

The History of Williams Bay

Part 1 of 3

The site of Williams Bay had been one of the favorite camps of Chief Big Foot, who had his main or royal residence and council pole at what is now Fontana. A well defined Indian trail followed the bank of the lake between the two camps. Another led to the trail which was used by the Potawatomi tribe to go back and forth to the large Indian camps at Mukwonago and Waukesha. There were many other trails which were used to go to favorite hunting and fishing points.

Arrival of Israel Williams and Family

When [Israel Williams](#) and his wife, Lavina and her mother, Hannah L. Joy came in July 1837, it is recorded that on a rude raised platform on the knoll east of the E.H. Hollister residence (on Elm Street) were the remains of wives of Chief Big Foot. They were buried in the spot which is marked by stone slabs. The women were clothed in fine broadcloth ornamented with numerous convex and concave disks, from two to four inches in diameter perforated with holes like shimmers, attached to the cloth. The wrists and arms were adorned with bangles or flat ribbed bracelets of silver and from the ears hung clusters of silver trinkets. Each was supplied with a covered tin pail filled with whiskey, a pipe, and some food for their journey into the Spirit World. Over all was a tent like covering of bark.

E.H. Hollister states he found the skeletons of two small children in a sitting position and one appeared to be in the arms of one of the women while digging for a foundation.

Israel Williams had three sons, Moses and Israel Junior, who had come to Linn in July 1836. Moses also made a claim for his brother Royal on section 13 in Walworth on the south side of the bay. Israel Junior took up a claim east of the bay.



Royal Joy Williams

When [Royal](#) came in August 1836 there was but one other family in Walworth, that of James Van Slyke, who had recently moved to the head of the lake from the Geneva settlement, where he had been one of the Payne party in the contention over the mill site. Mrs. Van Slyke was the first woman settler in the county and on July 2nd had become the mother of a daughter, named Geneva, the first white child to be born in the county.

In a letter written back home to Franklin County, Massachusetts, Royal said "The Indians told him that it was Old Big Foot that was buried up in the tree at the 'head of the lake' and father told me after climbing up and examining the corpse that the teeth were those of an old man. His squaws are buried on the farm where I now live. As the Indian gardens were here; this was their home and they were buried on a rising ground overlooking their homes and gardens and he at the 'head of the lake' overlooking his fishing grounds."

Royal's letter gives a different version of the story from that of Cyrus Church, who in describing a view from the Van Slyke log cabin as seen by him in February 1837, writes "The beautiful clear waters of the lake were hidden under the ice and snow. A little way from the cabin could be seen the abandoned wigwams of the Indians, they having been removed some three months before. Big Foot's wigwam was far superior to the others. A few rods from there in the top of a tree was deposited the body of a boy about fifteen years of age, a son of the Chief. His remains were in a butternut log."

The Potawatomies Leave Geneva Lake

On the afternoon of September 21, 1833 several thousand braves and their families, dressed in their finest were encamped on every available spot surrounding the settlement at the mouth of the river overlooking Fort Dearborn (Chicago). Some 20 to 30 Indian Chieftains representing the various tribes of the Potawatomies spent several days in negotiations with representatives of the government at a Grand Council at Fort Dearborn. As a result of the council they agreed to give up the land on which they lived, some million acres, within three years and in exchange were to receive an equal amount of land in Kansas. In addition the U.S. government agreed to transport them and pay all costs for the trip and to support them for one year after their arrival. Nearly one million dollars was to be expended in various ways for their benefit. They were to receive for twenty years annually the sum of \$16,000 in addition to mills, blacksmith shops, physicians, the promotion of education, domestic arts, and other contributions which civilization could provide. Before they left the Great Council some \$83,000 in goods and \$50,000 in silver coins were distributed. The final scene at the Grand Council was a great "war dance" in which some 800 took part.

Chief Big Foot had a prominent part in the Council. He had never been very friendly and for a while during the Black Hawk War had waived as to where he might cast his allegiance. However, after making his choice with the white man he was loyal.

That the Indians had been here for a long time is evidenced by the large number of arrow heads, etc. found area residents. When it is remembered that these were valuable and always retrieved when possible, those we find had been lost by the hunter. The stones from which arrow and spear points were made were traded from tribe to tribe, some coming from as far as the Rocky Mountains.

By the time of the coming of the whites, the Indians had acquired many of the articles of civilization at the trading posts at Fort Dearborn and Milwaukee, including a few guns, not to mention "fire water".

It is estimated that there were some five hundred Indians living around Geneva Lake when they left for Kansas. Before leaving for his long trek to the west, Chief Big Foot visited the burial place of his wives and children at Williams Bay (it is possible their deaths were caused by Whooping Cough which was causing havoc at the time of the departure). Likewise, he had placed his arm around the Council Pole at Fontana and taken a long last look at the lake and the coffin of his son in the treetop overlooking the fishing grounds. Then after stopping for a word of farewell with Mrs. Van Slyke and commending the care of the treetop grave to her, he followed his tribe on the way over the hills toward the long trail to Kansas, never more to see Geneva Lake.

Early Settlers

Unfortunately, the early settlers of Williams Bay did not leave much in writing about their experiences. However, Colonel Samuel F. Phoenix, the first settler in Delavan kept a diary and from that we can get some very good word pictures of the neighborhood as it was first viewed by the Israel Williams family.

"To the early explorers the country seemed a veritable paradise, waiting only for man to enter into possession. The southern and eastern parts of the county, which were the first to be viewed by prospectors, was watered by the most considerable lakes in the county. Geneva Lake stretched for nine miles through heavily wooded rolling country, opening out at its southern extremity on to the beautiful prairie of Big Foot. Across the country, some three miles to the northwest, another beautiful lake, then known as Swan Lake (Delavan Lake) lay in all its native loveliness, quite heavily wooded about its banks but flanked farther north by open prairie and groves, or openings as they were termed, of oaks.

The oaks had a peculiar fascination for the incoming explorers. Few of them had ever seen the like before. Emerging from the deep woods, they came upon these natural parks, as clear of underbrush as an ordinary orchard and skirting the prairie on every side. As an old pioneer expressed it 'They seemed like the old apple orchards in York State, only the fences were all gone and they extended as far as the eye could penetrate the shade.'

It was along borders of these openings where they skirted the prairie that the first farmers staked their claims, generally including a strip of timber and a strip of prairie."

The actual settlement of the county dates from 1836 when early settlers began to arrive and the surveys had been completed, the Indian title to the land had been extinguished, and the country lay in its native loveliness, waiting to welcome the sturdy pioneer, who with their descendents have made it the home of as happy and contented a community as exists anywhere on God's fair earth.

Early Area Residents

The editor is indebted to Mrs. Harold Williams on the Elkhorn Road for the sketch of the neighborhood back in 1857. The farm on which Mrs. Williams now lives was owned by Hiram Beals.

Mr. [William H. Southwick](#) who was born in 1852 on the farm where he now

lives gave the editor the names of some of the residents in the neighborhood when he was a boy.

Near where the railroad crosses under state highway 50 were the log cabins of Lige Godfrey, Jeremiah Ward, and Festus A. Williams, the latter about on the site of the A.W. Harris home. William Southwick's father, Jonas, had a log cabin just this side of where the barn now stands. The family usually went to Delavan for trading over a meandering road which has been straightened out into state highway 50, as there was no road to the Bay, the marshy land coming up to the foot of the rise of ground to the north, and the meandering road to Geneva village being impassable part of the year.

Where the [Kemah Farm](#), owned by A.W. Harris, (Kishwauketoe Nature Concervancy and Geneva National) is now located Warren Beckwith had a log cabin and not far away a Mr. Brownell had one.

On the Lockwood farm there was the Barnhart family, at DeLap's corner was John Handy, and on the Ed. Perry 40 acres was J.T. Paddock.



Stove wood house of Job Williams

Near East Delavan Union Cemetery was the cabin of Job Williams, which with its additions was recently torn down. The stove wood and mortar construction was quite common when it was built.

Near East Delavan corners there was a Horse Doctor named Dr. Burr. C.E. Woodford was the first blacksmith; it was he

who gave the land on which East Delavan Baptist Church stands. The congregation was formed February 14, 1845, with Reverend Henry Topping being the first pastor. The seventeen members, Ira Utter and wife, L.H. Willis and wife, H. Beals and wife, Daniel P. Handy and wife, Mrs. Laura Bailey, Mrs. Clarissa Wright, Lucy Pierce, Jerre P. Ward, Mrs. Ward, Nelson Calkins and wife, Elihu Eaton and Mrs. Clarissa Vincent. The congregation first met in a log school house and erected the first church building in 1846.

East Delavan was a thriving community, complete with church, school, creamery, store, and a number of houses. Thus East Delavan was a community long before Williams Bay. When the railroad came to the Bay,

several families moved from East Delavan to Williams Bay.

The first doctor in Williams Bay was Dr. Strang who lived to the west of the John. E. Anderson home. On the Kelley farm west of the golf course lived George Southwick, brother of William H. Southwick and father of Oliver P. Southwick.

Across the bay was Otis Dodge. On the rise of ground above the sewage disposal plant Peter Robertson had a cabin.

The Kiah Bailey family had a cabin where John M. Smyth lives (Bailey House B & B) and across the road was the Fiske's.

Edward B. Hollister who lived north of Williams Bay was the father of [Albert Hollister](#) and grandfather of Ed and Lawrence.

The lots at Conference Point were wood lots of those living on the prairies. W.B. Van Schaik of Big Foot Prairie paid \$300 for the point and after using wood off it for several years sold it for \$500. At one time Jonas Southwick had been offered the 40 acres at the point for a cow, but had refused the offer.

This history is taken from Bay Leaves, Frank M Van Epps, editor. Vol. 3 No. 1, 2, 3, and 5