

First Nations Studies

The following excerpt provides context to the pre-contact world of the Ho-Chunk people of Wisconsin. It comes from Patty Loew's book, Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal (2013). Patty Loew is a professor at Medill and director of the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research at Northwestern and a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe.

Chapter 4: Ho-Chunk

The Ho-Chunk people express their remembered past in the songs, stories, effigy mounds, rock art, and place names that dot the landscape of their ancestral home. For thousands of years, the Ho-Chunk have lived in the western Great Lakes region, south and west of present-day Green Bay. The Ho-Chunk, or Hochungra, formerly were known as the Winnebago, which came from the Maskwaki word *Ouinipegouek*, meaning "People of the Stinking Water." This appellation was not intended to be an insult. It referred to the waters of the Fox River and Lake Winnebago, which were turbid and rich in algae at certain times of the year. The French truncated it to "Stinking People," which, for obvious reasons, made it a name the Ho-Chunk people never appreciated.

Hochungra, the name by which the Ho-Chunk describe themselves, translates to "People of the Big Voice" or "People of the Sacred Language." This refers to the Ho-Chunk belief that they represent the original people from who all Siouan-speaking people sprang. The Ho-Chunk are most closely related to the Iowa, Oto, and Missouri tribes, which were part of the Ho-Chunk Nation at one time. According to oral history, the four tribes split apart shortly before European contact.

Ho-Chunk are also related linguistically to the Osage, Quapaw, Omaha, Kansas, and Ponca peoples, as well as the Mandan in North Dakota and Siouan-speaking people in the southeastern United States. The fact that the Ho-Chunk are situated in the geographic center of all these people lends weight to the Hochungra contention that they are the "original people" and explains why the Iowa, Oto, and Missouri tribes refer to the Ho-Chunk even today as "grandfathers."

Although Ho-Chunk culture today is patrilineal, meaning descent and clan membership derive from the father's side, some anthropologists believe that the Ho-Chunk originally were matrilineal. They speculate that this shift may have been the result of extensive intermarriage with neighboring patrilineal tribes in the seventeenth century and involvement in the fur trade, which emphasized male activities. Clans descend from two major divisions, or moieties: an earth division comprising eight clans, and a sky division with four clans. The earth division includes the Bear Clan, from which war chiefs were selected. The sky division includes the Thunderbird Clan, which traditionally produced the peace chiefs. Together, these leaders governed with the help of a council made up of principal members of each clan. They guided day-to-day activities in the large villages the Ho-Chunk inhabited at the time of European contact. Their closest neighbors were the Menominee, who were also their closest allies, and the Illinois, who were sworn enemies.

The Ho-Chunk believe they originated at Moga-Shooch (Red Banks), on the south shore of Green Bay, the deep notch between the thumb and fingers on today's map of Wisconsin. They were the most powerful tribe in the area, with homelands that extended from upper Michigan to southern Wisconsin. Sometime during the century that preceded European contact, the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Ojibwa) began moving into Ho-Chunk territory along the shore of Lake Huron to the confluence of Lakes Michigan and Superior. The Anishinaabe migration displaced the Menominee and the Ho-Chunk. One theory is that the loss of territory, combined with a growing population, created enough environmental stress that the Ho-Chunk began moving southward, which created antagonism with the

tribes of the Illinois Confederacy (Kaskaskia, Peoria, and Illinois). With no place to expand, the Ho-Chunk split apart. Sometime around the year 1570, a tribal faction that would evolve into the Iowa, Oto, and Missouri left the main body of the Ho-Chunk and headed west down the Wisconsin River to present-day Iowa, where they separated and evolved into three distinct tribes. The weakened main body of Ho-Chunk concentrated into large villages near Green Bay in order to defend their homeland against encroaching Anishinaabe from the north and the Illinois Confederacy from the south.

The population decline and economic dependence on European trade goods that accompanied Ho-Chunk participation in the fur trade left the tribe vulnerable to encroachment by white settlers, especially miners who were attracted to the rich lead deposits of the Upper Mississippi Valley. The indigenous people of the area had mined galena, the grayish lead ore, for at least eight thousand years. Women of the Sauk, Meskwaki, and Ho-Chunk Nations worked the lead deposits every spring and fall, gathering enough of the mineral for personal use and sometimes collecting enough to trade with other Indians. The Ho-Chunk melted galena and used it as body paint, reserving the finest pieces for burial with their dead.

After the American Revolution (1775-1783), lead eclipsed fur as the principal means of exchange between the Ho-Chunk and white traders. In 1788, neighboring Sauk and Meskwaki formally leased a portion of their mineral lands to Julian Dubuque, a French miner who hired Native women, including Ho-Chunk, to work the mines. Soon this region, known as the Fever River Valley, was producing up to forty thousand pounds of lead bars, sheets, and bullets a year. As word spread of the richness of the deposits, the Ho-Chunk witnessed a steady stream of white miners pour into their territory “like wolves in the Plains to the dead buffalo,” as Old Greyheaded Decora, a Ho-Chunk leader, described them. “They spread out in every direction and began to dig and find and carry off lead on Winnebago lands.”

When the United States dramatically expanded its territory with the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the Ho-Chunk discovered that their homeland, once the edge of American territory, was not in the middle of it. As war with Britain loomed, the Fever River Valley took on more importance as a strategic source of lead for ammunition. The federal government encouraged white encroachment by offering miners generous leases in exchange for 10 percent royalties. Alarmed by the number of lead miners trespassing into their territory, the Ho-Chunk responded to the pan-Indian call to arms by Tecumseh, who was trying to repel white encroachment into the Ohio Valley. Enthusiastically endorsing the religious exhortations of Tecumseh’s brother – Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet – the Ho-Chunk became one of the most militant members of Tecumseh’s alliance. By 1809, the Ho-Chunk established a permanent Hochungra village near Prophetstown (Tippecanoe) in present day Indiana.

Rykken’s Note: In addition to facing pressure from various other Tribal Nations, the Ho-Chunk dealt in succession with the French, the British, and finally the Americans. Ho-Chunk warriors fought alongside the French against Britain in the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and sided with the British during the American Revolution and War of 1812. After the Americans defeated the British in 1812, the Ho-Chunk signed their first of eleven treaties with the United States in 1816.