

Indian Dave History



he family of Indian Dave (Ish-don-quit, Crossing Cloud) settled seasonally in Vassar, Michigan, sometime after the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw, which ceded much of Lower Michigan to the United States. Old Dave had stated to settlers that his family witnessed this famous treaty at “Green Point”, with the Chippewa’s and General Cass, where the Saginaw River and the Tittabawassee divide. The “Legend of the Thumb” was supposedly born in 1803, and may have been a witness of this important event.

He then wandered throughout the territory after “Black Smallpox” wiped out most of his first family, and eventually, wives Mary and Emma Davis, as well.

Indian Dave and son, John David Davis, frequented Murphy Lake in 1893 with other members of his family clan, known as the “Tuscola Gathering”.

In Vassar, Tuscola County, merchants welcomed the aged gent, then a centenarian, into their establishments, where he could get most anything on credit, his word being good. He was exceedingly adept with ... “me borrow ten cents, give note, mark down ten”.

In this region, crossing streams on hollow logs, paddling canoes, making bows and arrows, baking clay-covered fish in mud-ovens, and snare-trapping, were talents taught children by their Indian mentor. Encampments of Chippewa-Ottawa were located, mainly east and southeast of Vassar, while a large settlement centered near the Riverside Cemetery property.

Indian Dave (David Stocker, David Tuscola, Tuscola Dave) and his Tuscola Gathering would often pad into town with hides, baskets, hampers, whittled toys, ginseng, fish and game, to sell.

With delight, local boys were ever present to help their antiquated friend Dave, who was quite bent with arms hanging low. He would often teach the siblings and their parents how to use certain herbs and roots for medicinal purposes, and also would often drop off wild turkey and fish at their homes.

Dave’s oldest known son was John David, a constant companion in their travels who always walked a few paces behind his famed father, in the ancient custom dating back to Asia. John David (died in 1916 at age 60) seldom spoke a word, leading folks to believe he was unable to speak to gather sympathy and aid. He would display little cards indicating he was a deaf mute. A school teacher later learned he could converse fine in his Algonquain tongue, but preferred sign symbols.

Indian Dave got involved in politics at one time when he and a Caro, Michigan businessman transported the courthouse records by canoe, under the cover of darkness, from Vassar to Caro. Vassar was the temporary county seat during a rather heated controversy between the two towns. Taking the records to Caro established the Tuscola County Courthouse in Caro in 1866.

Indian Dave also included Frankenmuth in his wanderings. He managed to be in Frankenmuth on the fourth of July for the annual picnic and ended up staying the night, courtesy of the local town marshal who furnished him with a cot and meals. Dave would pretend he was in a rage and chase the village children down Main Street during the celebration and other occasions, always a hit with the children. He also sold baskets along the streets, carrying them on a long stick over his shoulder. Dave would stop at one of the hotels and perform odd jobs for pay and choose the woodshed as his place to spend the night.



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One lovely day the Kern children, whose parents owned the hotel, were playing in the back yard. Suddenly the face of Indian Dave peered out of the hotel window, which frightened the children, but he immediately came out and assured them that all was safe.

Toward the end of his life Indian Dave was camped in a woods owned by Ed Hodgins northwest of Fairgrove. He came to Ed's door sick and said, "Indian Dave is going to Happy Hunting Ground ... not many days from now. I want good burial like white man."

Steven Benson, his parents, and many friends and neighbors attended the funeral of Indian Dave at the Batelle Methodist Church. His body was then taken north to M-25 (Wisner Township) to the Wisner Cemetery. A historical marker was later placed in the cemetery honoring the "Colorful Character – Indian Dave".

James Birbelmarsh

The last Chippewa Indian who lived and died in the township of Frankenmuth was James Birbelmarsh. He lived with his wife, an English woman, in a one story board and tar-paper shanty on the banks of the Cass River, about two miles down river from Frankenmuth.

He died on March 8, 1928, at the age of 80 years, 110 months and 6 days. His funeral took place in Carl Nuechterlein's casket room on March 10. He was placed into a wooden casket in which a soldier's body had been sent home to Frankenmuth during World War I.

His widow, who, when he had died, thinking that he might be buried immediately, tearfully begged for a few days of waiting as the corpse was being removed from the shanty. The mourners for James Birbelmarsh included: William Zehnder, Sr., who had made

arrangements that the Indian and his wife received welfare assistance; the Zehnder boys, Albert, Herman and William "Tiny" Zehnder, Jr.; Wallace Baum, whom Teacher Bunjes had hurriedly drilled in the singing of "Nearer My God to Thee"; and Carl Nuechterlein, who served both as undertaker and clergyman, since the Indian had not been a member a the Lutheran Church.

The funeral singing without accompaniment went badly. Mr. Nuechterlein's English reading was heavy with a German accent. The deceased Indian's widow gave many auditory evidences of her grief. The funeral service over, the boys choir, Mr. Nuechterlein, Mr. Zehnder, and the grief-stricken widow accompanied the body of James Birbelmarsh to the township cemetery on West Tuscola Street and quietly laid it to rest. Later the township placed a small white marker at the grave. It simply read:

James Birbelmarsh
1847-1928

In the year 2005, William "Tiny" Zehnder, Jr. placed a new grave marker on the grave. Besides his name and the years he lived, it also included: The last Indian to live in Frankenmuth. Buried by the William Zehnder, Sr. and the Carl Nuechterlein families.



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