

THE STORY OF BEENGWA, DAUGHTER OF A CHIPPEWA WARRIOR¹

In the summer of 1927 it was the good fortune of the writer to have the privilege of an interview with Mrs. George Curtis, an Indian woman then more than ninety years of age who was originally a member of the Sandy Lake band of Chippewa. Mrs. Curtis, whose Indian name was Beengwa, was born on Brown's Point on the south shore of the bay at the northwest extremity of Sandy Lake in Aitkin County.² She died in the early part of 1928. At the time of the interview she was apparently in vigorous health and in full possession of her somewhat unusual mental faculties. Her memory was clear and her statements definite with reference to matters of which she had personal knowledge. Her readiness to say "no" to questions regarding matters beyond her own knowledge gave increased credence to her positive statements. Although she understood and spoke English without difficulty, she preferred to give her answers and tell her stories in the native Chippewa tongue. Her statements were interpreted for the writer by Mr. Charles Wakefield, a son by her first marriage with Joseph Wakefield, a white man who was an early settler in the Sandy Lake region. Beengwa's sparkling black eyes, her interest and vivacity, and her entire lack of the customary reserve of the Indian in contact with a stranger made the interview a genuine pleasure as well as an unusual privilege.

Beengwa was the seventh and youngest of the children of Augenosh, one of the leading men, although not the chief, of

¹ This paper was read on June 14, 1928, at the Vineland session of the seventh state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

² For a map of Sandy Lake see *ante*, 7: 313.

the Sandy Lake band. Both Augenosh and his wife, according to Mrs. Curtis, lived to be more than a hundred years old. This statement, however, must be taken with some reservations, as exact age is evidently not a matter of accurate record among these Indians. Mrs. Curtis did not know her own age, but evidence in her narrative indicates that she was born about 1835 or 1836, and the fact that she was the seventh child of her parents would place the date of the birth of her father, Augenosh, sometime in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Augenosh died some forty or fifty years ago.

Augenosh was one of the greatest hunters and most successful trappers among the Indians of the upper Mississippi Valley. "He worked by nature,"^a and was one of the few hunters who could get a moose in the summer time. This he did by going out into the deep woods and listening to the deer flies. When he heard a loud humming of the flies he knew that there was a deer or moose somewhere near and was thus able to stalk his prey. With his wife he would go away in his canoe and stay in the woods for months at a time and he always came home with his canoe loaded with furs. At times both he and his wife "packed" for a trading outfit which used the old Savanna Portage. This trail was, however, never in common use within the period of Mrs. Curtis' memory.

As has been said, Beengwa did not know her exact age, but she suggested that it could be figured out from the date of the last battle between the Sandy Lake band and the Sioux in the latter's territory. The circumstances connected with this battle she remembered well, and she said that at the time she was about the age of her little six-year-old grandson "Muck" Wakefield, who was an interested auditor of the interview.

On the occasion of the battle, according to Mrs. Curtis, Augenosh was the war leader of the Sandy Lake band, which

^a All exact reproductions of Mrs. Curtis' phraseology, as interpreted by Mr. Wakefield, are indicated by quotation marks.

was joined by other bands of Chippewa from Mille Lacs and elsewhere for the invasion of the Sioux country. The Chippewa made their way down the Mississippi to the vicinity of a Sioux village "at St. Paul." There, crawling up through the brush to the edge of a brook, they "laid low" until daylight. It was understood that the attack should not be made until Augenosh gave the signal.

Early in the morning the Chippewa heard sounds in one of the Sioux tepees and soon a Sioux woman came out and started down to the brook to get water for breakfast. As she came in sight Augenosh "hollered," giving the signal for the attack; and he rushed forward, killed and scalped the woman, and the fight began. The Sioux warriors, surprised in their sleep, "fought naked except for their powder horns." The attack was entirely successful, many Sioux being killed without the loss of a single Chippewa warrior.

It had been agreed before the war party left Brown's Point that as soon as the returning warriors arrived within sound of the village they were to fire shots — two if none of their men had been killed and four if some had fallen in the fight. The women and children waited anxiously for the return of their men until one day they heard two shots away down in the woods southwest of the lake in the direction of the old portage trail leading from the Mississippi. Immediately, according to custom, they began a race through the woods to meet the returning warriors. Beengwa's eldest sister won the race and received as her prize the first scalp taken, that of the Sioux woman killed by her father, Augenosh. Two days later this sister gave birth to a son, later known as Joe Barney, who eventually became the chief of the Sandy Lake band. He died some years ago at the approximate age of eighty.

After the return of the war party a scalp dance was held. Members of other near-by bands came to Sandy Lake for the dance, which began at nightfall and continued through the entire night and most of the next day. The scalp taken by

Augenosh was fastened to a long pole⁴ decorated with all kinds and colors of ribbons, which stood, when it was not being used in the dance, in front of Augenosh's tepee at the very end of the point. During the progress of the dance Beengwa herself received the pole and danced around with it in the middle of her circle. At the conclusion of her part of the dance she was supposed to stick the pole in the sand, but she was too little to make it stand up and had to be helped by one of the older women. During the celebration Beengwa also danced the "taking-away dance."⁵ For this purpose her father gave her many pieces of bright-colored calico, which she carried over her left arm, and as she danced around the circle the visitors one by one took pieces of the calico. When the dances were over the scalp was handed to a representative of another band and the time and place of the next dance, at which members of the Sandy Lake band would be visitors and would receive gifts in the "taking-away dance," were announced. Thus the scalp went from village to village and from band to band until the celebration of the victory was completed.

The battle between the Chippewa and the Sioux that Mrs. Curtis described is undoubtedly the battle of Kaposia or Pig's Eye Lake, which was fought in 1842 within the present city limits of St. Paul. The Chippewa from Fond du Lac, Sandy Lake, and Mille Lacs formed a war party and invaded the Sioux territory. According to J. Fletcher Williams, the plans for the attack were well laid. The Chippewa concealed themselves in the brush along the bank of a creek, now known as Battle Creek, across the river from the Sioux village; and, had it not been for the fact that some Chippewa warrior yielded to the temptation to take the scalp of a Sioux woman, the invaders might have been able to exterminate the entire band

⁴ Mrs. Curtis here indicated with her cane the length of the pole.

⁵ This is also called the "giving-of-gifts dance."

of Sioux. As it was, however, a premature attack was made upon the cabin of a French half-breed, whose squaw was killed and scalped, thus warning the Sioux. Their warriors were deep in drunken slumber following a debauch the night before, and, according to custom, their squaws had hidden their guns and ammunition to prevent bloodshed among themselves. When the alarm of the Chippewa attack was given there was time for the squaws to dig up the arms and, partially at least, to sober up their warriors by throwing water over them. The Sioux outnumbered the Chippewa, and since the advantages of surprise had been lost, they were able after several hours of fighting to drive the invaders from the field. The Chippewa lost a number of warriors, but the Sioux loss is believed to have been greater. The sounds of the battle reached Fort Snelling and a detachment of soldiers was sent out to quell the outbreak, but it did not arrive at the battle field until after the conclusion of the conflict.⁶

Another account of the battle, as recorded by August L. Larpenteur, who settled in St. Paul in 1843, follows:

In the spring of 1842, the year before I came here, a war party of Ojibway Indians made an attack upon Little Crow's band of Sioux at Kaposia, close south of St. Paul, killing some eighteen or twenty of their best soldiers. They came from the St. Croix, and early in the morning of the attack they secreted their men in ambush along the coulie just below the present fish hatchery, where the old poor farm used to be. From there at early dawn, they started two scouts to make a demonstration on the village. Before they reached the site of the village, however, they came upon Francis Gammel's house. Two Sioux squaws were hoeing potatoes, a little patch of which they had in the yard. They shot and scalped the poor women, and from this an alarm was given. The Sioux on the village side, west of the Mississippi, immediately started as many as they could in pursuit. The scouts kept in sight, but at sufficient distance to be out of danger, and thus led the Sioux completely into ambush, when the fight began, and

⁶ Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul and of the County of Ramsey*, 122-125 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4).

eighteen of the Sioux fell at the first fire. Quite a number of the Ojibways were killed outright, and some of the wounded were dispatched afterwards by the women who followed in the rear. Old Bets told me that she dismembered one. He was a tough fellow, and, her hatchet being dull, she had a deal of hard work before she could accomplish her object satisfactorily. . . . For a long time, even after I came here, the excitement in regard to this raid by the Ojibways was the topic of almost every day's conversation, and an Ojibway Indian was supposed to be hidden behind every bush.⁷

The differences between Mrs. Curtis' account and those given in earlier records are not particularly significant. It is natural that the story told by the returning Chippewa warriors should have glorified their own success and minimized the exploits of the enemy. It is possible that none of the Sandy Lake Chippewa was among those slain in the battle.

Some time after the battle at St. Paul, according to Mrs. Curtis, there was a retaliatory raid by the Sioux into the Sandy Lake territory. Two Indians of the Sandy Lake band, one a comparatively young man and the other a more mature warrior, were "fire-hunting" deer on Rice Lake, called Lake Minnewawa by the Indians, southeast of Sandy Lake. They

⁷ Larpenteur, "Recollections of the City and People of St. Paul," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9: 374. Other accounts of the battle of Kaposia by Edward D. Neill, Samuel W. Pond, and William W. Warren may be found in the *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 182, 3: 134, and 5: 493. Contemporary references to the event appear in letters from Gideon H. Pond and William T. Boutwell to S. W. Pond, dated June 26 and 29, 1842, in the Pond Papers; and from Boutwell to David Greene, dated September 15, 1842, in the papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Edmund F. Ely, the missionary at Pokegama, tells of the departure and return of the Chippewa warriors in his diary for June 3 and 27, 1842. Photostatic copies or transcripts of all of these papers are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. These accounts vary as to the number in the Chippewa war party; Ely states that thirty-nine left from Pokegama. The losses of the Sioux are given as from nine to twenty. Five Chippewa reported killed in the battle are named by Ely, but no members of the Sandy Lake band are included. Several writers agree that the scalps of two Sioux women were taken by the Chippewa.

slept under the shelter of their overturned canoe. "Indians have a way of knowing things that they can't see." "Just at the peep of daylight" the older Indian woke up suddenly because he felt cold chills running up and down his back. He woke his companion, told him that something was wrong, and ordered him to get up and begin to stretch and pretend that he was going to get breakfast. He was to turn the canoe over, push it out into the water, and then jump into the bow with his paddle ready, paying no attention to what his companion was doing. The younger man did as he was told, and after he had pushed the canoe out into the shallow water along the margin of the lake, the older Indian jumped up suddenly, ran to the canoe, gave it "a big shove" out into the rushes, jumped in, and both of them began to ply their paddles vigorously.

Immediately there was a series of war whoops from the brush behind them and twenty or thirty Sioux came rushing down to the lake shore. The Sioux fired continuously at the two Chippewa, but as the latter were hidden by the reeds and rushes, the shots went wild. The Chippewa crossed Lake Minnewawa, going toward the place where the present dance pavilion is located.⁸ Then they turned to the north, portaged their canoe at Greenwood's, paddled across the north end of the lake, made a second portage to Billhorn Bay on Sandy Lake, and thence made their way to Moosegut Island, where their village was located.

The Sioux meanwhile, not having canoes, had been making their way on foot as rapidly as possible along the shore of Minnewawa. They reached Sandy Lake just about the time the two Chippewa arrived at their village. The Chippewa warriors seized their guns and a battle, during a part of which the contending parties fought standing in the water, took place

⁸ Modern local references were supplied by the interpreter, Mr. Wakefield.

between Moosegut Island and the mainland. The Sioux were driven off and lost a number of their warriors. This, according to Mrs. Curtis and Mr. Wakefield, is the event that accounts for the name of Battle Island. Mr. Wakefield said that he had heard the same story told by many of the old Chippewa.⁹

The accompanying picture of Augenosh was taken many years ago in his full war regalia. Every feather in his war bonnet indicates a Sioux killed in battle. Mrs. Curtis said that she could tell from the feathers which represented men and which women. The photograph was not at hand at the time of the interview, so this detailed identification is now impossible.

Other miscellaneous items of information given by Mrs. Curtis in answer to questions follow:

The first Chippewa chief whom she remembered was Hole-in-the-Day. She also recalled a chief of the Sandy Lake band named Misquadace, who died twenty or more years ago.¹⁰

The section of land deeded to Misquadace by the treaty of 1864, when the Chippewa ceded the Sandy Lake Reservation, was on or near Savanne Lake.¹¹ Misquadace told the Sandy

⁹ This account differs from other traditions current in the neighborhood among the white settlers, some of which connect the naming of Battle Island with one of the many fierce encounters that occurred between the Chippewa and the Sioux at the time of the first invasion of the Sandy Lake region by the Chippewa. Locally the name Battle Island is now often attached to the island that Mrs. Curtis called Moosegut, which lies about half a mile west and a little south of Indian Point Lodge.

¹⁰ One of the younger Indian women present said that Misquadace, also called Musquot, died while she was a pupil at Pipestone Indian School in 1900.

¹¹ This is probably Little Savanne Lake, near the Larson farm in Balsam Township. The writer was informed that there is still a tract of Indian land containing 160 acres near this lake. There was formerly a permanent Indian village on Little Savanne Lake. For a map showing this lake see *ante*, 8:131.

Lake Indians that they could come and live on his land on Savanne Lake whenever they had no other place for a home.

In addition to Misquadace's land, Mrs. Curtis said that she knew of three forty acre tracts that were deeded to three Indians as a sort of hush money to quiet their complaints over their treatment by the government and the white settlers. These three Indians were Wambedeya, Chewaynanee (Chewaywanee), and Ayabedwaywedung.¹² The deed to the forty ceded to Ayabedwaywedung was lost with other papers when his wigwam at East Lake burned many years ago. Mrs. Curtis said that she had a deed to one of the other forties. The forty deeded to Chewaynanee was just above the old Libby store, northwest of Sandy Lake. She believed that this deed was on file at Aitkin. She was one of the heirs of Chewaynanee.

The Indian name of "Old Muck," an Indian for whom Muck's Island in Sandy Lake was named, was Muckandwaywenanee.

She remembered the location of the old stockade on Brown's Point, where the Northwest Company had its post, and said that if she were there she could locate it exactly. It stood halfway down the point from the ridge. She remembered when the Indian gardens west of the stockade were plowed up. A man named Barzeen who had the only stock—probably oxen—in the country did the plowing for the Indians. Barzeen's other name was Jordain, possibly Mrs. Curtis' pronunciation of Jordan.

The Catholic mission on Sandy Lake stood on the ridge near Hartinger's cabin. There are many Indian graves on the hill up toward Ridge Park. There is another Indian burying

¹² An Indian named Awawbedwaywedung or Returning Echo signed the treaty of 1863 as the representative of the Sandy and Rice Lake bands of Chippewa. Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties*, 2: 842 (Washington, 1904).

ground on the point near Benedict's cabin. The biggest burying ground for the Chippewa was between Sandy and Minnewawa lakes. There are a few graves near McKay's store.

Mrs. Curtis had never heard the story of the death of a number of Chippewa at Sandy Lake as a result of eating poisoned meat. She did remember, however, a big payment at Sandy Lake when the Indians, who came from up and down the river and from as far as Otter Tail Lake and Mille Lacs, were issued some flour that poisoned them and caused many deaths. Mrs. Curtis said that she remembered several outbreaks of smallpox and measles, which caused many deaths among the Chippewa.

Although Beengwa's father and mother both were born in the eighteenth century, neither of them had ever seen pottery made by the Indians. The pottery that is now found around Sandy Lake was not, in Mrs. Curtis' opinion, made by the Sioux, but by the "old Indians"—the Indians who were there before the Sioux.

She had never heard of Biauswah, nor of the battles of Sandy Lake and Pine Knoll; but she did remember hearing of the capture of a number of Chippewa women by the Sioux.¹³ The women lived with their Sioux husbands for some time and then came back to Sandy Lake bringing their children with them.

Mrs. Curtis said that every Chippewa has an animal symbol.¹⁴ All mixed-bloods have the symbol of the eagle; the full-bloods have various symbols—loon, turtle, beaver, and the like. Her father's was a bull head. As she said this, she laughed, and pointing to a little Muck, her grandson, said, "He's a little bull head." The Indian men have the symbol of the family; the women have something different.

¹³ For accounts of Biauswah and the early Chippewa-Sioux battles around Sandy Lake, see N. H. Winchell, *The Aborigines of Minnesota*, 533 (St. Paul, 1911), and Warren, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5: 222, 226-232.

¹⁴ Mr. Wakefield called this "the Chippewa coat of arms."

Joe Libby was the first lumberman on Sandy Lake, but before he began logging here there was logging farther up the Mississippi.

Billhorn Bay was named for Bill Horn, the first logger at the east end of the lake. In answer to a question whether this name was "Billhorn" or "Bill Horn," Mrs. Curtis said, "Bill Horn, just like Bill Ingersoll."¹⁵

Mrs. Curtis knew nothing about William Aitken or Aitken's post. When she was a girl the store at the mouth of Sandy River was run by Bolyay and Lyons.¹⁶

The father of John Joseph, the present head of the little remnant of the Sandy Lake band, was with Augenosh in the fight at St. Paul. His name was Garwandawawis. He brought home from the battle of Kaposia a scalp which he gave to John Joseph.

Mrs. Curtis gave a version of the story of the first coming of the Chippewa to Sandy Lake that is slightly different from that related to the writer in 1926.¹⁷ According to her account a Chippewa warrior and his squaw came from their home in Wisconsin, looking for new hunting grounds. They came overland from the St. Louis River to the Prairie River and made their way through the woods along the latter stream. In the afternoon of the last day of their westward progress the warrior shot and killed some game and brought it to his squaw to be dressed and prepared for the evening meal while he was scouting in the vicinity. A short distance from camp he saw two loons swooping down as they do when they are settling into the water and he said to himself, "There must be a lake there." Pushing on to the height of land now known as "The Highlands," he saw suddenly a large lake with many

¹⁵ For a reference to William J. Horn, see Winchell, *Aborigines of Minnesota*, 662.

¹⁶ These are phonetic spellings. It is possible that "Bolyay" was a member of the well-known Beaulieu family.

¹⁷ See *ante*, 8: 118-120.

islands and a Sioux village near at hand. "He made a map of the lake in his head" and went back to where his squaw was getting the evening meal. He described in detail the shape of the lake and the location of the islands and the Sioux village. The Sioux had heard the musket shot fired during the afternoon by the Chippewa and had sent scouts out to find who was there. These scouts returned with the news of the presence of the Chippewa and his squaw. A Sioux party set out in pursuit and killed the warrior. The squaw made her way back to her people in Wisconsin and in revenge for the death of this warrior the first Chippewa war party came to Sandy Lake.

Mrs. Curtis said that the evidences of early settlement on the northwest shore of Sandy Lake were probably the remains of cabins built and occupied by some French half-breeds, who had lived there within her memory. She stated that there had never been a trading post on or near this location.

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