

Rare artifacts displayed at museum tell stories of Great Lakes Indians

By SUZIE MARKS

A rare stick telling the story of how Shawnee Indian Tecumseh organized other American Indians against the white man during the early 1800s is just one of the artifacts in the Indians of the Great Lakes exhibit in the Troy Historical Museum.

A collector of Indian relics, who requested anonymity, donated religious tokens, hunting remains, clothing and other artifacts to the museum for a display now through the middle of February.

Tecumseh's stick is the exhibit's highlight. The ornate stick, which measures slightly longer than a ruler, tells a story in symbols about the Indian confederation's violent resistance to the white man's steady encroachment on Indian land, curator Kathryn Maddy says.

Ms. Maddy says the stick, which is read from the bottom up tells Indians to gather on both sides of the Mississippi River, into one tribe, forget about hunting and other necessities and meet at the home of the white man at the time of an earthquake.

Tecumseh traveled from Montana to Florida from 1800-1810 and talked to Indian chiefs. He asked them to join the confederation and when they agreed he gave them a stick as a reminder of their mission.

The stick is one of two known to exist today from the original 50. The other stick is on display at the University of Michigan.

"THIS IS THE FIRST time the Indian meaning of the stick has been made public," Ms. Maddy says. "When a white person asked an Indian what it meant, the Indian would tell him it was the method Indians would go through to reach heaven."

Other relics in the display date back to the early 1600s through 1910, the curator says. They are from various tribes of the Great Lakes Indians and depict their lifestyles and religions.

"The Indians have sacred medicines. Their religion is very private and personal. They are not open with it, no do they show their medicines to other tribes," she explains.

The fertility apron is one symbol of medicine that's on display. The leather apron, worn between 1890-1920 has two blue painted thunderbirds on it. It

was worn by the medicine doctor around women who had trouble getting pregnant, trouble during pregnancy, difficulties during delivery or problems with newborn infants, Ms. Maddy says.

OTHER ARTIFACTS in the collection include animal skins used as medicine containers for special medicines, such as bones, ivory tusks, shells and herbs. A fur turbine worn by warriors to protect themselves against drowning is also included.

Another showcase is filled with beaded work, including a strand of purple beads made from clam shells about 1830.

"These are extremely valuable," she says. "Only one out of every 200,000 shells will be solid purple."

The shells were used like money for bartering by the Indians, she adds. The beaded apron is an artistic creation made between 1880-1890. Beads were stranded and sewn by the women during winter for their men.

"The number of beads the Indian man had on his apron showed how dutiful his wife was," she explains.

An Indian exhibit would be incomplete without peace pipes, and this display is no exception. Pipes made of cattail, which is compressed dry, are part of the collection. Ms. Maddy says the Indians believed that God created everything and had control over everything in the universe except man and tobacco, which man controlled.

"They used tobacco as appeasements to God and the spirits," she says. "If they were fishing and wanted better luck they would put the tobacco on top of the water. They also enjoyed smoking it."

The Great Lakes Indians had some interesting hunting and fighting tools with intriguing rituals accompanying them.

One bag of goods that was shared by very close male friends was called a bundle. It consisted of a rattle, a stangulation cord and feather hair pieces. A group of men would gather and place the bundle in front of them with one man on either side and a man in the middle. The man in the middle would put the stangulation cord around his neck four times and tighten it until he passed out, Ms. Maddy explains. The others would grab him so he wouldn't injure himself when falling. When the man regained consciousness, he would

recall what he saw when he blacked out.

"The other men would try to figure out what his vision meant," she says.

Another bundle, designated for horse stealing contained the scalp of a 15-year-old boy, taken by another 15-year-

old boy, a whistle, a push knife, a rattle and a tail of an albino buffalo.

There are many other momentoes of the Great Lakes Indians and stories behind them that can be told by Ms. Maddy at the museum. The collection be-

longs to a man who is half Chippewa and has gathered artifacts for 30 years. He explained the history to Ms. Maddy.

The exhibit is open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays from 2-4 p.m. at no charge. The museum is at 60 W. Waukegan.

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