

First humans on Koshkonong

By Janice Redford
Special to the Lakes Edition

The Koshkonong Prairie Historical Society (KPHS) welcomed archeologist and author Robert Birmingham as the guest speaker at its annual meeting on April 30, 2017.

Birmingham was introduced by KPHS President Gary Swain and the topic was the earliest human inhabitants from the archeological evidence of the Koshkonong area. Birmingham is the former state archeologist and author of many publications and books including his latest, "Indian Mounds of Wisconsin," published by the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Birmingham explained that the earliest European settlers were amazed by the earthen mounds and pyramids found in the Lake Koshkonong area and thought that the native people were uncivilized barbarians who could never have built them but perhaps had earlier killed off the builders.

The pivotal moment that started European settlements in Wisconsin was the Blackhawk War of 1832 after the Sauk and Fox Indians were removed from Illinois and pushed into Iowa, but the Ho Chunk, sometimes called Winnebago, were the actual natives of southern Wisconsin. Federal troops and the Illinois militia (including young Abraham Lincoln) were sent to clear out native tribes and caused an estimated 1,000 deaths at the Battle of Wisconsin Heights and the Battle of Bad Axe on the Mississippi River. These were actual massacres of native people. Chief Blackhawk was captured, sent to Washington D.C. and, although originally viewed as a terrorist, eventually



Gary Swain with Robert Birmingham at Koshkonong Prairie Historical Society. (Photo submitted by Janice Redford)

were heated and hammered with symbolic images. The natives burned off the prairies and 95 percent of their diets were deer.

During the Woodland Period, 500 B.C.–1200 A.D., burial mounds were constructed that included bone bundles saved over a period of time. Conical mounds were more prevalent and contained bones of the most important people. During that era, the Mississippian culture appeared from 1,000 to 1200 A.D. and built the pyramids and a village at Aztalan near what is now Lake Mills. They were not connected to the Aztec culture from Mexico, as earliest settlers had thought, and the mystery continues about what destroyed them. A blend of both cultures may have resulted.

About 700 A.D. the mounds took an amazing turn into animals and spirits that were as large as 600–800 feet long. Nowhere else in the world were effigy mounds built like these. They represented beliefs of clans: upper were birds and thunderbirds, middle were bears and earth animals, and the lower were the watery world of snakes and water panthers or feline spirits. An intaglio of a water panther still exists along Riverside Drive in Fort Atkinson and is the only one of its kind.

Effigy mound clusters were built around the four lakes of Madison, Lake Ripley and the Mississippi River in Iowa. Those clusters of huge villages near Lake Koshkonong were the heart of the most important archeological discoveries of all. French trade material from the mid-1600s were found, and when an estimated 80 percent of the natives died of diseases, their oral histories died with them.

The federal government decided that the native Indians could not live together with settlers, so the tribes were removed. The Winnebago were sent to Nebraska and other tribes went to Kansas and elsewhere west. Some of the Ho Chunk people stayed under the radar and lived long lives nearby, such as those buried in Busseyville.

The earliest human settlements in the Koshkonong area were Paleo Indians, 11,000–9,000 B.C., when mammoths and mastodons were still roaming. They were nomadic and left spear points for scientists to recover. McFarland and the Yahara River were gathering and hunting spots around a huge glacial lake. The Skaare site may be the largest in North America from that era.

The Archaic Period, 8,500–800 B.C., brought the first fishermen who were hunters and gatherers during a much warmer and drier climate change that lasted thousands of years. The artifacts left showed that they had a system of trade that included copper from Lake Superior in items such as fish hooks, slicers and gouges for woodworking, plus copper items that

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Small village offers much charm and historical value

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The oldest village on the Koshkonong Prairie was founded in 1836 along Koshkonong Creek as a mill town named Clinton. It was renamed Rockdale nearly 100 years ago and today is one of the smallest incorporated villages in Wisconsin.

Although tiny in size, Rockdale has much historical value and remains as though in a time-warp with a population of about 200.

Rockdale was in competition for the state capitol in the 1840s. Once a center for wagon trails, today's trails are for bikers, hikers, skiing, and a waterway for kayaks or canoes often bringing visitors to Rockdale. County Highway B brings vehicles.

Once there were stores, hotels and a brewery, plus a waterfall, a lovely millpond and a working mill with a stone waterwheel imported from France. But things changed: the dam was removed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 2000, the old mill site has turned into part of Cam-Rock County Park and the stores are residential living quarters.

Displays, photos and historical books of Rockdale are at the Cambridge Museum.

The businesses that remain are an auto body shop and the Rockdale Bar and Grill. The body shop is a busy place repairing vehicles for the area. The Rockdale Bar and Grill is owned by Deanna Skjolaas and remains a popular attraction with food, beverages



Downtown Rockdale. (Photo submitted by Janice Redford)

and live music on Friday and Saturday evenings, plus Sunday afternoons. The local population and visitors consider Rockdale as a gathering place from 11 a.m. until close each day.

Don't miss these summer events at Rockdale:

•Fourth of July Fireworks start at dusk and the entire village lights up with music, people and celebration.

•The Rockdale Shindig on Aug. 26 includes a parade at 2 p.m., outside and inside food, live music and a lively village setting.



Rockdale Bar and Grill owner Deanna Skjolaas (left) with former owner Heather Popp. (Photo submitted by Janice Redford)



The annual parade through Rockdale will be held Aug. 26. (Photo from past parade submitted by Janice Redford)

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