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EKWABET - WATCHING OVER

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

The statue has a name: "Ekwabet" means "watching over".

The tribal councils of the Potawatomi Nation chose it.

The naming ceremony of the St. Charles Potawatomi Indian statue finally took place on Thursday, June 28, 1989, when a small group of Potawatomi Indians in full dress regalia gathered at the foot of the statue just north of the Main Street bridge.

The ceremony included ritual prayers and dancing.

Now the statue is sacred to the Potawatomi Indian Nation.

"Over the years we can expect to see Indian families come into St. Charles to visit the statue," said James Dowd, St. Charles historian and writer of several books about Indians.

According to Potawatomi oral history, "we were always here" in the Fox River Valley. However, some historians believe that the forbears of all of the American Indians entered the unpopulated New World 10,000 to 20,000 years ago from Asia across the Bering Strait into Alaska. As the glacial ice from that last Ice Age receded, streams, flowers, meadows, and forests appeared in all their grandeur. Wisconsin and Michigan lakes teemed with waterfowl and wild rice.

The northeastern Woodland Indians, which included the Potawatomi, entered our written history with reports of French explorers who set up vast trading systems even before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. By 1750 the semi-nomadic villages of the Potawatomi stretched from the Rock River on the west, south to Peoria, and east to Lake Michigan - long before any white settlers entered the area.

However, as the European immigrants from the Atlantic coast continued their relentless westward advance over the Appalachian mountains and into the American heartland, border clashes with the Indians inevitably ensued. The long years of the Indian wars

culminated in the defeat of the Indians. Multiple peace treaties forced them to cede all claims to their Illinois lands and leave the banks of the beautiful Fox River where they had lived peacefully for centuries.

Shabni (Shabonna), a peace chief and spokesman for the Potawatomi, was born in Michigan in 1775 and died in 1859.

Always a true friend to the first white settlers in the Fox River Valley, he observed:

"In my youthful days, I have seen large herds of buffalo on these prairies but they are here no more. For hundreds of miles no white man lived but now trading posts and settlers are found throughout the country, and in a few years the smoke from their cabins will ascend from every grove....The red man must leave the land of his youth and find a new home in the far west. The armies of the whites are without number, like the sands of the sea."

The first Potawatomi Indian statue in St. Charles was installed in Potawatomi Park and dedicated in 1915. That statue was vandalized and destroyed in 1965 and only the head remains in the St. Charles Historical Society museum.

In 1985, William Berg of the St. Charles Rotary Club suggested a new community service project to the Rotary members:

replace the Indian statue. Such an ambitious project was then possible because nationally famous sculptor Guy Bellaver, a new St. Charles resident and Rotary Club member, offered to donate much of his work on the statue.

The project snowballed to capture the imagination of the whole community. St. Charles business leaders formed a special committee to raise money for the statue and guide the project to completion. Cash donations eventually exceeded \$85,000. The value of additional volunteer materials and services is incalculable.

The Indian Statue Dedication Ceremony took place May 22, 1988, at the foot of the statue. Community leaders spoke. School children read winning essays about the occasion. Some Potawatomi Indians attended as honored guests.

According to James Dowd, the Potawatomi Indians feel that the statue is a great honor for them and has helped reunite the four surviving bands of the Potawatomi Indian Nation as they participated in the ceremonies of 1988 and 1989.

Louis Shepard, Secretary of the Executive Council of the Forest County Potawatomi Community wrote to the people of St. Charles in a letter published in the St. Charles Chronicle:

"The Potawatomi people are extremely grateful for your

untiring efforts and devotion you all have demonstrated in relation to the honored statue on our behalf.....It has always been a custom of ours to share and to live in peace, harmony, and balance with all that the creator has given his children. Our ancestral hunting grounds and homeland shall be somewhat restored by your gesture of this great honor you bestow upon the Potawatomi Nation. The spirits of both our ancestors will receive great satisfaction knowing that our hearts and our minds have once again crossed paths in peace and harmony....."

Any serious student of history realizes that the only constant in history is change. People and populations shift. Nations come and go. We know that the Potawatomi were here two hundred years ago. We do not know who will be in this beautiful Fox Valley two hundred years from now.

In his speech at the dedication of the statue on May 22, 1988, Mayor Fred Norris put history in perspective when he said, "Our local museum shows how two great people walked different roads to the same spot and how, with the same ideals, they formed a community of people, a village, a city to raise their families on the river bluff and in the prairies of the Fox Valley. The history of this ground we stand on is a long and continuing

process of all the people who passed this way before us and left memories of themselves and their words."

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,

Bears all its sons away;

They fly, forgotten, as a dream

Dies at the opening day.

-Isaac Watts, 1719

St. Charles has not forgotten. And that, perhaps, has made a difference.

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