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Walk commemorates Menominee's departure from tribal lands

By Patricia Wolff
of The Northwestern

POYGAN –More than a year ago Richie Plass, a Menominee Indian, visited the Lake Poygan Paygrounds, read an historical marker, looked at the lake and began to think of a journey he needed to take.

The words on the marker read: "In 1836 the Menominee Indians ceded all their lands between the Wolf and Fox rivers to the U.S. government. Payment was made every October in 20 annual installments on these grounds. All remaining lands were ceded in 1848 and they were offered a reservation in Minnesota, which they refused. In 1852 they moved up the Wolf River where in 1854 they were granted eight townships, the present Keshena Reservation."

Wednesday, the Green Bay area man and about a dozen other Menominees and friends set out early from the paygrounds for a 70-mile walk to Keshena to commemorate the walk their ancestors took in 1852.

They gathered at the historical marker entitled "Poygan Paygrounds," at the boat landing on Lake Poygan tucked away on County Road B near Winneconne. The words on the marker give a brief background. It tells a part of the story of how Wisconsin was formed in the mid 1800s.

"There would be no state of Wisconsin without this spot," said Tony Brown, a member of the Menominee Indian Tribe who is walking with the group. He lives in Shawano.

Treaties with Indian tribes to obtain their lands were a crucial element in establishing the state. In 1848, Wisconsin became the 30th state to enter the Union.

The Treaty at Lake Poygan arranged for the sale of 4.5 million acres of Menominee lands to the government for \$350,000 plus six million acres in Crow Wing County, Minnesota, according to a history of the Menominee Indian Tribe on the Menominee Nation's official Web site.

The Indians signed the treaty ceding their lands to the government but they were not told precisely when they would have to leave. The timing was bad, Plass said.

"The government made a decision. They waited until the first hard freeze and said, 'You've got to go now,'" Plass said. "Our ancestors had no say in it and it was the worst time of the year. They had to walk in ice and snow."

The actual move to the reservation did not begin until November when the ice had begun to form on the river. This was the only mode of transportation and it was difficult for the Menominee families having to use the birch bark canoes that were easily damaged in the icy water.

Nearly 2,400 Menominees started the voyage but only 1,600 were left when the journey ended, Plass said.

Charlotte Kinepoway and her daughter Donna of Keshena decided to take the walk for the same reasons Plass did. They both felt a need to experience what their ancestors did.

Plass admitted that at 58 and being out of shape, the journey would be a hardship, but it was something he needed to do to honor his ancestors. In the Menominee tradition, Plass was named for Chief Powekonnay, the chief who led that walk more than 150 years ago. It was a matter of responsibility.

"I decided a year ago I would make the commemorative walk," Plass said. "When you are given a name you need to find out what that name means. When I learned of Powekonnay and his responsibility I joked to a friend that even though we are not spring chickens we should take that walk."

They plan to arrive at their destination on Sunday. They will camp each night and other walkers will join them along the way. All are welcome to join them.

The walk has an educational facet to it. Plass wants young people to learn the history of the tribe.

The walkers will collect samples of Wolf River water along the way and donate them to the College of the Menominee Nation.

"It will be interesting from a 21st century point of view to get it analyzed," he said.

Plass spoke to the group just before departure and he kept things light.

"I'll start us and set the pace, so it won't be fast," he said.

The Menominees' original route followed the shore of the Wolf River. The route this time will be as direct as possible, Plass said. The first day would take them about 18 miles to Winchester.

"And remember, this is not a race; it's a spiritual walk," he said.
