



Great Lakes region in 1688 map by Franquelin, *Carte de l'Amerique Septentrionale* (early 20<sup>th</sup> c. copy). Green Bay ("Baye des Puane") extends west from Lake Michigan ("Lac des Illinois").

# FIRST ENCOUNTERS of the HO-CHUNK NATION and the FRENCH

Account of the first contact of the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) with explorer Jean Nicolet in Green Bay in 1634, and the later marriage of a French soldier to the daughter of a Ho-Chunk chief, as related in the early twentieth century to ethnologist Paul Radin.

## How the Winnebago First Came into Contact with the French and the Origin of the Decora Family

. . . Now this is what the old men have said and handed down to us.

Once something appeared in the middle of the lake (Green Bay). They were the French; they were the first to come to the Winnebago. The ship came nearer and the Winnebago went to the edge of the lake with offerings of tobacco and white deerskins. There they stood. When the French were about to come ashore they fired their guns off in the air as a salute to the Indians. The Indians said, "They are thunderbirds." They had never heard the report of a gun before that time and that is why they thought they were thunderbirds.

Then the French landed their boats and came ashore and extended their hands to the Winnebago, and the Indians put tobacco in their hands. The French, of course, wanted to shake hands with the Indians. They did not know what tobacco was, and therefore did not know what to do with it. Some of the Winnebago poured tobacco on their heads, asking them for victory in war. The French tried to speak to them, but they could not, of course, make themselves understood. After a while they discovered that they were without tools, so they taught the Indians how to use an ax and chop a tree down. The Indians, however, were afraid of it, because they thought that the ax was holy. Then the French taught the Indians how to use guns, but they held aloof for a long time through fear, thinking that all these things were holy.

Suddenly a Frenchman saw an old man smoking and poured water on him. They knew nothing about smoking or tobacco. After a while they got more accustomed to one another. The Indians learned how to shoot the guns and began trading objects for axes. They would give furs and things of that nature for the guns, knives, and axes of the whites. They still considered them holy, however. Finally they learned how to handle guns quite well and they liked them very much. They would even build fires at night so that they might try their guns, for they could not wait for the day, they were so impatient. When they were out of ammunition they would go to the traders and tell their people that they would soon return. By this time they had learned to make themselves understood by various signs.

The second time they went to visit the French they took with them all the various articles that they possessed. There the French taught them how to sew, how to use an ax, and how to use a knife. Then the leader of the whites took a liking to a Winnebago girl, the daughter of the chief, and he asked her parents for

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permission to marry her. They told him that her two brothers had the right to give her away in marriage. So he asked them and they consented. Then he married her.\* He lived there and worked for the Indians and stayed with them for many years and he taught them the use of many tools. He went home every once in a while and his wife went with him, but he always came back again. After a while a son was born to him and then another. When the boys were somewhat grown up he decided to take his oldest son with him to his country and bring him up in such a way that he would not be in danger, as was the case here in the woods. The Indians consented to it and they agreed that the mother was to bring up the youngest child.

So he took his oldest boy home with him and when he got home he went to live with his parents, as he had not been married in his own country. He was a leader of men. The boy was with him all the time and everyone took a great liking to him. People would come to see him and bring him presents. They gave him many toys.

However, in spite of all, he got homesick and he would cry every night until he fell asleep. He cried all the time and would not eat. After a while the people thought it best to bring him back to his home, as they were afraid that he would get sick and die. Before long they brought him back. The father said: "My sons are men and they can remain here and grow up among you. You are to bring them up in your own way and they are to live just as you do."

The Indians made them fast. One morning the oldest one got up very early and did not go out fasting. His older uncle, seeing him try to eat some corn, took it away from him and, taking a piece of charcoal, mashed it, rubbed it over his face, and threw him out of doors. He went out into the wilderness and hid himself in a secret place. Afterwards the people searched for him everywhere, but they could not find him. Then the people told the uncle that he had done wrong in throwing the boy out. The latter was sorry, but there was nothing to be done any more. In reality the uncle was afraid of the boy's father. They looked everywhere but could not find him.

After a full month the boy came home and brought with him a circle of wood (i.e., a drum). He told the people that this is what he had received in a dream, and that it was not to be used in war; that it was something with which to obtain life. He said that if a feast was made to it, this feast would be one to Earthmaker, as Earthmaker had blessed him and told him to put his life in the service of the Winnebago.

From this man they received many benefits. He was called to take the foremost part in everything. They called him the Frenchman, his younger brother being called *Tcap'ósgaga*, White-throat. And as they said, so it has always been. A person with French blood has always been the chief. Only they could accomplish anything among the whites. At the present time there is no clan as numerous as the descendants of that family and the object that he said was sacred (the drum) is indeed sacred. It is powerful to the present day. His descendants are the most intelligent of all the people and they are becoming more intelligent all the time. What they did was the best that could be done. The ways of the white man are the best. This is the way they were brought up.

This is the end of the history of the Decoras.




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\* Joseph Sabrevoir DeCarre (DeCarrie, etc.), a French soldier and fur trader, married Hopokoekau (Glory of the Morning) around 1730. The name evolved into Decora/Decorah, which remains a prominent name among the Ho-Chunk.