

L'Arbre Croche Odaawaa in Manitoba

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Ningwiigan (modern orthography), Wing, who fought on the American side during the War of 1812, and after whom Newaygo County and the Old Wing Mission were named, told Henry Schoolcraft, August 19, 1833 that: ¹

His father was a native of Detroit, having lived a little above the present site of the city. He was an Ottawa. He emigrated, with his father and grandmother, to Waganukizzi (L'Arbre Croche), when young, and he had since lived there. His father died, not many years since, a very old man, at Maskigon River. He is himself seventy-six years of age, and gray headed—the little hair he has (his head being shaved after the Indian fashion).... He is a man above six feet in height, and well proportioned....

The implication is that Wing's father's progenitors, only one or two generations before, had been among the Odaawaa who had accompanied Cadillac to Detroit in 1700, not among those who had remained as Mackinac against his wishes, then founded L'Arbre Croche in 1742.

This also renders apocryphal A. J. Blackbird's family origin story: ²

I am not regularly descended from the Ottawa nations of Indians, but I am descended, as tradition says, from the tribe in the far west known as the Underground race of people. They were so called on account of making their habitations in the ground by making holes large enough for dwelling purposes. It is related that they even made caves in the ground in which to keep their horses every night to prevent them from being stolen by other tribes who were their enemies.... By cultivating the soil they raised corn and other vegetables to aid in sustaining life beside hunting and fishing....

My father...stayed about twenty years in the country of Manitoba with his brother Wa-ke-zoo, among other tribes of Indians and white fur-traders in that section of the country.

The "Underground race" was probably an allusion to the Mandan, and it is quite plausible the elder Mack-e-te-be-nessy (Makade-binesi, modern orthography) and Wa-ke-zoo visited them on a trading expedition, possibly accompanying Alexander Henry (the Younger) in 1806.

Henry described the Manitoba Odaawaa in his *Journal*: ³

August 11, 1808. Hoisted sail, and about two miles below Seine river met a canoe coming up for me with the two men I had sent to Bas de la Rivière. We put ashore, transferred my baggage to the canoe, and started my people in the boat for Panbian river, with a supply of high wine and tobacco. Camped at Dead river, where the Courtes Oreilles and some others were gardening. From them I purchased a small quantity of provisions, which, with what I had already, would enable us to proceed without going to Bas de la Rivère.

The small band of Courtes Oreilles settled here came from Michilimakinac about 16 years ago, when the prospects of great beaver hunts allured them from their native country. At first they dispersed in different quarters of the North West. A band went as far as Lesser Slave Lake and Athabasca river, by the

¹ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers (Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1851, p. 446). McKenney described an 1826 encounter with Wing: "When nearly opposite [St. Joseph] island, we noticed a canoe, filled with Indians, having a flag flying, following us, and every soul in it appeared to have a paddle. Our bargemen did not remit their labour, but we were soon overtaken. It contained old Neguegon, or the Wind [sic], and his family, who, with so many others, had been to Drummond's island to receive presents from the British king. This was not in the direction of his home, his route being by the way of Michillimackinac, but he said he had heard that his father Gov. Cass had passed, and he had come on to see and shake hands with him.... This old man is an Ottawa and lives well. His canoe was pretty well laden. He was one of the few Indians who remained friendly to us during the late war. By his side was seated his aged and wrinkled squaw, and ranged in the order in which people are forced to sit in bark canoes, were his two sons and four daughters; two of the latter were uncommonly handsome" (Thomas McKenney, Sketches of a Tour of the Lakes, Baltimore, Fielding Lucas, Jr., 1827, p. 172).

² A. J. Blackbird, History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan (Ypsilanti, 1887, p. 25).

³ In Elliott Coues, ed., New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company, and David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company (New York, Francis P. Harper, 1897, vol. 2, pp. 477-478).

Saskatchewan route; but beaver getting scarce, they abandoned those parts and are now nearly all here, where they pass the summer attending to their corn and potatoes, and in the autumn separate to hunt.

These people have no inclination to intermarry with the Saulteurs; they keep to themselves, and dispose of their daughters only among their own tribe. Their manner of living is entirely that of their own nation; they erect bark huts for the summer, others of birch rind for the winter, and also use rush mats. Their utensils and furniture are neatly constructed, and generally kept clean. They are thus much more civilized and more industrious than the Saulteurs.

The first corn and potatoes they planted here was a small quantity which I gave them in the spring of 1805, since which period they have extended their fields, and hope in a few years to make corn a regular article of traffic with us.

As recalled by John Tanner, spring of 1794: ⁴

I was now thirteen years old, or in my thirteenth year. Before we left the village, I heard [his adoptive mother] Net-no-kwa talk of going to Red River, to the relations of her husband. Many of the Ottawwaws, when they heard this, determined to go with her. Among others, was Wah-ka-zee, a chief of the village at Wargun-uk-ke-zee, or L'Arbre Croche, and others; in all, six canoes....

Although Tanner soon after became acquainted with Pe-shau-ba, "a celebrated war-chief of the Ottawwaws, who had come from Lake Huron several years before," and his companions, "Waus-so, (the lightning,) Sag-git-to, (he that scares all men,) and Sa-ning-wub, (he that stretches his wings), there was no further mention of Wah-ka-zee until 1812: ⁵

... In the fall, I returned to Pembinah, my intention being to go thence to the wintering ground of the trader...who had proposed to assist me in getting to the states. I now heard of the war between the United States and Great Britain, and of the capture of Mackinac, and this intelligence deterred me from any attempt to pass through the frontier of the United States territory, which were then the scenes of warlike operations.

Here a messenger overtook us to bring to the Ottawwaws the information that Muk-kud-da-be-na-sa, (the black bird,) an Ottawwaw of Waw-gun-uk-ke-zie, or L'Arbre Croche, had arrived from Lake Huron, to call us all home to that country....

Wah-ka-zee, the brother of Muk-kud-da-be-na-sa, met those Ottawwaws who returned from the Wild Rice River, at Lake Winnipeg. He had been ten years in the Rocky Mountains, and the country near them, but now wished to return to his own people. He had, in the course of his long life, been much among the whites, and was well acquainted with the different methods of gaining a subsistence among them. He told me that I would be much better situated among the whites, but that I could not become a trader, as I was unable to write; I should not like to submit to constant labour, therefore I could not be a farmer. There was but one situation exactly adapted to my habits and qualifications, that of an interpreter.

He gave us, among other information, some account of a missionary who had come among the Ottawwaws of Waw-gun-ukkezie, or some of the Indian settlements about the lakes, and urged them to renounce their own religion, and adopt that of the whites. In connexion with this subject, he told us the anecdote of the baptized Indian, who, after death, went to the gate of the white man's heaven, and demanded admittance; but the man who kept watch at the gate told him no redskins could be allowed to enter there. "Go," said he, "for to the west there are the villages and the hunting grounds of those of your own people, who have been on the earth before you." So he departed thence; but when he came to the villages where the dead of his own people resided, the chief refused him admittance. "You have been ashamed of us while you lived; you have chosen to worship the white man's God. Go now to his village, and let him provide for you." Thus he was rejected by both parties.

Wah-ka-zee being the most considerable man among us, it devolved on him to direct our movements; but through indolence, or perhaps out of regard to me, he determined that not only himself, but his band, should, for the winter, be guided by me. As we had in view no object beyond bare subsistence, and as I was reckoned a very good hunter, and knew this part of the country better than any other man of the band, his course was not an impolitic one.

⁴ John Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, prepared for the press by Dr. Edwin James (London, Baldwin & Cradock, 1830, p. 40).

⁵ Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures*, pp. 54, 168-177.

It was in conformity to my advice that we went to spend the winter at the Be-gwi-o-nush-ko River. The Be-gwi-o-nush-ko enters Red River, about ten miles below Pembinah, and at the time I speak of, the country on it was well stocked with game. We lived here in great plenty and comfort, and Wah-ka-zhe often boasted of his sagacity in choosing me to direct the motions of his party. But a part of the winter had passed, when Wa-megon-a-biew began to talk of sacrificing Wah-ka-zhe, the latter being in some manner connected with the man who, many years before, had killed Taw-ga-we-ninne, Wa-me-gon-a-biew's father. I refused to join, or in any manner countenance him in this undertaking; but notwithstanding my remonstrances, he went one day to the lodge of Wah-ka-zhe, with his knife in his hand, intending to kill him; but as he was entering, Muk-kud-da-be-nasa, a son [sic] of Wah-ka-zhe, perceived his intention, and prevented him. He immediately tried to provoke Wa-me-gon-a-biew to engage him in single combat, but he retreated in his accustomed manner. I not only reproved Wa-me-gon-a-biew for this unmanly conduct, but proposed to Wah-ka-zhe to have him driven from the band, and no longer considered him my brother; but Wah-ka-zhe was a considerate and friendly man, and unwilling that trouble or disturbance should be made, and therefore forgave his offence.

One of the young men, the son of Wah-ka-zhe, was accounted the best hunter among the Indians of this band, and there was, between us, while we resided at Be-gwi-o-nush-ko, a friendly rivalry in hunting. O-ke-mah-we-nin-ne, as he was called, killed nineteen moose, one beaver, and one bear; I killed seventeen moose, one hundred beavers, and seven bears; but he was considered the better hunter, moose being the most difficult of all animals to kill. There are many Indians who hunt through the winter in that country, and kill no more than two or three moose, and some never are able to kill one....

We now found it necessary for our large party to disperse in various directions. With Muk-kud-da-be-nasa, Black Bird, and Wah-ka-zhe, and one other man, I went and encamped at the distance of two days' journey from the place where we had been living. While here, we all started together one morning, to hunt, but in the course of the day scattered from each other. Late at night I returned, and was surprised to find, in place of our lodge, nothing remaining but a little pile of the dried grass we had used for a bed. Under this I found Black Bird, who, having come in but a little before me, and after the removal of the lodge, had laid down to sleep, supposing himself the only one left behind. As we followed the trail of our companions on the succeeding day, we met messengers coming to inform us that the son of Nah-gitch-e-gum-me, the man who, with Wah-ka-zhe, had left us so unexpectedly, had killed himself by an accidental discharge of his gun. The young man had been resting carelessly on the muzzle of his gun, when the butt slipping from the snow-shoe on which he had placed it, it had fired, and the contents passing through the arm-pit, had entered his head; but though so shockingly wounded, the young man lived twenty days in a state of stupor and insensibility, and then died. The Indians attributed to a presentiment of evil on the part of Nahgitch-e-gum-me and Wah-ka-zhe, their abrupt abandonment of Black Bird and myself.

Shortly after this, we were so reduced by hunger, that it was thought necessary to have recourse to a medicine hunt. Nahgitch-e-gum-me sent to me and O-ge-mah-we-ninne, the two best hunters of the band, each a little leather sack of medicine, consisting of certain roots, pounded fine and mixed with red paint, to be applied to the little images or figures of the animals we wished to kill.... We started with much confidence of success, but Wah-ka-zhe followed, and overtaking us at some distance, cautioned us against using the medicine Nah-gitch-e-gum-me had given us, as he said it would be the means of mischief and misery to us, not at present, but when we came to die. We therefore did not make use of it, but, nevertheless, happening to kill some game, Nah-gitch-e-gum-me thought himself, on account of the supposed efficacy of his medicine, entitled to a handsome share of it. Finding that hunger was like to press severely upon us, I separated from the band, and went to live by myself, feeling always confident that by so doing I could ensure a plentiful supply for the wants of my family. Wahka-zhe and Black Bird came to Lake Winnipeg, from whence they did not return, as I had expected they would....

After visiting the trader on Red River, I started with the intention of coming to the States; but at Lake Winnipeg I heard that the war between Great Britain and the United States still continued, with such disturbances on the frontier as would render it difficult for me to pass with safety. I was therefore compelled to stop by myself at that place, where I was after some time joined by Pe-shau-ba, Waw-zhe-kah-maish-koon, and others, to the number of three lodges. The old companion and associate of Pe-shau-ba, Waw-so, had been accidentally killed by an Assiniboin in hunting. Here we lived in plenty and contentment, but Pe-shau-ba, upon whom the death of his friend Waw-so had made some impression, was soon taken violently ill....

He...put on the new clothes I had given him..., walked out of the lodge, looked at the sun, the sky, the lake, and the distant hills; then came in, and lay down composedly in his place in the lodge, and in a few minutes ceased to breathe....

An old Ojibbeway, called Crooked Finger, had been living in my lodge about a year; in all that time, having never killed any thing. When I started to hunt buffalo, he followed me, and we came at the same

time in view of a large herd, when the old man endeavoured to raise a quarrel about my right to use those hunting grounds. "You Ottawwaws," said he, "have no right in this part of the country; and though I cannot control all of you, I have you, at last, now in my power, and I am determined, that if you do not go back to your own country from this very spot, I will kill you." I had no apprehension on account of his threat, and I defied him to injure or molest me. After an hour or more of altercation, he crept up, and at length began to shoot at the herd of buffaloe. Soon after he had left me, two Ottawwaws, who had overheard the quarrel as they were coming up, and had concealed themselves in the bushes near, joined me. The old man, after three or four unsuccessful shots at the buffaloe, turned and went home, ashamed alike of his insolence to me, and of his want of success. Then I went forward with the two young Ottawwaws who had joined me, and we killed a considerable number of fat cows....

We then went down to Dead River, planted corn, and spent the summer there. Shagwawkoosink, an Ottawwaw, a friend of mine, and an old man, first introduced the cultivation of corn among the Ojibbeways of the Red River country.

Tanner gave as O-ge-mah-we-nin-ne's totem, "ka-kaik," "hen-hawk," and Muk-kud-da-be-na-sa's as, "pe-pe-ge-wiz-zain," "sparrow hawk," kestrel.⁶ In principle, they should have been of the same totem, as patrilineal kin, perhaps confusion caused by "gegek" being also used as the generic word for hawk.

According to A. J. Blackbird: "Wa-ke-zoo...died before my time in the country of Manitoba.... It is related that he was also a prophet and a great magician."⁷

Schoolcraft recounted, dated April 18, 1838, a story told him by "Gabriel Muccutapenais, an Ottawa chief of L'Arbre Croche":⁸

He states that, at one time, a trader took from him forty beavers; at another, thirty beavers and bears; at another, ten beavers, and at another, thirty beavers, and four carcasses of beavers, for all which he received no pay, although promised it. He also served as a clerk or sub-trader for a merchant, for which he was to have received \$500, and never received a cent. He requests the President of the United States to pay for all these things. On inquiry, the skins were hunted, and the service rendered, and the wrong received at Athabasca Lake, in the Hudson's Bay Territory, when he was a young man. He is now about sixty-six years old.

This more or less corroborates A. J. Blackbird's statement that his father was "once left to perish...by the fur traders on a lonely island."⁹

There remain, however, many unanswered questions about Wa-ke-zoo (or Wah-ka-zhe) and the elder Madake-binesi's time in the northwest. Were their wives with them and children born there? Did they sometimes return to L'Arbre Croche, as it seems Makade-binesi had done before coming to Manitoba in 1812 to fetch his relatives home? Ogimaa Inini (modern orthography), as a young man, was an accomplished hunter, which would have been unlikely if he was in a novel environment. His name means Chief-man, but he had that name in his youth when he was not chief.

Siblings of Wa-ke-zoo and Mack-e-te-be-nessy—Wing, Au-se-go-nock, Kaw-me-no-te-a, and Mme. Hamlin, in A. J. Blackbird's spelling, do not seem to have gone to Manitoba.¹⁰

⁶ Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures*, p.314.

⁷ Blackbird, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*, p. 27.

⁸ Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, p. 606.

⁹ Blackbird, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*, p. 28.

¹⁰ In May, 1815, "Ottawa Chief Assegenack [was] despatched with wampum and the pipe of peace, to all the nations on the east side of lake Michigan," to inform them about the peace, so he had been on the British side (*Historical Collections of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 16, 1890, p. 297). Francis Assikinack (b. 1824), whose father had apparently been among the Odaawaa who relocated to Manitoulin in response to the removal threat, read a paper, "Legends and Traditions of the Odawah Indians," to the Canadian Institute, December 1857, three decades before his cousin's much longer *History* (*The Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art* xiv n.s., March 1858, pp.115-125). Good Heart was named for Kaw-me-no-te-a (Who-had-a-good-heart). I have not seen information on the name of Augustin Hamelin Jr.'s mother—the father remarried to Angélique in 1823.

Blackbird placed his cousin, Oge-maw-we-ne-ne, at his father's favorite wintering grounds on the Muskegon (where his grandfather had died) c. 1825.¹¹ The younger Blackbird, a brother, and a sister, had been baptized at Seven Mile Point in 1825 by Père Badin, but not any Wa-ke-zoos,¹² although presumably both Ogimaa Inini and his much younger brother, Biindanwaan (Quiver) must have been baptized Joseph and Peter, with their father's last name, at some time—the mission was moved to L'Arbre Croche proper under Père De Jean in 1827, for whose baptisms I have found no records.

From Schoolcraft's *Personal Memoirs*:¹³

October 14, 1835: Pendonwa, son of Wahazo [sic], a brother of the Ottawa chief, Wing, reports himself as electing to become "an American," and says he had so declared himself to Col. Boyd [husband of his cousin, Margaret], the former Indian agent.

Biindanwaan (various spellings) would be one of the Odaawaa delegates who accompanied James L. Schoolcraft's "exploring party" to find territory for removal under the 1836 Treaty.¹⁴

On the supplemental agreement to the 1836 Treaty, next to his x-mark for the cursive signature of Ogimaw Nininne (who did not attend the treaty at Washington), was printed in "Wakaso," probably by Schoolcraft. An October 2 1838 *Memoirs* entry used the spelling, "Wakazo."¹⁵

In his April 26, 1836 letter, requesting the opportunity to purchase land in Allegan County, Ogimaa Inini referred to himself as Joseph Wakazo, and was signed for him with that spelling.¹⁶ For the 1839 Allegan County land patents, it was Joseph and Peter Wakazoo. In an 1848 report on mission schools, Reverend Smith spelled the last name Wakajoo.¹⁷ Smith's idiosyncratic orthography in his Memoranda confirms that the first vowel is a long -a- (-aa- in current orthography), the second, short. Since there is no obvious meaning under any of the variations, the correct pronunciation is unclear. A French priest might have rendered the native -zh- as -z-, the closest equivalent, but would not have used -o- or -oo- for the final vowel.

Ogimaa Inini's mother was present at Old Wing, apparently with authority over her daughter Kinequa's children (including Payson Wolf, who would marry George Smith's daughter after the move to Leelanau), and loyal to the Protestant school, at a time her sons were facilitating a priest—"Chiefs mother stays at home and scholars I have are kept by her. The old lady stands on right ground and stands firm." She died August 19, 1845.¹⁸ This would be consistent with her older son being born c. 1890 and her being spry enough that Smith bought from her "82 lbs Sugar" in Spring 1843.¹⁹ Kinequa claimed to have been born in Manitoba but much about her life as recalled by her granddaughter stretches credulity, as does Blackbird's:²⁰

Our tradition says that long ago, when the Ottawa tribes of Indians used to go on a warpath either towards the south or towards the west, even as far as to the Rocky Mountains, on one of these expeditions towards

¹¹ Blackbird, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*, p. 34.

¹² U.S., French Catholic Church Records (Drouin Collection), 1695-1954 D Détroit, Ste-Anne, pp. 67-70.

¹³ Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, pp. 532-533.

¹⁴ National Archive, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Microfilm Series, Mackinac Agency, M234, Reel 415 648-656, 627-629, 662-663, 641-645.

¹⁵ Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, p. 610.

¹⁶ Joseph Wakazoo to The President and Congress, April 29, 1836, National Archive, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Microfilm Series, Michigan Superintendency, M1, Reel 72, 486-488. See Larry Wycoff, *Wakazooville, Michigan*, 2021, Omena Historical Society.

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indians Affairs for 1848*, Message of the President to the Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress, p. 174.

¹⁸ George Smith Memorandum, January 6 and 9, 1845, quoted in Robert P. Swierenga and William Van Appledorn, eds, *Old Wing Mission: The Chronicles of the Reverend George N. and Arvilla Powers Smith, Missionary Teachers of Chief Wakazoo's Ottawa Indian Band in Western Michigan, 1838-1849* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008, pp. 230-231, 254).

¹⁹ Memorandum, April 24, 1843, quoted in *Old Wing Mission*, p. 160.

²⁰ Blackbird, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*, p. 25; Swierenga and Van Appledorn, eds, *Old Wing Mission*, pp. 623-625.

the Rocky Mountains my remote ancestors were captured and brought to this country as prisoners of war. But they were afterwards adopted as children of the Ottawas, and intermarried with the nation in which they were captives. Subsequently these captives posterity became so famous among the Ottawas on account of their exploits and bravery on the warpath and being great hunters that they became closely connected with the royal families, and were considered as the best counselors, best chieftains and best warriors among the Ottawas.

Revered Smith's day-to-day Memoranda were not conducive to elaborating on the background of the people he mentioned, so an opportunity to know more about Ogimaa Inini and his siblings was lost. Did he ever meet up again with his hunting-prowess competitor, John Tanner, after both had returned from Manitoba? Tanner's daughter, Martha, A. J. Blackbird's sister, Margaret, and Augustin Hamelin all taught at Catholic Mission schools.

Presumably, the time in Manitoba had an impact on those who had been there. From later documents, romanticized family legends aside, it is hard to see anything to differentiate the Blackbirds and Wakazoos from their kin, or other Odaawaa, who remained at L'Arbre Croche: conversion to Catholicism, winter hunting grounds. The senior Assikinack, who had been on the British side, chose to return to Canada in response to removal threat under the 1836 Treaty. Ogimaa Inini sought special dispensation to purchase land and acquire a Protestant mission-school, whether because there really was frustration with the lack of English-language instruction by priests, as A. J. Blackbird suggested, or because that was strategic in dealing with anti-Catholic Indian Department administrators, like Schoolcraft, is unclear. A quarter century had passed in which to forget the Red River valley.

Peshabe and Wasso, who died in Manitoba, had namesakes at Little Traverse on annuity lists, whether relatives is unknown. Wakazhe, with his twenty years in the west, had a good enough understanding of the white man to advise Tanner that, as a proficient hunter, he would not want to become a farmer, and that he lacked education to do anything that required reading, writing, or arithmetic. What advice might he have given his son?