

SKATEKOOK

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

SOMETIMES an arrow falls right at our feet. Long had we wondered about the location of one of the last inhabited Indian village sites in Berkshire. Skatekook and its last chieftain, Umpachene, were not legend; they figured in Berkshire's earliest written history.

By a recorded deed of April 25, 1724 to a committee of settlers dispatched to Housatonock by the General Court, the Indians "did reserve to ourselves" a strip of land five-eighths of a mile wide extending from the Housatonic River along the north border of Sheffield through South Egremont to the New York boundary. On this tract was the small settlement of Skatekook where dwelled Lt. Umpachene and four other families. The tenure of this promised reservation became the story of the Indians countrywide. Within 12 years they were shunted elsewhere.

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IN OCTOBER 1734, the Rev. John Sergeant, having traveled from Westfield "thro' a most doleful wilderness, and the worst road, perhaps, that ever was rid," held his first meetings with the scanty population of Indians to whom he was to bring Christianity. One meeting was at Skatekook in the wigwam of Umpachene, which was stated by the Rev. Samuel Hopkins to be "fifty or sixty feet long." This figure hints at the age of this village site.

But by 1736 the Indians were removed from it and from their entire reservation, and with all others south of Monument Mountain

were given an equivalent six square miles in present Stockbridge and West Stockbridge. The reservation strip from east to west was granted to Isaac Vosburgh, Arent Gardner, Anderes Karner and John Van Guilder. This much from recorded history, and Skatekook disappeared.

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BY CHANCE we were dining with a fellow artifact hunter when the telephone rang. The message was from a farmer who believed he had plowed up some Indian stones. The site was in Skatekook area; and needless to say, we were there like shot arrows. The stones proved to be fragments of quartzite and marble of no significance, but a cursory look over the field revealed promising, worked chips of both quartz and flint. Flint is nowhere indigenous to the county, and therefore in any quantity offers unmistakable proof of Indian occupancy.

The field was to be seeded, and the hunting time was limited before this pre-book history would once again disappear beneath the grass. In the course of several hunts, four of us discovered 30 almost perfect artifacts plus much broken material and bits of bone and clamshell. Points and chips were about equally divided between flint and quartz in sharp contrast to the almost uniform flint found in the nearby Hudson Valley. The concentration of material was dispersed over a strip 40 rods long and 8 rods wide. The small size as well as the location spelled Skatekook.

THE WIDE VARIETY of projectile points, including triangular, small-stem, corner-removed and side-notched, typified the Ceramic or Woodland period and suggested occupation back to its inception about 300 A.D. These were to be expected from the 10-inch depth of plowing, as were the stem knife blades. Dutch traders or settlers, who were

generous with firewater and trade articles, may well have presented clay pipes, evidenced by three broken pipestems, to Umpachene himself.

The largest artifacts were hammerstones battered from use on sides and ends, 3 pitted anvils and a broken hoe. This last and a pestle tip attested to riverside corn culture, which translates from the word Skatekook.

Most interesting finds of all were two points of dark flint. The perfect broad point, side-notched with corners removed, is the diagnostic type of the Late Archaic or Stone Bowl period back to 5,000 years ago in New England. The broken stem-end found nearby, showing shoulders and a tapering rounded stem, is diagnostic of the Early Archaic with some overlap of the type to late Archaic. It may well indicate aboriginal occupation of this site back toward 6,500 years ago.

HOW STRANGE that point manufacture was not from caprice but from cultural compulsion or fashion of the time! Yet how modern, as the summer grasses sway and whisper over the ancient secrets of Skatekook!