



As director of the Sauk County Historical Society, I type or say the word Sauk many times each day. If you grew up in this area the word “Sauk” was soon part of your vocabulary of place names. If you live in the area, when someone says they’re “going to Sauk” you know they are going either to Sauk City or Prairie du Sac, collectively known as Sauk Prairie. While the word Sauk is ubiquitous in this area many people probably don’t know what it means, let alone that it refers to a people, the Sauk, and a language. I hope that changes some today.

It was exactly 256 years ago yesterday that the Sauk living here saw a group of birchbark canoes floating down the Wisconsin River filled with men exploring the area for the British government. The leader of the expedition Jonathan Carver was impressed with the vast village and agricultural fields that he saw here. He wrote in his journal:

“This is the largest and best built Indian town I ever saw. It contains about ninety houses, each large enough for several families. These are built of hewn plank neatly jointed, and covered with bark so compactly as to keep out the most penetrating rains. Before the doors are placed comfortable sheds, in which the inhabitants sit, when the weather will permit, and smok their pipes. The streets are regular and spacious; ... The land near the town is very good. In their plantations, which lie adjacent to their houses, and which are neatly laid out, they raise great quantities of Indian corn, beans, melons, &c. so that this place is esteemed the best market for traders to furnish themselves with provisions, of any within eight hundred miles of it.”

Two weeks behind Carver was another British expedition part of which was James Stanley Goddard who also wrote about the Sauk and their village here. Goddard described that the Sauk, “have a quantity of horses which they use to hunt buffeloes on in the summer season. This town is situated on the banks of the Ousisconsang: behind the town is a very extensive plain on which the Indians raise a large quantity of Indian corn, squashes, mellons & tobacco; they raise sufficient to supply themselves and sell vast quantities to the traders.”

Seven years later in 1773 Peter Pond encountered the Sauk village here and also described the distinct Sauk longhouses made of upright hewn planks with arched roofs covered in bark. He noted that some of the longhouses were 60 feet long and contained several families each. Carver noted 90 houses, and Goddard reported the village had 300 warriors. Estimating for other men, women and children the village here could easily have consisted of over 1,000 people. Pond also commented on the great agriculture output of the Sauk accurately reporting that “The Women Rase Grate Crops of Corn, Been, Punkens (pumpkins), Potatoes, Millans (melons) and artikels.”

Decades later the extent of the Sauk fields was still highly evident. In 1851 Henry B Staines wrote “I have often examined the remains of their tillage there, and should suppose they raised corn in one lot of at least 400 acres; the town of Westfield (Sauk City) is laid out on part of this

ground, and the whole quantity of land, the 400 acres, is covered with well formed, regular, corn hills.”

The Sauk village that Carver, Goddard, and Pond described was established here around 1740.

During the 1730s the Sauk had become allies of the Fox (Meskawki) who were reduced from several thousand to a few hundred after twenty years of war with the French. The Sauk themselves then became a target in the ongoing hostilities with the Fox. The Sauk and Fox fled west of the Mississippi during the last unsuccessful campaign of the French against the Fox and their allies from 1733 to 1735. When the fighting subsided, the Sauk returned to lands east of the Mississippi around 1740 and established a village here on the Wisconsin River next to a great prairie where they flourished here for about 40 years.

The Sauk left the village around 1780 due to increasing pressure from the Chippewa and moved south near other Sauk living in the Mississippi River valley at places like Saukenuk, the great Sauk village on the Rock River.

The Treaty of St. Louis in 1804 with the Sauk and Fox, who were by this time considered one tribe by the US Government, compelled the tribe to relinquish all title to land east of the Mississippi River.

The Sauk and Fox would become divided about whether to abide by the treaty which many felt was not legitimate. A leader named Black Hawk rose among the Sauk who felt this way. From 1829 to 1832 Black Hawk led a group of Sau and Fox men, women and children back to the area of the great village of Saukenuk where he had been born. The action led to what was called the Black Hawk war in 1832. During that conflict with American militia and regular troops, Black Hawk led his group of followers on a cross country trek of hundreds of miles trying to evade US forces and return to Sauk lands west of the Mississippi. The Battle of Wisconsin Heights was fought just a few miles downriver from here as Black Hawk and his warriors, though outnumbered 10 to 1, held off the US forces long enough for hundreds of Black Hawk’s followers to cross the Wisconsin River. The war ended just a few weeks later at the Battle of Bad Axe, a euphemistic name for the bloody end to the conflict where hundreds of Sauk, mostly noncombatants died.

Some years after the Sauk left this area the Ho-Chunk presence became stronger here and villages were established along the Baraboo River and elsewhere. Just like the Sauk the Ho-Chunk were compelled to sign treaties that gave away their lands east of the Mississippi. The Treaty of 1837 with the Ho-Chunk led to this side of the Wisconsin River being opened for American settlement and when a new county was laid out in 1840 it was decided that it should be named Sauk. Though the Sauk had not lived here for over fifty years their former presence on the prairie was still highly visible

Edmond Rendtorff wrote in 1861



“During the first days, especially, that I lived in Sauk, my eyes were much of the time on the fine scenery. It was no unbroken wilderness that met my gaze. The idea struck me that Indians had lived here and ... occupied this lovely prairie. ... All then was covered with Indian hills; thousands of deer bones, glass neck-pearls, arrow points of flint, and Indian graves were everywhere to be found. Yes, here they hunted, fished, raised corn and died.”

The county would be called Sauk. It's two earliest villages, Prairie du Sac, and Sauk City would be named after the Sauk and collectively known as Sauk Prairie. A small hamlet in the interior of the county would be named Blackhawk and most recently the Great Sauk State Trail traverses the area known to the Sauk people over 250 years ago.

After the Black Hawk War, the Sauk in Iowa were subjected to more treaties throughout the remainder of the 1800s with forced relocations to Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Some returned or stayed in Iowa or Kansas. Today the Sauk comprise three federally recognized tribes:

- the Sac and Fox Nation headquartered in Stroud, Oklahoma,
- the Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska headquartered in Reserve, Kansas, and
- the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa known as the Meskawki Nation, with headquarters in Tama, Iowa.

Each tribe has roots here in the village that once stood beside the great prairie. Some Sauk live here, and some have returned today. We welcome them, are honored by their presence and hope that more people will come to know Sauk not just as a place name but as a resilient, vibrant people. I know that from this day forward I will write the word Sauk with a greater appreciation for what it means and stands for and I hope you will too as we celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day every year in SAUK County.

