



Journey through Wisconsin Dells’ Rich Native American Heritage

Long before the first boat embarked on a tour, even before the arrival of the hard-working lumber raftsmen who made their living on the Wisconsin River, others lived out their days in Wisconsin Dells. For hundreds of years, Native Americans made this area their home and it is their culture, history and intriguing legends that helped shape this region.

The Ho-Chunk tribe, known for many years as the Winnebago, played a significant role in the history of the Dells area and was even partly responsible for its name. The river itself they called “Meskousing” or “Misconsin,” which historians have come to believe means “River of Red Stone” or “River of the Great Rock.” Over time, explorers, writers and map makers have given the name various spellings. In the end, the most common was *Ouisconsin*, which eventually took on a uniquely American spelling of *Wisconsin*. French explorers and fur traders called the area the “Dalles” which means “flat, layered rock.” Eventually the two names merged to become Wisconsin Dells.

One of the most famous Ho-Chunk members is Yellow Thunder, who through his “refusal policy” emerged as the most important leader of the tribe. In 1837, the Ho-Chunk were coerced into signing a treaty relinquishing their Wisconsin lands and setting into motion the U.S. government’s “removal policy” in which Native Americans were moved to an area west of the Mississippi River. Four times, between 1844 and 1873, U.S. troops came to Wisconsin Dells, rounded up the Ho-Chunk, and moved them west. Four times, Yellow Thunder turned around and walked right back, often with others following him. In 1849, he attempted to escape these forced removals forever by purchasing 40 acres of land, thinking if he was a landowner and taxpayer, he could not be forcibly evicted. Eventually, these 40 acres became a haven for the tribe, and a site for pow-wows and dancing. In 1873, the U.S. government officially stopped its removal policy. Yellow Thunder died one year later knowing his people would never be forced to leave their land again.

Another Native American with strong ties to Wisconsin Dells is Black Hawk, the well-known warrior of the Sauk (Sac) and Fox Indians. Although neither of these tribes made their homes in the Dells, this is where Black Hawk fled after a devastating massacre at the Bad Axe River in 1832. Native legend has it that during his flight, he coaxed his horse to leap 52 feet across the Wisconsin River at the narrowest spot in the Dells, known today as Black Hawk’s Leap. Folklore also says that Black Hawk hid until he was captured by two Ho-Chunk braves. Other historical documents indicate Black Hawk surrendered to the U.S. Army after his defeat. A rock formation along the river resembling a head in profile is named Black Hawk’s Profile, after the great warrior who sought refuge among the caves of the Dells.

These stories and others from this important period in Wisconsin’s history are brought to life through a Dells Boat Tour. See where Black Hawk took his legendary leap and view the rock formation named for him. Learn of the names that native people gave to the many other eerie and fantastic shapes of the spectacular bluffs. And take in the legends that have been told throughout generations as the boat sails on the same waters, past the same land that Yellow Thunder refused to leave.