

# A DAY IN THE LIFE *of* Ojibwe

ONE WINTER DAY late in 1850, Ojibwe thought back over the year that was ending. He was 30 years old. Both he and his tribe shared the same name, a point of pride for the young man. Ojibwe was neither a civil nor a war chief. He was not a spiritual leader. However, like many of his people, he was, through circumstance and birth, directly and inextricably linked to the huge shifts and changes affecting his community. His father, Zoongakamig (Strong Ground), and uncle Bagone-giizhig (Hole-in-the-Day I) had been defending Ojibwe lands and livelihoods from the Dakota Indians and American intruders since the early 1800s, and 1850 was a time of great change.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of that year Ojibwe had traveled to Crow Wing with other members of his band and family to winter where they could hunt for food and trap beaver and muskrat to sell for supplies. They had harvested, parched, jigged, and stored wild rice in pitch-lined birch-bark containers near the portages and trails they used during the winter, as their people had been doing for centuries. Ojibwe saw the ducks beginning to migrate, but a mallard or wood duck would have been a delicacy, a rare treat, for him. Ojibwe didn't have a shotgun, and those who did saved their ammunition for bigger game or kept it in reserve in case there was any trouble with Dakota warriors.

When he arrived at Crow Wing he



Daguerreotype of Ojibwe's cousin Bagone-giizhig (Hole-in-the-Day) II, 1855

saw that hundreds of other Ojibwe people had already gathered. Crow Wing always became densely populated at that season. A winter hunting site for Ojibwe living at Sandy Lake, Mille Lacs, and Leech Lake since the early 1800s, it had become a true, rugged border town after the 1847 Ojibwe treaty ceded the region. White traders had flooded in to take advantage of the new Ho-chunk (Winnebago) and Menominee reservations as well as the older Ojibwe communities. By 1850 Crow Wing had a substantial white population as well as a growing and powerful mixed-blood trading elite. Liquor

was a staple trade item, and gambling was as common as trade.<sup>2</sup>

Warfare was taboo in the colder months when Ojibwe and his family focused their energies on hunting, fishing, and trapping. If men had been diverted to war, the people would have starved to death. Therefore, both the Ojibwe and Dakota people traveled to the border regions in the winter and often lived, hunted, and fished together. The Ojibwe called this practice *biindigodaadiwin*—to enter one another's lodges.<sup>3</sup>

The winter before this, Ojibwe and his cousin Bagone-giizhig II had visited and hunted with the Dakota at Crow Wing. Then, in spring, they went on a daring raid to the heart of Dakota territory around St. Paul with only two other companions.

After traveling by canoe for more than 80 miles, they ambushed a lone Dakota man. Ojibwe shot and scalped him, then quickly retreated across the river, being chased all the while by nearby Dakota warriors.<sup>4</sup> Now, Ojibwe gambled and told stories with his Dakota friends in the evening. He and his sometimes enemies knew that after winter was over they would return to their summer villages and perhaps fight each other.

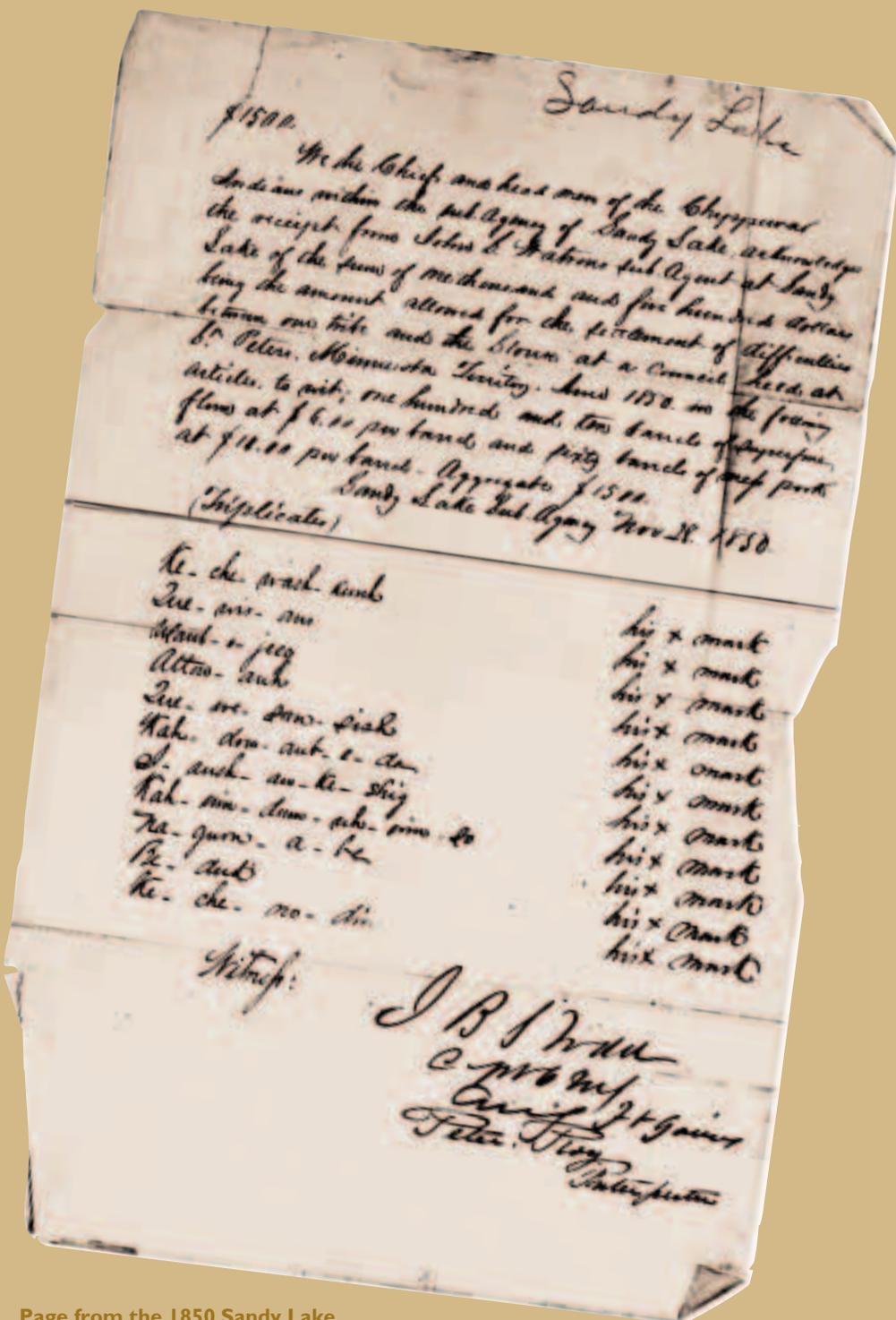
Such alliances weren't normal for Ojibwe or his band, but he was living in trying times. In 1850 the reservation system was beginning to put an end to older life cycles and challenge

his entire culture. Ojibwe, his friends and family, and his Dakota counterparts were all profoundly affected by the vast changes taking place.

Like many natives, Ojibwe's growing-up years had been filled with tragedy. Both of his brothers and his mother had been killed by Dakota warriors. And, like many others, Ojibwe's father, Strong Ground, had died of alcohol poisoning in 1845. His uncle, Bagone-giizhig I, had fallen out of an oxcart in a drunken stupor after treaty negotiations with the Americans in 1847 and had been crushed to death.<sup>5</sup>

By 1850, when the creation of Minnesota Territory was being lauded as one of the greatest advancements of civilization in the region, Ojibwe and his people were feeling more pressure on their lands, livelihoods, and lives than ever before. The fur trade that had enabled them to sustain and even increase their standard of living during the period of French explorations was declining. In order to keep his children well fed, Ojibwe, like other Indian people, had to use every resource at his disposal.

While the Ojibwe and Dakota had a complex and sometimes bizarre relationship, nothing was as strange as their newest neighbors, the Americans. When Americans began to talk of land cessions, Ojibwe found the concept hard to fathom. He and many other young Indians didn't trust the American officials, but times were hard. Game was increasingly scarce, and even their children went hungry. When the Americans promised annual payments of food and money in return for land cessions, Ojibwe and others in his community said no. But when the Americans said that the Indians could still



Page from the 1850 Sandy Lake annuity-payment rolls, acknowledging receipt of superfine flour and pork valued at \$1,500

hunt and fish on that land, Ojibwe and many companions acquiesced.

Ojibwe felt trapped by the new treaties. He needed the money and food annuities to support his family, but he had never depended on anyone for that before. He was even more frustrated when white people streamed into the ceded lands and, in clear violation of the treaties, stopped him from hunting there. White traders offered Ojibwe food on credit, but when the next treaty signing came they used those claims to take most of his annuity payments. Trapped like the otter he harvested every winter, Ojibwe had to sign more treaties to get more annuities. The more he gave up, the harder it became to live as he and his ancestors had for centuries.

And just when Ojibwe thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. In the fall of 1850 he and his cousin, the young chief Hole-in-the-Day II, along with some 3,000 Ojibwe people had gone to Sandy Lake to receive their annuity payments. The invigorating feeling of being party to such a large gathering quickly turned to horror, however. American officials fed the Indians spoiled meat. As many as 400 people died from food poisoning and dysentery. Ojibwe, Hole-in-the-Day II, and other Indians felt that the poisoning was intentional. American officials claimed it was an accident, however, and no reparations were made.<sup>6</sup>

Ojibwe had always been proud of his warrior traditions. The Dakota scalp he took in the spring of 1850 was not his first. Yet, more than his skills as a fighter, he was proudest of his self-sufficiency, his ability to feed his family and live well by the work of his own hands—hunting, trapping, and fishing. He loved the land—the pristine lakes and huge stands of white and red pine. As much as anybody ever could, he owned that land

and knew it intimately. Now he was being forced off of it, and his skills as a woodsman had no testing ground. Ojibwe was faced with a gut-wrenching decision and the ultimate test of his character and resourcefulness. How would he meet that attack? Would he run and seek refuge in alcohol? Would he try to adapt to the ways of the white man for everything from religion to economy? Would he cling ever stronger to the ways of his prayerful people and fight the onslaught by refusing to give in? The dilemma that Ojibwe faced on that December day in 1850 was that of all Ojibwe people.

OJIBWE STOOD FIRM *for everything he valued—to protect his family, his people, and their shared culture. He survived that way through Minnesota statehood, the U.S.-Dakota conflict in 1862, and removal to a new reservation at White Earth in the late 1860s. He was alive to hear about the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He lived to witness the advent of electricity, the telephone, and the first radio transmission in 1906, although he never acquired any of these luxuries in his own home. He outlived Queen Victoria, who died in 1901. At the ripe age of 91, Ojibwe passed away at his home on White Earth Indian Reservation in 1911.*<sup>7</sup>

*Many of his tribesmen were not so resilient. They succumbed to the bullets and diseases brought by the invaders. Or they took their own lives slowly through vicious drinking. While many perished in the assault on their lives and livelihoods, Ojibwe and people like him survived to tell their stories and build a new future for their families and all who came after. Resiliency and survival, even more than tragedy and change, are the legacy of Ojibwe's life and times.* 🌿

—Anton Treuer and David Treuer

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ojibwe (1820–1911) was the son of Strong Ground, a leader from Sandy Lake who had helped establish a new village around Gull Lake. William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (1885; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS] Press, 1984), 47; Mark Diedrich, *The Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day of the Mississippi Chippewa* (Minneapolis: Coyote Books, 1986), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Crow Wing became a populous, permanent Ojibwe settlement under the leadership of Ojibwe's cousin, Hole-in-the-Day II; Diedrich, *Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day*, 13; Julia A. Spears, "Reminiscence of Hole-in-the-Day," 2, Julia A. Spears and Family Papers, MHS. On the treaty, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: MHS, 1956), 1:310, 324.

<sup>3</sup> Warren, *History of the Ojibway*, 267.

<sup>4</sup> Diedrich, *Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Diedrich, *Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day*, 14–15. See also, Stephen R. Riggs, *Tah-Koo Wah-Kan: The Gospel Among the Dakotas* (Boston: Congregational Sabbath School and Publishing Society, 1869), 444; Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah: Or, the Life and Legends of the Sioux* (1849; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1962), 205. Bagone-giizhig's death was widely reported in local newspapers.

<sup>6</sup> *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), Jan. 21, 1851; Helen H. Tanner, ed., *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 167; Diedrich, *Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day*, 21–22.

<sup>7</sup> Ojibwe was active in affairs at White Earth, even in his later years. See Melissa Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 105.



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