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## **Lake Mendota Indian legends : prepared for the use of students, University of Wisconsin summer session. 1927**

Brown, Charles E. (Charles Edward), 1872-1946

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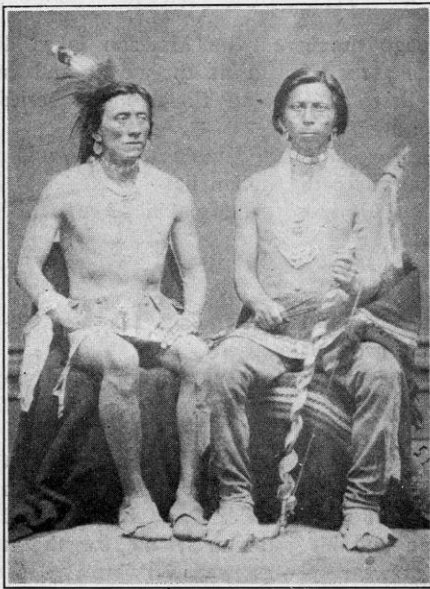
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# LAKE MENDOTA INDIAN LEGENDS

Prepared for the use of Students

University of Wisconsin

Summer Session



CHARLES E. BROWN  
Chief, State Historical Museum  
Madison, Wisconsin  
1927



Here, often by Mendota's tree-hung shore,  
By ancient mounds in form like beast or bird,  
Weird music of their sacred rites was heard,  
And swaying dancers symbolized the lore  
Of mighty deeds of man and Manitou.

—Sam Bryan.



## LAKE MENDOTA INDIAN LEGENDS

Obtained from the Winnebago Indians whose camps and villages were located at different places on its shores up to 1840 and later.

### THE FOUR LAKES

The Winnebago numbered the Madison lakes differently from the whites; they began at the north and called our Fourth Lake, first, and so on through the series. Their names for them are:

Their first (our Fourth or Mendota Lake) Wonk-sheck-ho-mik-la, the lake where the Indian lies.

Their second (our Third or Monona Lake) Tchee-ho-bo-kee-xa kay-te-la, tepee lake.

Their third (our Second or Waubesa Lake) Sa-hoo cha-te-la, rushes lake.

Their fourth (our First of Kegonsa Lake) Na-sa-koo-cha-te-la, hard-maple grove lake.

All of these names are self-explanatory and appropriate except the first. Its significance is given in the following legend:

Long ago, when the Winnebago dwelt around the Four Lakes, a young man, who had fasted long, was blessed with a vision of a spirit maiden who dwelt in a large lake. So this young man and his intimate friend, for the institution of friendship between youths was very strong, set out to find the fulfillment of the dream. They passed along the shore of the southernmost lake just after the first light snow had fallen, when they saw the tracks of what appeared to be a giant raccoon, come out of the lake and lead to a tall tree. They followed the trail and at the foot of the tree, looked up and saw two great eyes shining down at them. The first

youth was very hungry and he persuaded his friend to climb the tree and endeavor to catch the animal; but when the friend mounted the tree and looked down into its hollow trunk, there was no raccoon there, only a great catfish. The hungry lad asked his friend to kill the catfish and throw it down for them to eat, but the first youth was superstitious and would not do so—"It is a spirit fish," he said, "for it was changed from a raccoon, no good comes to anyone who kills and eats it." But the hungry Indian persisted, and at last his friend to oblige him reached down into the hole, hauled up the great fish, killed it with a blow of his stone axe, and threw it down on the shore where the hungry youth had already kindled a fire. Then the young man who had dreamed, cooked and ate the fish, while his friend stood by refusing to partake because of his fear.

After eating the fish the Indian grew very thirsty, and asked his friend for water several times. Finally his friend said, "You may as well go down to the lake yourself and drink your fill." He did so, and did not return. When his friend went to look for him there was no Indian there, but only a great catfish swimming around in the water. His friend cried out, "I was afraid this would happen, I warned you, but you would not listen."

Then the fish opened its mouth and cried, "Friend, I brought you here purposely as I have been blessed by a spirit maiden who dwells in the largest lake. There are two beautiful maidens and I thought we might both go and marry them and live there forever. But you refused, so I will go alone. Nevertheless I will bless you with long life upon the earth." So saying he darted forth with a great noise and made a leap from first into second lake, then he made another dart and noise in the next lake, and the same in the third, until he reached the large lake where he had been told the spirit maiden dwelt. There he found her and there he remained, so the lake has ever since been called, because he dwells there with his Indian maiden, "the Lake where the Indian lies."

### MAPLE BLUFF

Many years ago two Winnebago Indians who were hunt-

ing game found near the ford of the Catfish (Yahara) River the track of a raccoon, which they followed. It lead them to the point on the east shore of the lake now known as Maple Bluff. Here they saw the animal which crawled into a hollow log. The raccoon was a wakanda (spirit). It so informed the hunters. One of the Indians refused to heed this warning. He killed and made a hearty meal of the animal. Then he laid down to sleep. When he awoke he was very thirsty. He went to a spring on the shore of the lake and drank deeply. But this did not appease his thirst. The more he drank the more thirsty he became. His thirst soon became so bad that he waded out into the lake. As soon as he was in the water his thirst left him but returned again when he came on shore. So he was compelled to remain in the deep water and here he soon sank from sight.

On quiet nights the Indians say one may hear at Maple Bluff, coming from the lake, the cries of this unfortunate Indian and the beating of his war drum.

### GOVERNORS ISLAND

Water spirits (wak 'tcexi) live in the deep water off the shore of Governors Island. Only a few old men have ever seen them. These long-tailed water monsters were feared by the local redmen. When they are angry they cause the waters to become very rough and at such times they overturn the Indian canoes and people are drowned. At night they crawl out on the bank. They are regarded as "bad" spirits and were frequently at war with the powerful Thunderbirds. Tobacco offerings were formerly made on the waters of the lake to retain their good will. When Earthmaker created the earth he put four water spirits under it to keep it from turning. Then he scattered stones over its surface and the earth became quiet. The large panther effigy (with a long curved tail) on the State Hospital lawn is said to represent one of these water spirits. The bird mounds located there are probably effigies of Thunderbirds.

### RATTLESNAKE LEDGE

Many rattlesnakes were formerly found on Governors Is-

land. Their dens were in the cracks and crevices in the limestone wall along its waterfront: They were regarded as sacred by the Indians who would not kill them. They were created by Earthmaker first and placed in the earth to keep evil away from the homes of men. The Winnebago snake clan had a feast in which snakes were specially honored with songs and offerings. This was held in the fall when they crawl into their dens for their winter sleep, and "close their doors." Some Indians will not tell a story in the summer time when these reptiles are active.

### KENNEDY POND

When Earthmaker was engaged in creating the world he misplaced one small lake. It was afterwards found here. This is Kennedy Pond or "Lost" Lake, located in the woods a short distance north of Morris Park. There are several Water Spirit (panther) mounds on its shores and the pond may have been regarded as a retreat of these powerful underground spirits.

### FOX BLUFF

The top of Fox Bluff, on the north shore of Lake Mendota, was a place where the Thunderbirds sometimes roosted. Old Indians claim to have seen these huge bird deities roosting here in early days. Their nests are said to be on the tops of mountains in the far North. When the weather is stormy, one or a number of Thunderers can be seen flying high up in the sky. Lightning is caused by the flashing of their eyes and peals of thunder by the flapping of their wings. When their wings strike the clouds it rains. When they are angry they drop their eggs on wigwams and villages and then people are killed. They set fire to forests and shatter the rocks. They sometimes carry away people who are never heard of again. The Indians regard the Thunderbird as a very powerful deity. He is the ancestor of the most important Winnebago clan. The Thunderers made the first fire with their fire-sticks. They thus gave fire to the Indian.

## MERRILL SPRINGS

Springs are the openings through which the animals enter the spirit world. The Winnebago in former times made offerings of tobacco, food, and stone and bone implements to the animals at these places to obtain their "blessings."

One of the springs at Merrill Springs was a "medicine" spring and its waters were believed to possess special healing properties. Wishes made while drinking its waters might be fulfilled.

## EAGLE HEIGHTS

The Winnebago name for Eagle Heights was Sho-heta-ka (horse hill). They believed that this highest hill on the shore of Lake Mendota was inhabited by a spirit horse. It could be heard neighing and stamping its feet at times. On cloudy or misty days its form could sometimes be seen on top of the hill. Being a sacred place some of the Indians went to this hill to fast and dream and to gain inspiration and power from this spirit horse. No Indian has seen the horse for many years.

## BLACK HAWK CAVE

At Blackhawk on the shore of Lake Mendota is a cave in which the Sauk Chief Black Hawk is claimed to have hid during his retreat to the Wisconsin River, in July 1832. There is no foundation for this legend. Black Hawk was retreating too rapidly before the pursuing U. S. troops and militia to have an opportunity to hide in any cave. Similar fictitious Black Hawk myths have in the past few years "grown up" about a number of localities in southern Wisconsin.

## OBSERVATORY HILL

On the top of Observatory Hill is an Indian mound representing a turtle. Turtle was the Winnebago war spirit. Earthmaker sent him down to earth to instruct the Indians how to live and he forgot his mission and taught them how to make war instead. He created so much trouble that he was recalled by Earthmaker and Hare sent to the earth in his place. The turtle mound on Observatory Hill has two tails. Their purpose is not explained.





