

Chief Decora
His Ancestors and Life

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The French period of Wisconsin history began with the voyage of Jean Nicolet to the shores of Green Bay in 1634 and closed with the treaty of Paris in 1763, when sovereignty over all lands east of the Mississippi passed to the British. The British period ended with the Treaty of Ghent after the War of 1812. These two periods in the early history of Wisconsin were characterized by numerous conflicts between the French, the British, and the Indians, who occupied the sought after lands.

A great many French traders and "courrier de bois" (rangers of the woods) moved in to fight for their homeland. At least two-thirds of these men perished in the fearful conflicts; however, some survived and made this "new land" their home. This life of a settler was chosen by a man named De Carry, who had been an officer for the French troops. He soon married "Ho-po-ko-e-kaw" or "the Glory in the Morning", who was the daughter of the principal chief of the Winnebago Indians. They had two sons. Soon after the births of his sons, De Carry began fighting in the French and Indian War. He was wounded and died shortly after at Montreal.

De Carry's widow, after the death of her father, became chieftess of her tribe of O-chunk-o-raws of the Winnebagoes. It is believed that she was the chieftess written about by Jonathan Carver in his book, Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America. (Jonathan Carver was a New England school-teacher and map maker, who traveled through Wisconsin and wrote the first account of this region in English. Actually, he was a liar, a rogue and a very gullible fellow, but his book was a

great success in Europe and America. He wrote in this book that Ho-po-ko-e-kaw, despite her charming name of "the Glory in the Morning", was "a very ancient woman, small in stature, and not much distinguished by her dress." However, Carver described her as a heroine for what she had done for her tribe and "saluted her often" to win her favor.)

The first son of this marriage of De Carry and Ho-po-ko-e-kaw was called Choo-ke-kaw or "the Ladle". He became head chief at the Portage in Wisconsin, 1801, and signed the treaty of peace with the United States in 1816. He was father to Chachipika-ka or "the White War Eagle" who played a prominent part in Wisconsin history.

Chah-post-kaw-kaw or "the Buzzard" was the second son. He came to LaCrosse with a band and was killed previous to 1800. This man also had two sons. The first being Wa-kon-ha-kaw or "Snake Skin" who was still living in 1867. He served as orator of his tribe and was known to the English as Washington De Carry.

His second son is the one of primary concern. This was Wadge-hutta-kaw or "the Big Canoe" commonly called "one-eyed De Carry" (Decora - an explanation of the spellings of this name is found later in this writing).

Chief Decora is a well known name in the history of western Wisconsin, and many traditions are associated with it. One of these traditions concerns the rock-crested hill to the east of Galesville which is now called Decorah Peak. During an attack on Decora's village by a tribe of Chippewa Indians, Chief Decora was wounded and took refuge in a cave near the peak. He remained in this cave throughout the bloody engagement and then at night-

fall made his escape. He jumped off the peak, and in doing so, he broke both knee caps. Even though severely wounded, he made his way to the Black River, and in a canoe went downstream to another Winnebago settlement. The next day he returned with reinforcements, surprised the Chippewa and forced them to leave.

Chief Decora then led his tribe of O-chunk-o-raws to the great council with the United States, held at Prairie du Chien, August 19, 1825. Chiefs from the tribes of Winnebagoes, Sioux, Sacs, Foxes, Chippeways and Ottawas of Wisconsin and the Chippeways and Potowatomies of Illinois were present at this council. They all signed a treaty establishing tribal boundaries in the hope of securing "a firm and perpetual peace".

Relative peace between the tribes was attained through this treaty; however, there was still fighting between the Indians and the Americans. This can be seen in the Black Hawk War in which Decora played a part. This war was the last stand of the Indians in Wisconsin. It was a brutal butchery of men, women, and children.

About 1823 white squatters began to encroach on the lands near the Fox and Sauk villages in northwestern Illinois. In 1830 Chief Keokuk yielded to the inevitable and led most of the Indians across the Mississippi. However, Black Hawk, a young leader of one of the tribes, refused to let the whites take over his homeland, and in 1832 led four hundred warriors and some six hundred women and children back to their original lands. He wanted to do it peaceably, but the Americans considered it, the moving, an act of war and many skirmishes ensued. Black Hawk many times tried to surrender, but the Americans could not

understand his language, and his band of 1000 gradually diminished. They traveled along the rivers of Wisconsin as they tried to get back across the Mississippi. Their last stand was near the mouth of the Bad Axe River. After this massacre only 150 of the original 1000 remained. These were captured, but Black Hawk escaped.

This was the point at which Decora played his part. Chief Decora captured Black Hawk and delivered him to the government officials in Prairie du Chien. The following interview contains information concerning the capture of Black Hawk. It was recorded by S.S. Luce when told by Chief Decora.

"Learning that the aged and celebrated chief of the Winnebagoes was encamped with some others of his tribe two or three miles west of our village, we went in company with Charles E. Perkins, Esq., to pay him a visit and behold with our own eyes one of whom we had heard and read much; who possesses much historic, not to say poetic, interest.

Arriving at the wigwams, we fortunately found Mr. Grignon, who understands and speaks the Winnebago language with facility. Mr. Grignon invited us to enter the tent, where we found the veteran chief lying upon a flag mattress. In his hand he held the peace pipe, which he soon lighted at a little fire in the center of the lodge made for the purpose, and commenced to smoke. Decorah gave his age as 130 years. He is of a little more than medium size, well made and extremely muscular of limb; he is nearly blind, but otherwise does not appear more infirm than many persons of 70 years. His head is bald on the crown and the remainder covered thinly with hair nearly white.

Through Mr. Grignon, Decorah communicated the following interesting items with regard to the taking and delivering up the celebrated Black Hawk. Decorah with his tribe had encamped at LaCrosse. He one day heard a splash in the water near by. Taking down his gun and moving carefully toward the place whence the noise proceeded, he saw one of Black Hawk's tribe had jumped in, when Decorah brought his gun to bear on him and commanded him to come across, telling him he was his prisoner, but should be well treated. This Indian gave him intelligence regarding Black Hawk, whom he soon after captured together with about thirty warriors of the tribe. He says Black Hawk willingly gave himself up, shaking hands and saying he would go with him. He took them to Prairie du Chien and delivered them up to the agent, General Street, with the following words, which we quote from the history of Wisconsin:

"We have done as you told us. We always do as you tell us, because we know it is for our good. You told us to bring them to you alive; we have done so. If you had told us to bring their heads alone, we should have done so. We want you to keep them safe. If they are to be hurt, we do not want to see it. Wait until we are gone before you do it. We know you are our friend, because you take our part; and that is the reason we do what you tell us to do. We have confidence in you, and you may rely on us. We have been promised a great deal if we would take these men; that it would do much good to our people. We hope to see what will be done for us. We now put these men into your hands. We have done all that you have told us to do."

Chief Decora delivered his prisoners to Prairie du Chien on August 27, 1832. He was rewarded highly by the United States government, but was criticized severly by members of different tribes of Indians. They felt his loyalty should have been with a fellow Indian and not with the Americans.

After the conclusion of the Black Hawk War, the Winnebagoes ceded all of their land east of the Mississippi to the United States. They, including Chief Decora and his tribe, then lived in southern Minnesota for many years and became prosperous farmers. However, all hopes of prosperity were dashed with the occurrence of the Sioux massacre in June of 1862. The Winnebagoes took no part in this uprising against the government, but because of it, they were forced to leave their new lands and were sent south to poor land near the Missouri River.

Chief Decora deeply disagreed with this action of the government and he fled to escape it. He took his family with him. This included his son, Chief Winneshiek, and granddaughter, Princess Marinuka. Another Winnebago, Chief Dandy and his family also went with them. They fled to Wisconsin to a place near the tunnel in Monroe County. It was here in the fall of 1864 that Chief Decora died in poverty. He had spent his entire life time doing the most he could for his tribe of Winnebagoes.

Throughout this paper the spelling of the Chief's name has been given as Decora. This, however, has not always, and is still not always, the accepted spelling.

As mentioned previously, Judge Gale in writing history of the Indian tribes, wrote the name as De Carry. This is French and was the name of the grandfather of the chief who was a French officer. It is believed that when early whites came into this

region and heard the name, they spelled it as best they could. Thus, the name finally became Englishized to Decora and Decorah. At one time during this transition it was spelled De Kauray. B.F. Heuston used this spelling in sections of his History of Trempealeau County.

Now, the question lies between the following three spellings: Decora, Decorra, and Decorah. S.S. Luce in his writings used the two spellings: Decorra and Decorah.

The area east of the peak referred to earlier has been known for many years as Decora Prairie. It was on this land that Decora's original village was located. The spelling of this was decided by the United States government. When a post office was established in this area, they listed the name as Decora Prairie.

Historians, however, have continued to use the final "h" when referring to the chief. This is the spelling used by the State Historical Society in 1958 when a placard was placed near the peak. However, the usual, present spelling of the name has been Decora. The Galesville Republican adopted this spelling in 1931, and it has been used in their publications since that time.

The name Decora, no matter how it is spelled, will forever remain associated ^{with} the southern section of Trempealeau County because of the peak, the prairie and the many traditions.