

History at Agawa Bay

by Ian Seddon



"According to an old Indian tradition, the Agawa River, in its mad plunge from the canyon to Lake Superior, is mortally wounded by the crags, gorges, massive hills and rock strewn ledges over which it must pass. This is why the waters of this river are dark like blood, and at times nearly black". (Stewart White - 1890's)

The Hudson's Bay Company operated an outpost near the mouth of the Agawa for about forty years. It was established in the 1850's and they say Xavier Dubois was the first trader at the Agawa Post. At first, the trade through this post was fairly good considering the small size of the post and the small population of Indians in the area. There was an average annual turnover of 800 beaver pelts for a short while, but soon the effects of over trapping were felt, and by 1886, the trade had fallen off drastically. By 1894, when William Schillen and his large family were looking after the post, the returns of the trade were hardly more than the expenses, and the post was soon officially closed and turned over to Schillen for his own use.

The post, during its peak years, attracted as many as 120 Indians, or 25 wigwams, to Agawa for the purposes of trading and fur trapping. However, by 1915, all of the post's buildings were gone. The complex had included a store, blacksmith shop, grocery store, storage room and a main house.

Life at the post could not have been as easy as a Sunday afternoon picnic. A contemporary account of the post tells of the "famine winter".

"Come the "famine winter" of 1879. There was no game in the bush, and the fish, packed in pork barrels, all rotted. The Indians ate chipmunks and squirrels, and the dogs all died. The weather was unusually severe, and the ice used to move out into the lake until nothing but clear water could be seen, and then would drift back and pile up on the beach. It was then the waters of the Agawa backed up and threatened the post. According to custom, the Indians used to take the bones and the heads of the bear they killed, out to Agawa Rock, and "decorate" them. Food became so scarce, that these bones were all taken from the island, and boiled with fungus, bear grease and small potatoes that had been thrown away, and used for food. Many of the Indians died. William Schillen left for Michipicoten for supplies, but on the return trip was jammed in the ice, and the food had to be packed back to the post. It was distributed to the Indians, and all ate so much, that they became sick. The Agawa cemetery grew that winter".

Today, nothing remains of the old post, except a few fireplace bricks. Visitors to the Agawa Bay Campgrounds in Lake Superior Park can see where the post once stood: it is in a small meadow at the north end of the campground.