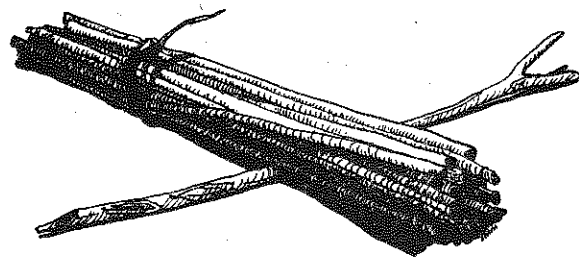


Indians loved their games in early Niles

Playing games was a favorite pastime among the Indians at Fort St. Joseph and throughout New France when they were not at war. Because they were at play during the majority of their free time, it is relevant to analyze this portion of their life in order to better understand the personality of the Indians at Fort St. Joseph and the Northwest Territory. The object, then, of this article is two-fold: first, to gain an insight into the cultural and social life of the Indians at the Fort and in New France; and, secondly, to examine the function of these games in the everyday life of the Potawatamie and Miami Indians who inhabited the region which is the location of present day Niles, Michigan. With these two objectives in mind, it is necessary to first define the games of LaCrosse, Dish, Straws, and gambling games which were the most common to the Indians in this Southwestern tip of Michigan. Then, evaluate the purposes of these games which preoccupied the Indians outside of war.

One of the most common games played by the Indians in New France was a stick and ball game called LaCrosse by French explorers and Bagagataway by the Indians. It was played from Canada to Florida and West to the Great Plains. Thus, the Indians at Fort St. Joseph were no exception to this gaming trend in New France. LaCrosse, in addition to its significance as the most prominent game in the Northwest, is important because it links the Jesuit missionaries with the Indians in the "Illinois Country." Pierre de Charlevoix, the famed French Jesuit explorer and cartographer of new France and North America, coined the name LaCrosse in 1705, and it stuck. He named it LaCrosse because the curved sticks used by the Indians while playing the game reminded him of the cross which the bishops wore around their necks. Ever since, LaCrosse has been the name of the game.

Charlevoix gives a concise account of a game of LaCrosse when he described a match that he viewed at the St. Joseph River among the Miami Indians. Each player equipped himself with two "crosses", which consisted of a staff with a great curve at the end, which was laced like a



Game of 'Straws' was popular

racket. The ball they used in playing was of wood and resembled a turkey's egg.

The racket was generally three feet long and two inches wide. The hoop which formed the racket was twelve inches in circumference. In the hooped area, two strings were fastened sufficiently enough to catch a ball. These strings were made of small roots of spruce trees and the stick of deerskin. Although the game was basically the same, there were slight differences in the way Indians played the game, even among Indians in close geographical proximity. For example, the Potawatomies used a wooden ball; the Miamis often used a deerskin or rawhide ball about the size of a tennis ball. It was stuffed with hair and sewed with a cord.

send the ball across the boundary of his team's goal post. If it fell to the ground, the player endeavored to draw the ball towards himself and his crosses. If the ball was sent outside the crowd of players, the jocks of the time tried to retrieve it, therefore gaining distinction and public recognition.

At first appearance, it might seem as though LaCrosse matches would be relatively short-lived. However, that was not the case. Says Charlevoix, speaking of the Miamis at Fort St. Joseph: "The savages are so adroit at catching the ball with their crosses that these games sometimes last several days in succession."

While playing, the Miamis and the Potawatomies generally wore only a tight cloth around their loins, except for the grant matches. Then, when Indians played tribe against tribe or nation against nation, they painted their faces and bodies and decorated themselves with bird feathers of various colors. Often, the players wore a tail projecting from the small of the back, made of dyed white horsehair, or dyed quills of porcupines. In addition, the players sometimes wore a mane or neck of horsehair dyed various colors. The Potawatomies always wore mocasins while playing LaCrosse.

However, the players were not the only ones who dressed up for these important LaCrosse occasions. The squaws and children also assembled on the plain selected for the match, dressed in the gaudiest of feathers and beadwork. The squaws of each side kept the goods which were invariably staked on the result of the match. They generally squatted on the ground in little picturesque groups and placed bets with one another on the outcome of the game. Even children wagered their toys at such matches.

Not only the people, but the LaCrosse equipment, were decked out for the grand occasions. Indians often ornamented the hoop of the LaCrosse stick and the handle with small feathers or tufts of hair painted or dyed various colors.

All of the betting, ornamentation, and competition indicates the seriousness of the Indians while playing LaCrosse. They would strike one another in their effort to ward the ball in the desired direction. A spectator could hear the noise they made in striking one another while trying to ward off the blows of their opponents, while, at the same time, they tried to guide the ball in the appropriate direction. If a player would keep a ball between his feet without letting it escape, he had also to try and avoid the blows that his adversaries placed upon his feet. Wounded players were of little concern to these early sports enthusiasts. It was not unusual for players to get broken legs or arms or even killed during a match of LaCrosse. It was common to see them crippled for the rest of their lives a la grace their competitive efforts during a match.

LaCrosse was played seriously for other reasons than for reasons of tribal competition or exercise, however. For example, a game of ball was the strategy by which old Fort Mackinaw was taken from the English during the Pontiac uprising in 1763. The Indians challenged the British to a game of LaCrosse; then, once they entered the Fort, they attacked and killed most of the inhabitants therein.

Moreover, LaCrosse matches were often believed to heal people. A sick man would sometimes be ordered to play LaCrosse to cool his fever. Other times, one with a malady dreamed that he must die unless the whole tribe played LaCrosse for his health. Even though people might not have believed him, villages contended against one another as to whom could play best for the sick man.



Potawatomi Indians playing a game of dish

interruption. Often, long games were played on behalf of the sick. Before playing the actual game, the Indians would assemble for several nights and play trial games. Additionally, they would fast, and the married practiced sexual abstinence to obtain a favorable dream which signified good luck.

The sick man would then be brought in a blanket, along with the honored man in the village who was chosen to shake the dish. One person from each side was set apart to do the shaking and more ess act as the impartial judge on controversial plays. So there was not cheating, the one chosen to shake the dish

I have displeased you; for I know very well that you are dissatisfied, and that God is not pleased. I will stake nothing hereafter, except something of small value."

On more than one occasion, the Indians gambled away more than they could afford. It has been known to go as far as Indians betting parts of their body. One Huron, having played away all his wealth, staked his hair, and having lost it, the winner cut it off close to the scalp. Charlevoix had heard of other Indians who gambled even to the little finger of the hand and who, having lost that, gave it to be cut off without showing any sign of pain. It is recorded that one Huron

Players were divided into two sides, each having its own posts. In order to win the game, one of the two teams had to carry its ball beyond the northern and southern goals; the other team, beyond the eastern and western goals. Moreover, the ball could not fall upon the ground or be touched with the hand while a team tried to drive the ball past his opponent. If either of these happened, the game was lost, unless the person who touched or dropped the ball could retrieve the ball and drive it, with one stroke, to the goal. This was often impossible because of the great skill of the opposition and the distance in which one had to reach in order to score points.

Games usually began at nine o'clock in the morning, after the melting of the winter's ice and lasted until seeding time. A match began after all had assembled together at the middle of the place selected. The coming of the players to the match was somewhat ceremonial, because they emerged, at a given signal, from a covert place in the forest. They made their presence known by waving their sticks, shouting, and making terrible contortions and grimaces. Some even turned somersaults upon their appearance. Upon another given signal, the Indians laid their sticks at their feet, while the game director gave a long speech urging the players to play fair and play their best. To insure fair play, the four eldest medicine men served as umpires.

After giving his pep talk, the game director, who held the ball in his hand, threw it into the air. Thus, a game of LaCrosse commenced. Each player successively tried to



Braye is dressed for fast game of 'LaCrosse'

would betray the whole country. Even if the people did not think that the match would aid the sick, the villages would compete against one another, staking beaver robes and porcelain collars, so as to excite greater interest in the game.

The game of Dish was also renown in affairs of medicine, especially if a sick man dreamed of it. Charlevoix tells of a game of Dish, or bones, he witnessed at Fort St. Joseph. It was played between two people; however, that did not exclude the village. They chose teams before the game began, so that although only two people played at a time, before a match ended, almost the entire village had a chance to try their hand at Dish. Those who did not play watched, shouted, made contortions, talked to the bones, and pronounced curses on their opponents. Says Charlevoix, "The whole village rings with their howling; if this is ineffectual to retrieve their ill luck, the losers are at liberty to put off the party till tomorrow, at the expense of a very slender report to the assistants."

The game was played with these small figurines which were carved either out of bone, wood, or plum stones. They resembled modern day chessmen. Charlevoix says he "first thought the bones or stones were apricot stones, these being of the same size and shape; but upon viewing them closer, I found that they had six unequal faces; the two largest are painted, the one black and the other straw color."

These figurines were thrown into a wooden bowl. The players made a hole in the ground, thrust the bowl with the figures into it, while giving it a slight shake. Points were scored according onto which side was the uppermost, black or white. Whoever had the greatest number of stones or bones of a similar color turned up received five points. The game usually ended at forty points.

Like LaCrosse, Dish would last a long time. Sometimes, one game was played for four or five days without in-

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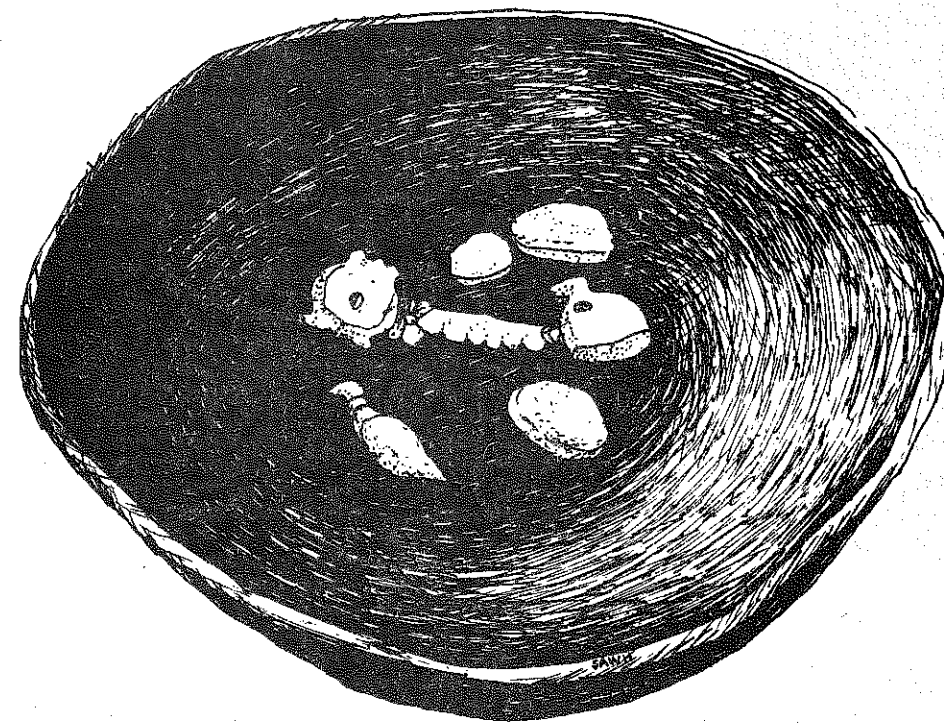
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Crude equipment all that was needed for dish

in the game by betting and yelling for their favorite player from their team. Usually at the end of a game, both tribes had lost a large quantity of porcelain or other things they had wagered, "but the sick man, he had experienced no relief than had his head well broken by the great uproar."

Another game played among the Indians of the St. Joseph River was called 'straws' or 'pailles' by the French. It was to the Indians what cards were to the Europeans. But, Charlevoix could never understand fully how it was played. He called it an "undecipherable enigma."

The game of Straws was partly of chance and partly of skill. It was played with straws the size of wheat blades, approximately two inches in length. Generally, the Indians near the Fort used about 201 straws for their games. These straws were unevenly divided into ten small bunches with an awl and passed back and forth between players. Uneven numbers were always lucky and the number eleven the best of all. It gained a predetermined amount of points when a player selected the group with eleven straws. The division of the straws made the game run either high or low. Oftentimes, several days were spent playing one match which consisted in as many as 100 games.

From what has been related thus far, the reader sees that gambling was one of the favorite pastimes of Indians, particularly in games of chance. Although gambling was of great sport among the Indians in the area around Niles, Michigan, and throughout all of New France, it brought about the displeasure of the Jesuit priests. They thought it was the greatest of vices, next to 'spirits', because the Indians did not know when to stop gambling. One young man gambled and lost something valuable from his little property. Wondering, rightly, if the priests would not be displeased with him, he came to one of them and said, "My Father, I pray you not be displeased with what I have done; I will not do so anymore. I have lost much in play; I have done wrong. I am not sad about my loss, but because

"Savages." They began to use material images to depict God's Word. One such game was called "From Point to Point." It was played to portray Christ's life from the point of his birth to the point of eternity. The Indians called it, "The way to arrive at the place one lives forever, whether in paradise or in hell."

It has been seen in this article that Northwestern Indians played games for various reasons — some to heal others, some to build up tribal morale, some for exercise, some to train their braves for war, some for competition, and some just for fun. Whatever the motive, the games served specific purposes. Dish and Straw were among the most effective and, apparently, potent means of medicine available. As remedial devices, these games provided the focal points around which many Indian rituals revolved. Basically, preventative rituals were conducted in order to curtail epidemic; to provide the individual immunity from diseases; and to prevent reoccurrence of a previous illness.

Generally, when games resulted because some dream appeared to someone, Indians believed it to have originated from a supernatural source. Thus, its contents were thought to be sacred in nature. Hence, natives who dreamed that a specific game would prevent, contain, or curtail a particular malady requested that a game be performed for a sick person(s). Although some might consider such a practice bizarre, one might liken it to superstition on Friday the 13th or to taking precautions against an unfavorable horoscope nowadays.

Moreover, games provided other vital functions for Northwestern Indians. Already mentioned were the medicinal rights, but additionally, games provided entertainment for the sick during their illness and helped them forget or allay illness. Although some were not healed, there were others who, by witnessing a game on their behalf, became healed much the same way as people today become healed by faith healings or by the prayers of other people.

Outside the religious domain, chance and competitive games such as gambling, Straws, Dish, and LaCrosse served other purposes. For example, they provided an outlet for the spirit of rivalry. If one seriously considers Indian gaming, it is apparent that it also redistributed the wealth between tribe and clan members. As Indians played Straws, LaCrosse, and Dish, the gambling which accompanied these games provided a means by which those who had good luck might improve their financial standing in the tribe. As long as they won, Indians continued gambling until, eventually, they lost at least a portion of their gains to someone else. This process continued and provided a challenge to anyone with any means to take his chances in hopes that he might better his financial and social status in his tribe.

Furthermore, games and gambling played a role in improving interpersonal relationships. The gaming trend established a semi-neutral ground where arguments and aggressions might be settled. If there were disagreements, the antagonist would challenge his opponent to some game, and the winner would be the victor in the said argument. Perhaps, games even mediated and transformed enemies to friends, because after the initial game to settle differences, there would be rematches, and after playing for a long period of time, the two players had so much in common that they become devout friends. Moreover, the same principle worked on a group level between clans and tribes. In fact, group games such as LaCrosse were the mediums for most social interaction between kinship groups, as well as other tribes and nations.

Finally, Indian gaming patterns are significant, because they not only reveal the life style and cultural heritage of the Northwestern Indians, but they established the foundation upon which many of the present day sports are built. For example, LaCrosse, which is the modern day national game of Canada, was played by the Indians in the Northwest territory. Modern day tennis has also been strongly influenced by LaCrosse. Additionally, Dish, which may not have been a forerunner of the game of chess, has certainly had an integral effect on the rules of chess as we know it today. The examples could probably be infinite, but the important point to remember is that our "roots" and sports heritage today lie in the ingenuity and depth of understanding of the Northwestern Indians of yesteryear.

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