

It was now time to return home, provisions having run out, and “after a very tedious and tiring journey across the bluffs...we arrived at Sauk sometime after night and lodged in the primitive house. The latter was only a marginal improvement in our modern view”, for it was no more than a dugout on a hillside. However, they pronounced it as “a very agreeable change from the night before.”

This report appears to have been submitted to historian Canfield by C.O. Baxter, one of the five adventurers, the others being Berry Haney, Samuel Taylor, Burk Fairchild, and Solomon Shore. It probably was written many years later at Canfield’s request, for historical purposes.

“We saw no visible signs of white men in the Baraboo valley. I think in all probability we were the first white men that ever crossed the bluffs between (Sauk Prairie) and Baraboo valley.” Devils Lake was not mentioned. Did they miss meeting Abe Wood and the Pecks, or had they left for the winter?

An added observation: While writing this story in November, one of our astronauts was spending two weeks in space during which time his wife went into labor and bore a child.

Well, shortly after the events in this story, the wife of one of our explorers, Berry Haney gave birth on November 10, 1839 to Charles B, Haney, the first white child born in Sauk County. Can we presume that Haney was home for the event, or was he, like the astronaut, off on another adventure?