



Historical White Lake

Wabaningo: The Man

By Bennett Hartz

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White Lake's mythical Wabaningo figure dates to at least 1897, when cottagers erected a white clapboard hotel nicknamed "The Wabaningo" on its western shore. Though the hotel has disappeared, "Wabaningo" still adorns the local post office, community center, and Boy Scouts camp. The entire area bears the name on Google Maps and Wikipedia, though in practice it is called Sylvan Beach. A statue claiming to be a man named Wabaningo overlooks Lake Michigan from the bluffs. It bears no plaque, no story. The mystery of the man is old as the community of Sylvan Beach itself.

One reason for the mystery is his name. Transcribing names into the Latin alphabet is more art than science, and "Wabaningo" had many variations. The 1906 Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection transcribed his name as "Wab-i-wid-i-go," but in 1912 switched to "Wab-win-de-go." His name appears elsewhere as "Wobwindego," "Wab-i-wid-i-go," "Wabiwindigo," "Wobiwindigo," and "Wab-in-de-go." The spelling based directly on his own pronunciation was "Wabiwindego," meaning "White Wendigo" in Ottawa. "White" was perhaps a reference to white hair, or mixed-race heritage, or even White Lake—which the Ottawa called it, too.

Wabiwindego was an ogima (Ottawa for "leader") in the Ottawa tribe that lived along the Grand River and the west coast of Michigan. His small band was part of a larger tribe called the Grand River Ottawa. His largest village sat at the meeting of the Grand and the Flat Rivers, but he moved around Michigan through the year, following the richest soil, sugar groves, fishing, and hunting. He had at least three daughters and four sons, and was tall and white-bearded.

Like many Ottawa, Wabiwindego maintained good trade relations with settlers (the word Ottawa itself means "trader"). In 1828, for example, he took in a teenage runaway named Daniel Marsac and helped him build a trading post at his village on the Grand River.

Michigan's sandy, unproductive soil kept settlers away for many years, but that all changed in the 1820s. First, Wabiwindego's fellow ogima Kewaykishkum sold all the tribe's land south of the Grand River to the U.S. government, for which he was banished and eventually murdered. Second, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, greatly reducing the cost to travel to Michigan. In 1820 there were as many Ottawa as settlers in Michigan. Within twenty years, the Ottawa were outnumbered 25 to 1.

This sudden intensity of migration worried Wabiwindego. In 1834, he and other ogimaag ("leaders") invited the L'Arbre Croche Ottawa from northern Michigan to discuss the settler crisis. While the L'Arbre Croche considered selling a few islands to the government, Wabiwindego and the Grand River Ottawa opposed any sale. They had seen the Potawatomi—the tribe to the south—sell all their land only to be forcibly removal by federal troops.

The tribes gathered on the Grand River in what one Catholic missionary described as "a large amphitheatre." Together "they kindled several fires, laid tobacco everywhere around the fire and a large ket-

tle with sugar water; and at the entrance to the valley they mounted a large flag." After debating all day and night, the ogimaag passed around "some glass beads, which were strung on a green ribbon, as a sign of their unity and unified sentiment." The tribes agreed not to sell.

But a brutal winter—overhunted game, a smallpox outbreak, and crop failure—broke their unity. Facing starvation, the L'Arbre Croche set up treaty negotiations with the government in 1836.

The Grand River Ottawa prepared to go to Washington, D.C. to stop the sale. Before leaving, they sent ahead a warning to President Jackson: "Were we desirous to make a treaty for your land, you would refuse us, you would say 'I cannot sell the graves of my relation.'"

First on the agenda was a meet and greet with President Jackson, who "received them handsomely" at the White House. The Ottawa insisted on meeting with Jackson personally, and must have been disappointed that his involvement was ceremonial.

Rather than objecting to the treaty, however, Wabiwindego demanded that any deal "reserve some lands for us and our posterity" in Michigan.

Exactly why Wabiwindego ultimately agreed to a treaty is unknown—the bad winter, the L'Arbre Croche's influence, advice from his white allies, or the nightmare possibility of troops marching his grandchildren out of Michigan.

Whatever their reasons, Wabiwindego and the Ottawa agreed to sell western Michigan to the federal government in exchange for permanent land on the Manistee River and federal investments. But the government negotiators had double-crossed them: they knew Jackson and Congress would never agree to a reservation. After the Ottawa left Washington, the Senate added a five-year limit to the Manistee deal, torpedoing its main provision. Wabiwindego, the first to sign the original treaty, refused to sign the Senate version. Most Grand River Ottawa decided to sign, but ignore the reservation altogether, and find other ways to stay in Michigan instead. Immediately after the treaty, the federal government admitted the state of Michigan to the union.

Wabiwindego died soon after returning from Washington during a smallpox pandemic so awful that, according to a local minister, "almost without exception, every house has been literally a hospital, both among the natives and white inhabitants."

After his death, Wabiwindego's son Shagwabeno assumed leadership. He and other Ottawa bought title to their villages, learned Western-style trades, build farms, engaged in business, bonded with their new neighbors, taught Sunday school. Surely Wabiwindego's sons had their father in their hearts when they wrote the government: "We love the spot where our Forefathers bones are laid, and we desire that our bones may rest beside theirs also."

Ultimately, the Ottawa outmaneuvered and outlasted the Jacksonian hardliners. In 1855, they met the government again in Detroit. Shagwabeno and his brother Aishkibegosh negotiated a permanent reservation on the Manistee River. The tribe is organized today as the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in Manistee and Muskegon, and along the Grand River as the Grand River Band of Ottawa Indians.

How Wabiwindego came to be "Wabaningo," a myth long associated with White Lake, is another story.



Image from the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

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