

Ho-Chunk and Winnebago Explained

More on the Legend of the Red Banks
Excerpts from
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by
Charles D. Robinson in 1856
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Upon a high bank, on the eastern shore of Green Bay about 12 miles north of town, is an interesting earth-work, bearing a singular resemblance to military defences [sic] of modern times. Its walls at one time, must have been some seven feet in height, or thereabouts, having a ditch or moat on the outside, and provided on its three exposed sides with regular bastions. Its fourth side fronts on a precipice of perhaps one hundred feet in height, whose base is washed by the waters of Green Bay; and leading down this steep bank impassable at any other immediate point, is what seems to have once been a protected passage of steps cut into the clay, and perhaps covered with bows of trees. This was the communication from the fort to the water; and standing here now, it needs but little fancy to see those grim warriors of the olden time filing down their covered way, with less of the pomp, and more of the nerve of the mailed knights of feudal days, issuing from their rock-bound castles.

In or near, the centre, are two parallel walls, about twenty-five feet long, which were probably united at the ends, as there is some appearance of it now. It is very difficult to imagine the use of this part of the structure, unless it was to protect valuables, or such inmates of the fort as were incapable of aiding in its defence. Had the place been constructed in these days, it would have made a magazine of the most approved kind. A few rods (a rod is 16.5 feet in length) to the north, outside the walls, and on the very brink of the precipice, is what was once, apparently, a look-out (a high mound of earth), a few feet high, now half carried off by the wearing away of the cliff. To the southward and eastward of the fort, occupying some hundreds of acres were the planting grounds of the people who inhabited the place. Large trees now over-grow the ground, yet the furrows are as distinctly marked as if made but last year, and are surprisingly

regular. The whole work is admirably placed, and would do credit to the forethought and judgment, so necessary in correct military positions of modern times.

This is the only ancient earth-work, it is believed, which possesses an undoubted history or tradition, and that is but the history of its fall. When and by whom it was built, there is no story---nothing but the persistent declarations of the Indians of the vicinity that it was the work of red men, long, long ago. The tradition which follows is related by O-kee-wah, or *the sea*, an Indian woman now living near the Red River, on the eastern shore of Green Bay, and who, beyond doubt, is upwards of 100 years of age. She sat over a wigwam fire, only a few nights ago, and related this story, while the light of other days faintly illumined her wrinkles face as she marked out in the ashes the plan of the campaign, and as she told of the long days of desperate fighting, in which her ancestors were engaged, her withered arms seemed nerved with the strength of youth, like the old soldier, who

-----"Shouldered his crutch
And fought his battles O'er again."

"It was long ago," said O-kee-wah --- "I was so high --- placing her hand about three feet from the ground, when my grandfather told me the story. The *Sauks* and the *Outgamies* lived in the old fort at the Red banks. They had lived there a long time, and had their planting ground there, and ruled the whole country. The forests eastward were full of deer, the waters of the Bay were full of fish, and they possessed the whole. We (the *Menomonies*) lived over the Bay (at the Menomonee River), and we sent down the lakes, inviting the other tribes to come up and help us drive out the Sauks and Outgamies. They came in canoes -- the *Chippewas*, the *Pottawattamies*, the *Ottawas* and many more. You see how wide this bay is; their canoes stretched half way across; the bay was half-full of canoes, and each canoe was full of fighting men; they sent their greatest braves. They landed here at the Red River, after coming across the Menomonee, and for two miles along the beach their canoes were so thick that no more could be crowded in. From here

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they all went, in the night, to the Red Banks. They had bows and arrows, and the heads of the arrows were flint. Silently they paddled along until they came to the fort, and then the canoes were stationed all along in front, out of reach of arrows from the shore. A part of the warriors staid [sic] in the canoes, and a part went on shore and formed a line around the fort, so that, with those on shore and those on the water, it was completely surrounded, and there was no escape for the people inside. So cautiously was this all done, that of all within that fated fort, but one discovered it. A young woman, whose parents lived within the walls, had that day been given, against her will, to be the wife of one of the Sauks living in the immediate vicinity. In the night she ran away from his wigwam and went home, passing on her way the lines of the besiegers. Rushing into the fort, she awakened her family, with the cry, 'We are all dead!' The father laughed at her story, and laid [sic] down to sleep again."

"Just before daylight the battle began, and it lasted many days. The besieged fought bravely, standing in the trenches within the walls, and blood was up to their ankles. They had no water, for the supply was cut off by the party on the beach. They tried in every way to obtain it. Vessels attached to cords were let down to the water by night, but the cords were cut before they could be drawn up. 'Come down and drink!' cried the Menomonies; 'here is plenty of water, if you dare to come down and get it.' And they did go down many times. These taunts, and their great necessity, made that narrow way the scene of many desperate sallies, but all to no purpose. The besiegers were too strong".

"The heat of the burning sun, and the dreadful suffering for the want of water became intolerable. Some rain fell once, but it was only a partial relief for those who were perishing in sight of that sparkling water which was almost in their reach. At length one of the youngest chiefs, after fasting strictly for ten days, thus addressed his companions: 'Listen!---last night there stood by me the form of a young man clothed in white, who said, I was alive once---was dead, and now live forever; only trust in me, now and always, and I will deliver you. Fear not. At midnight I will cast a deep sleep upon your enemies. Then go forth boldly and silently, and you shall escape.'"

"Thus encouraged, and knowing this to be a direct revelation, the besieged warriors decided to leave the fort. That night an unusual silence pervaded the entire host of their enemies, who had been before so wakeful. So in silent, stealthy lines, the wearied people passed out and fled. Only a few, who disbelieved the vision, preferred to remain, and were massacred with fiercer barbarity than ever, when the next morning the besieging tribes awake from their strange slumbers to find their prey was gone."

Note:

Books researched for this article: *Wisconsin Historical Collections*--- Volume III, IV, X, XIII and XIV.....Volume X contains an index for Volumes I thru X