

The treasure and tragedy of Hermit Island

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Ashland Daily Press

Tales of rumored treasure and unsolved mysteries on isolated islands seem more suited for the tropics or more exotic locales. And while northern Wisconsin may not fit that bill on the latter count, the region does have a story of its own to tell about treasure and tragedy.

Off the Bayfield Peninsula are the Apostle Islands, an archipelago of 22 islands ranging from tiny Gull Island at 3.5 acres on up to Madeline Island, the largest at 15,359.45 acres. Between them, the islands offer a variety of scenic beauty and outdoor opportunities for campers, kayakers and boaters to enjoy.

They also offer a little mystery to go with that majesty. In the mid-1800s, Hermit Island was the scene of a whodunit that has never been satisfactorily been solved.

The story centers on William Wilson, a loner who was the sole occupant of Hermit Island. According to records, he was the first white settler on that island, building a cabin there in 1845. He guarded his privacy fiercely and his only company on the island were chickens and a rat he kept as pets.

Little was known of Wilson's past. He stayed on his island making barrels for local fishermen and journeyed over to Madeline Island twice a year, when he got his necessary supplies.

And allegedly paid for them in Mexican gold and silver.

No one knew how Wilson obtained that money, nor did they know ex-



FILE PHOTO

Hermit Island is one of the smaller of the Apostle Islands, tucked between Oak, Stockton, Basswood and Madeline Islands.

actly how much he had. Rumors speculated he may have had as much as \$90,000 worth of coins stashed away, but very few of them were uncovered when the hermit was found dead in his cabin in 1861, apparently a victim of foul play.

The only insights into Wilson's life came from accounts from Benjamin G. Armstrong and Hamilton Nelson Ross. Armstrong, an Ojibwe interpreter, was perhaps the only person to befriend Wilson during his life on the island while Ross

wrote of Wilson's early days on Madeline Island in his history book "La Pointe: Village Outpost," published in 1960.

Ross wrote that Wilson clashed with "King" John Bell, who was the kingpin of Madeline Island and served as sheriff, magistrate and several other roles. The two men finally came to blows in a loser-leaves-the-island fist fight, which Bell won.

Wilson, true to his word, left La Pointe and moved to Hermit Island.

Armstrong gave his account of his dealings

with Wilson in "Early Life Among the Indians," which was published in 1892. He lived on nearby Oak Island, which was about two-and-a-half miles from Hermit Island by boat, and wrote about their relationship.

"He sometimes came to my place for a visit but would never stay more than an hour at a time. For two or three years I bought what hay grew in a little meadow back of his house ... Through this dealing with him and his visits to my house there grew up an acquaintance

which in him amounted to a friendship and he appeared to look upon me as the best friend he had."

Wilson related that he had joined the Hudson Bay Company as a fur trader and had traveled across the country working for them. He was married but lost his wife early, and eventually made his way to Lake Superior.

Armstrong said that Wilson also kept liquor by the barrel and ordered a barrel of whiskey through him. When Wilson came to Oak Island

to pick up the barrel, he asked Armstrong to accompany him to help get the barrel up to his cabin and offered to pay him for his troubles.

After finishing the task, Wilson invited Armstrong into his cabin so he could pay him.

"He brought out either three or four bags of coin in buckskin and one stocking-leg filled with coin, and laid them on the table. From one he counted out the money for me and when he was finished he asked, 'Is that enough?' I told him it was and a little too much and gave him back the change.

"I put the money he had paid me in my pocket and proceeded to count his. I put each \$100 in piles, there being about \$1,300. The money consisted of gold, silver, English sovereigns and a few Mexican dollars ..."

In those early times, \$1,300 was a small fortune. Wilson carefully hid the money and gave Armstrong a ride back to Oak Island.

In the winter of 1861, Armstrong said he was told that no smoke had been seen from the chimney of Wilson's cabin for several days. After a similar report several days later, Armstrong rowed over to La Pointe to give Bell the news.

Bell, who said he hadn't seen Wilson in months, put together a posse and the group went over to Hermit Island to investigate. They found Wilson's corpse on his cabin floor, with all signs pointing to murder.

Recalling the money Wilson had from years

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Windigo Lake named for cannibal legend?

More than a legend?

BY FRANK ZUFALL
Sawyer County Record

"Granddaughter?" Meloux's voice made her pause, but she didn't look back.

"I have fought the Windigo before."

Now she turned. "You?"

"I can stand between you and this Windigo, if you will let me."

"You?" she said again, her voice full of disbelief, even derision. Then she said, "Right," as if it were nothing but a joke and a hurtful one at that.

From "Windigo Island," by William Kent Krueger, 2014 Atria Books



PHOTO BY FRANK ZUFALL

Windigo Lake in the Town of Bass Lake, Sawyer County is a beautiful body of water east of Highway 27, a few miles south of the City of Hayward.

tall as trees — a creature sometimes made of flesh and other times stone and ice. The Wendigo's head is skeleton-like, crowned with antlers, with long gangly arms ending in raptor claws. It is said to roam the forest with an insatiable hunger for human flesh.

Author Gayle Ross and painter Murr Jacob presented the Windigo legend in a picture book, "The Legends of the Windigo: A Tale from North America." The tale begins with the disappearance of a young hunter and then a young woman. After their tribe decides

the two haven't run off to elope, they attribute their disappearance to a Windigo. The tribe traps the giant in a large hole. They cover it with wood and grass and destroy the ice creature, which dies in a ball of flames. As the Windigo expires, his ashes fly into the darkness and transform into mosquitoes that continue the Windigo's flesh-eating ways.

In "Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales: And Their Relation to Chippewa Life," by Victor Barnouw, 1997, the author said the Chippewa (now more commonly called

the Ojibway or Ojibwe) use the term Windigo to refer to a legendary cannibal giant, but he said anthropologists have used the word to refer to a mental disorder, "the so-called Windigo or Wiitiko psychosis."

Karl Habeck, LCO Ojibwa Community College librarian and tribal member, has done extensive research on the history of the Ojibwe and their legends. He believes the Windigo legend was used to explain the behavior of those pushed to the edge, especially during winter months, who resorted to extreme behavior for sur-

vival, possibly even cannibalism.

The Windigo, or spirit of the Windigo, has been blamed for actual cannibalism in North America. In 1879, a First Nation man by the name of Swift Runner, from Alberta, Canada, was convicted of killing and eating six family members, including his wife and children (according to Murderpedia, an online encyclopedia of murders). Suspicions were raised when Swift Runner appeared from his winter camp without his family. Canadian Royal Mounties found gruesome remains of

skeletons and obtained a confession. Swift Runner claimed he was possessed by a Windigo spirit during the brutal winter of 1878-'79. On Dec. 20, 1879 in Fort Saskatchewan, Swift Runner was hanged for his gruesome deeds.

In 1907 a Canadian Cree named Jack Fiddler and his brother Joseph claimed to have killed 14 people. Jack Fiddler said they were either possessed or would soon be possessed by the Windigo spirit. Jack hanged himself after escaping jail, but his brother stood trial and received the death penalty. An eyewitness at the trial said the Fiddlers euthanized those on the edge of death to prevent them from becoming Windigos. In a tragic twist of timing, three days after his death, an order came for Joseph's release.

While Bigfoot sightings may be commonplace, have there ever been Windigo sightings?

According to an article on the website Ancient Origins ("Be Wary of the Windigo: A Terrifying Beast of Native American Legend with an Insatiable Hunger to Devour Mankind"), from the late 1800s to the 1920s there were reports of a Windigo appearing near the northern Minnesota town of Roseau; allegedly, following each sighting an unexpected death occurred.

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Hermit

past, Armstrong told Bell about the treasure. They searched the cabin and surrounding area but only found about \$60 worth of coins hidden behind a clock, which went to pay for Wilson's funeral. The buckskin bags and stocking leg filled with coins never were found. It wasn't clear whether the alleged murderers, who were never found, came across Wilson's stash or whether it was still hidden somewhere on the island. However, word of the possible treasure spread throughout the area and would-be treasure hunters combed the island, leaving few areas unturned, as Ross

wrote. "For some years thereafter, rumors of Spanish doubloons and pieces of eight took treasure seekers to his Hermit Island home, but, so far as is known, no one found any of the trove." So where exactly did this treasure come from? There are several theories. One chalks it up as a lost pirate treasure. Around 1700, a party of raiders based on Oak or Hermit Island preyed on trappers, traders and passing ships. They supposedly attacked a party of French traders in 1705 but were wiped out, leaving their previously ill-gotten gains secreted somewhere on the island. Another tale relates that British soldiers car-

rying their payroll with them — a common practice at the time — landed on Hermit Island in the 1760s and buried it near their campsite. Early the next morning, the party was attacked by Indians and very few escaped. The survivors found that the officer who buried the payroll was killed and fearing another attack, left after a brief search and returned to the fort on the mainland. While a search party was dispatched to recover the payroll, they never recovered it. Do those stories seem plausible? Well, in some ways, the facts don't add up. Considering Mexico won its independence in 1821 and Wilson allegedly had Mexican dol-

lars among his coins, it's doubtful Wilson found a stash that included them. The timing of the tale about a British fort also is questionable, as northern Wisconsin was controlled by the French until the Treaty of Paris ended the French and Indian War in 1763. The British did establish a presence in this region shortly after that, but Fort LaPointe was abandoned by the French in 1759 and Henry's Post, which was a British trade post at the head of Chequamegon Bay, was established in 1765. "The trouble is, there's so much misinformation out there," said Washburn's Bob Mackreth, a retired National Park Service ranger and local historian who doubts that Wilson had a small for-

tune socked away on his island. "So many stories told about him (Wilson) have no basis in reality." Mackreth said that the few accounts of Wilson's days were not recorded until some 30 or more years later. By then, stories were more second- or third-hand accounts, and he said some authors cherry-picked what they considered to be the most interesting tidbits from several different stories. There are other stories of wonder surrounding the Apostles, Mackreth said, some of which touch upon the supernatural in various degrees of credibility and likely with a great deal of imagination or exaggeration. But the best ones — the real treasures to him — involve the people themselves

and how they carved out a living. "There are wonderful stories out there of the people who lived there and what they left behind and the way they lived out there," he said. Still, this tale likely has you thinking about Hermit Island and its other neighbors in a whole new light and wondering about the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there's some truth to be found there. Along with a little treasure. Should you go, though, leave the shovels at home. As one of the 21 islands making up the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, there's no excavating or digging allowed on William Wilson's old island.

FROM PAGE 4

Legend

Legends

In chapter five of "Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales," it was reported that in the 1940s, John Mink of Lac Court Oreilles retold seven Windigo stories that Mink considered only legends. In the stories a shaking kettle or other moving objects are premonitions of the Windigo's arrival. Other common story elements are a character transforming into a Windigo to confront the approaching evil Windigo and the use of animal tallow as an antidote for returning to human form. In five of the seven stories, children or youth (even a baby), transform into giants to become a protagonist Windigo. "One morning the kettle over the fire started to move, and the people got scared," begins "The Little Girl and the Windigo." "They went around the village to see if anyone felt strong enough to fight the Windigo, but they couldn't find anyone. At one end of the village, there was an old woman living with her granddaughter. The girl asked what was wrong, and the old woman said, 'Someone is coming and we're all going to die.'"

In the story, the girl becomes a giant Windigo. She holds a sumac that suddenly turns to copper to kill the threatening Windigo. After her success, she drinks tallow and returns to her regular size and tribal members chop up the dead Windigo and discover a normal-sized man inside.

Modern era

In 1910, author Algeron Blackwood published

the mystery/thriller "The Wendigo," a story of a moose hunt in the northern Canadian wilderness that turns into an exploration of mysterious creatures. The Windigo legend is also credited with inspiring the Hannibal Lecter character, a psychiatrist turned serial killer/cannibal, in the 1981 book "Red Dragon." That book was followed by another Lecter page-turner immortalized in popular culture by the movie "Silence of the Lambs." More recently, author William Kent Krueger published in 2014 "Windigo Island," another in his Cork O'Conner mystery series set in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. The antagonist is a human trafficker of Native American teenagers. This character is so evil he known as Windigo.

A real Windigo in Sawyer County?

Habek believes Windigo Lake in Sawyer County is so-named because the lake has a higher than normal concentration of mercury that, he believes, existed prior to the modern era. Habek believes tribal people recognized that those who drank from the lake or ate fish out it were dying at higher than normal rates and the name Windigo was evidence of a dark concern connected to the lake. Paul DeMain, an Oneida tribal member and publisher of the newspaper "News From Indian Country," said his spiritual mentor, friend and Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe elder James "Pipe" Mustache Sr. (now deceased), explained the Windigo legend to him in the late 1980s as the two were

reading the historical marker on Highway 27. "I told him there was development going on across the highway named Windigo Heights and Pipe started laughing," DeMain said. "I said, 'What are you laughing about?' and he said, 'I wonder if those white people moving in there know they are living on a cannibal lake.' He called the development Cannibal Heights." DeMain said Mustache shared two Windigo stories: one about the legend and another on the lake's name. In the first story, a Native American hunter leaves his tribe to hunt, kill and eat beaver. He cannot stop eating the animals and develops an obsession that turns to gluttony. When the hunter returns to his tribe, he becomes famished and envisions his people as beaver and begins slaying them and thus becomes a Windigo.

As Mustache told DeMain, the lake is named for a story about an Ojibwe man, with two wives, who lived by the lake in the 1700s during the period the Sioux or Dakota were still living in the area and were mortal enemies of the Ojibwe. "Pipe said the man was sitting in his wigwam and noticed his war hatchet or war club was moving or shaking on the wall, and because of that he said the enemy must be nearby, and he went out and set up a situation where he could watch what was going on," DeMain said. "He found two Sioux guys creeping up on the wigwam and he slayed them, which is what he should be doing to defend his family." After killing the two, DeMain said, the man



PHOTO SUBMITTED

In 1879, a First Nation Cree man in Alberta, Canada by the name of Swift Runner said he was possessed by the spirit of Windigo and killed his family and ate them.

then ate parts of each of the Sioux warriors, possibly their hearts. "That's how he earned the name Windigo," DeMain said. "He lived to be an old, old man and they named the lake after him and that's the story of Windigos Lake." According to Mustache, DeMain said, the actual name of the lake should be Windigos Lake, which sounds like it is referring to more than one, possibly the two Sioux warriors killed, the eating of two or even the two wives. For North American tribes prior to European occupation and even into the early years of European settlement, cannibalism was known to have

been practiced only by the Iroquois of the Northeast who ate those they captured and tortured. It was not a common or accepted practice amongst the other 1,200 tribes, but DeMain said there was the idea that eating a small part of the flesh or heart of those killed in battle was a way to imbibe the bravery or spirit of the deceased. DeMain believes the story he heard from Mustache about the lake's origin is true. However, one element of the story that might lead one to lean toward legend is the element of the war club moving and acting as premonition of danger.

It's possible fact and legend merged. A Native American legend, an unscientific explanation for mercury poisoning or a real-life cannibal — each could be behind the lake's name. For myself, after studying the lesson of the Windigo, one thing is certain. When I'm out in the dark winter woods by myself and the trees limbs are slapping each other like drunken goons, the icy wind is sweeping through the bare bony bushes and I hear what sounds like my name screamed like a threat, I know what I'm going to do ... run like hell! There's a Windigo about!

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