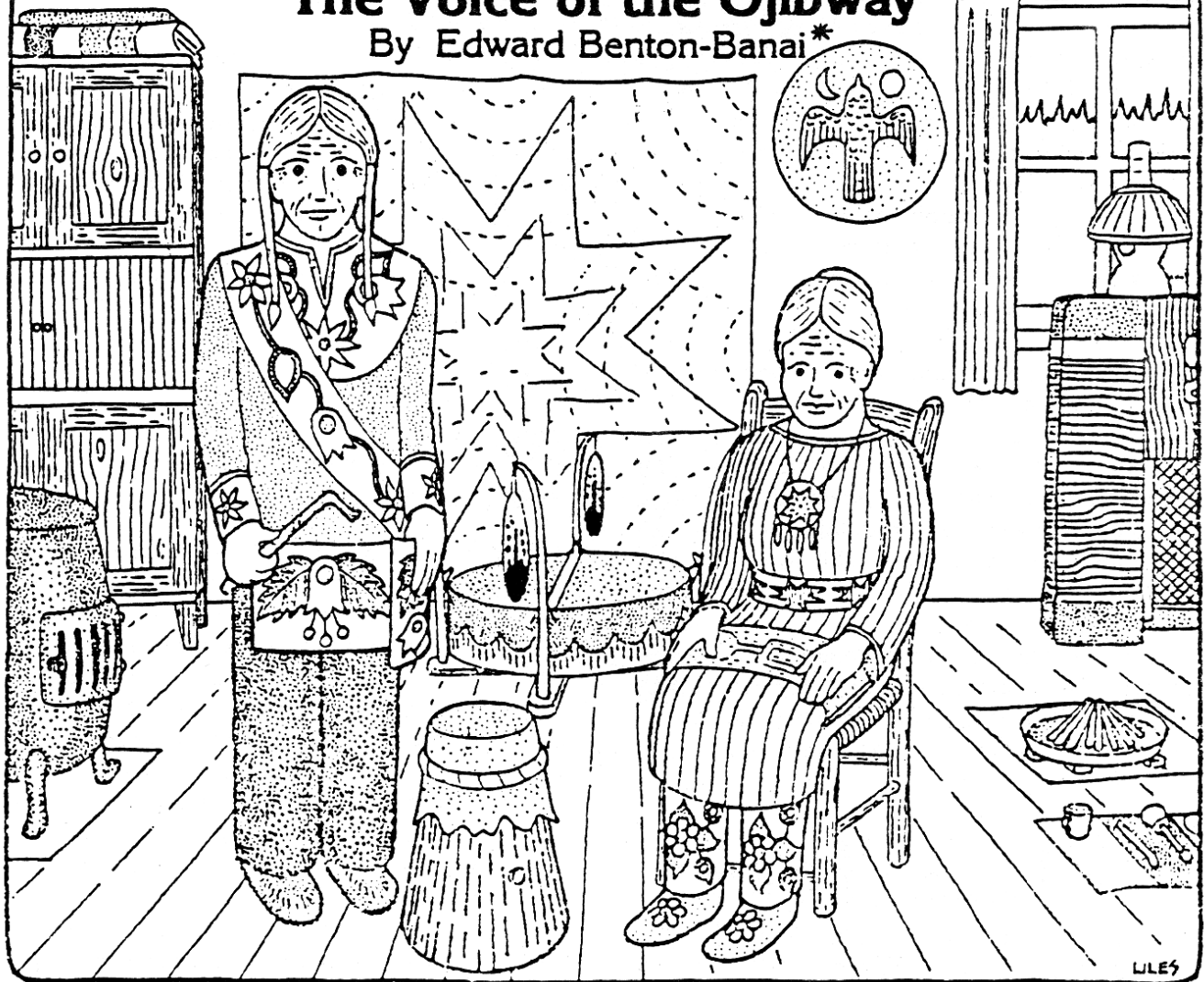


THE MISHOMIS BOOK

The Voice of the Ojibway

By Edward Benton-Banai*



The Migration of the Anishinabe

Boozhoo, I am going to try to reconstruct the chi-bi-moo-day-win' (migration) of my Ojibway ancestors. I will draw upon the words given to us by the prophets of the Seven Fires. I have also looked at old maps of North America that might give hints to places referred to by the seven prophets and by my grandfathers. Finally, I have listened to what the scholars have had to say about early written accounts of this country.

When the seven prophets came to the Anishinabe, the nation was living somewhere on the shores of the Great Salt Water in the East. There are many opinions about where this settlement was. It is generally agreed that the Ojibways and other Algonquin Indians were settled up and down the eastern shores of North America. We have some idea of the size of the nation from these words that have been handed down: "The people were so many and powerful that if one was to climb the highest mountain and look in all directions, they would not be able to see the end of the nation." Bands and clans were scattered here and there. There were berry pickers, wood carvers, fishermen, canoe makers, and stone carvers. There were those who were charged with raising food from Mother Earth. They were called

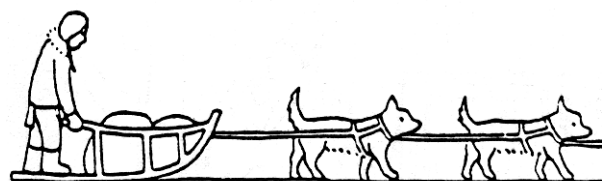


the Gi-ti-gay'-wi-nini-wug' (planters or keepers of the Creator's garden). There was an active exchange and communication among all the groups of people.



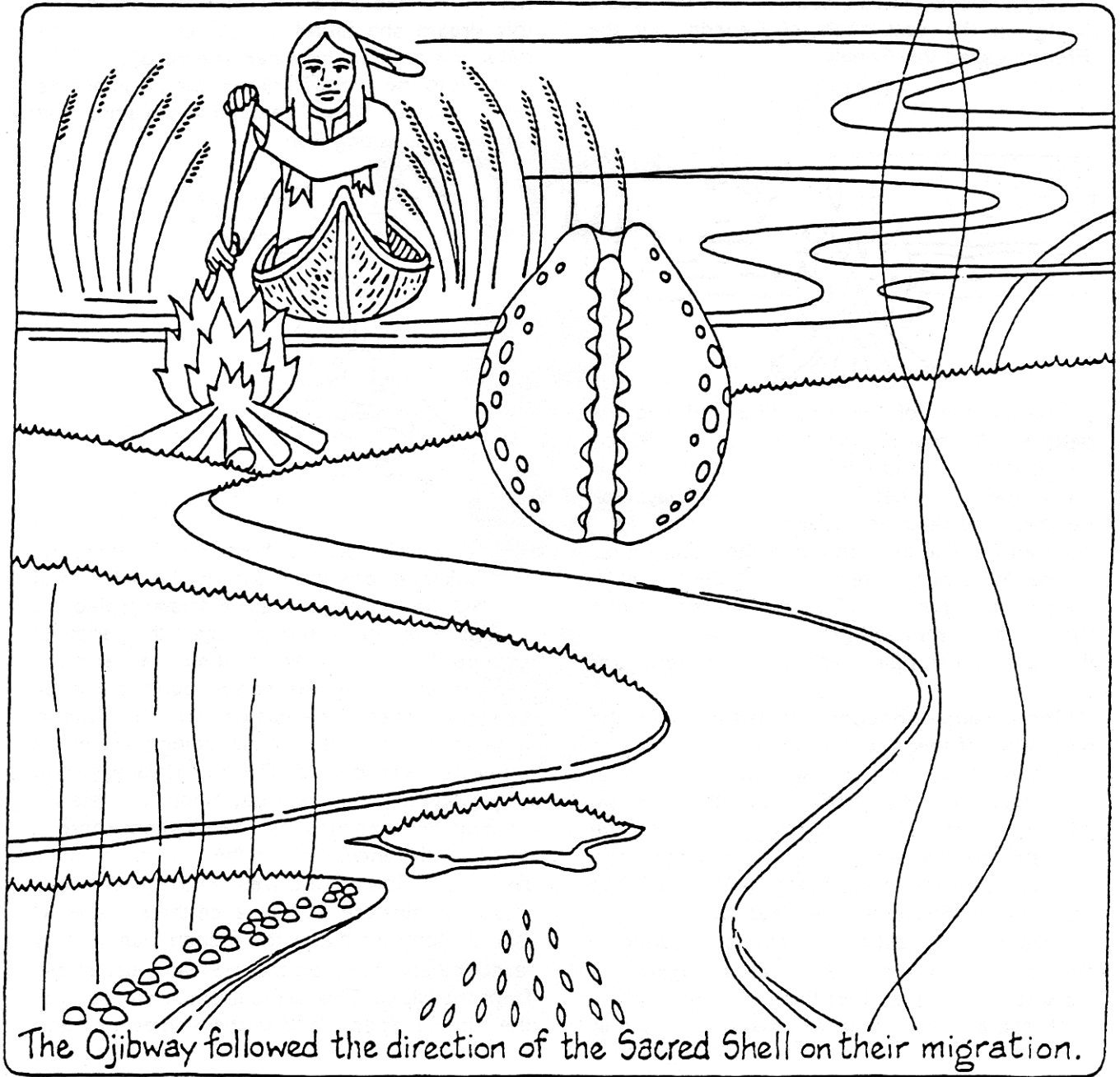
They used the waterways of the land to travel by canoe. They had a system of overland trails. They used sleds and dog teams to travel in the winter. Life was full for the people here. The Clan System and its government were strongly enforced. There was ample food from the land and sea, and there were fish from many rivers.

This fullness of life made many people doubt the predictions of the seven prophets. There was

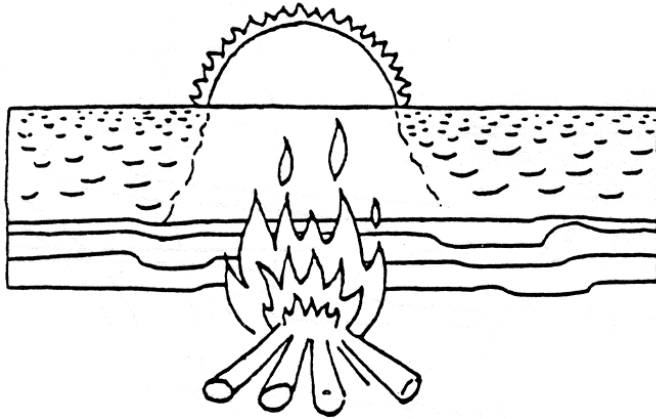


much discussion among all the Anishinabe about the migration and the prophecies of the Seven Fires. Huge gatherings were held to discuss the plans of the nation. Many people did not want to move their families on the journey to the West. Others were ready to follow the believers in the migration and give their unselfish support to what they felt was the Creator's plan. There was one group who supported the migration but who pledged to remain at the eastern doorway and care for the eastern fire of the people. They were called the Wa-bun-u-keeg' or Daybreak People.

Today it is speculated that these were the people living on the east coast of Canada that the French called the Abnaki.



The prophet of the First Fire had told the people: "If you do not move, you will be destroyed." It would come to pass that most all those who stayed behind,



including the Daybreak People, were destroyed or absorbed by the Light-skinned Race at the coming of the Fourth Fire.

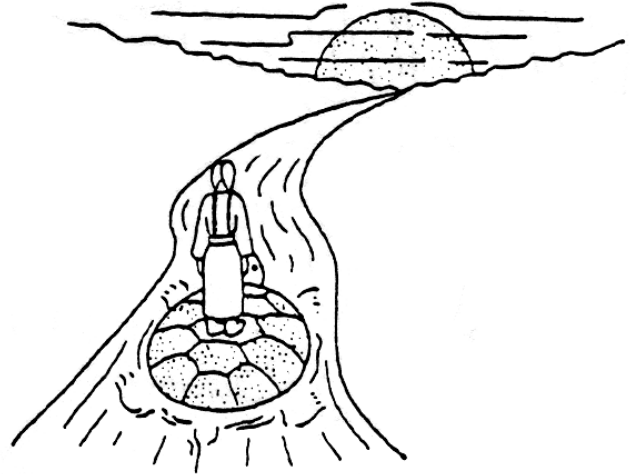
The Mide people remembered the words of the prophet of the First Fire. He had spoken of a turtle-shaped *mi-ni-si'* (island) that would be the first of seven stopping places during the migration.

Some people thought that this island of the beginning of their journey was surely a place of great power and that they were to go there and await further instructions from the Creator. Others thought that those who accepted the words of the prophets should seek out this island and go there for Sweat Lodge and purification ceremonies. Still others felt that the search for the island was a test of their strength by Gitchie Manito. There was a great search throughout all the waters of the land for this island.

At last, a woman who was carrying a child in her womb had a *ba-wa-zi-gay-win'* (dream). In this dream she found herself standing on the back of a turtle in the water. The tail of the turtle pointed to the direction of the rising Sun and its head faced

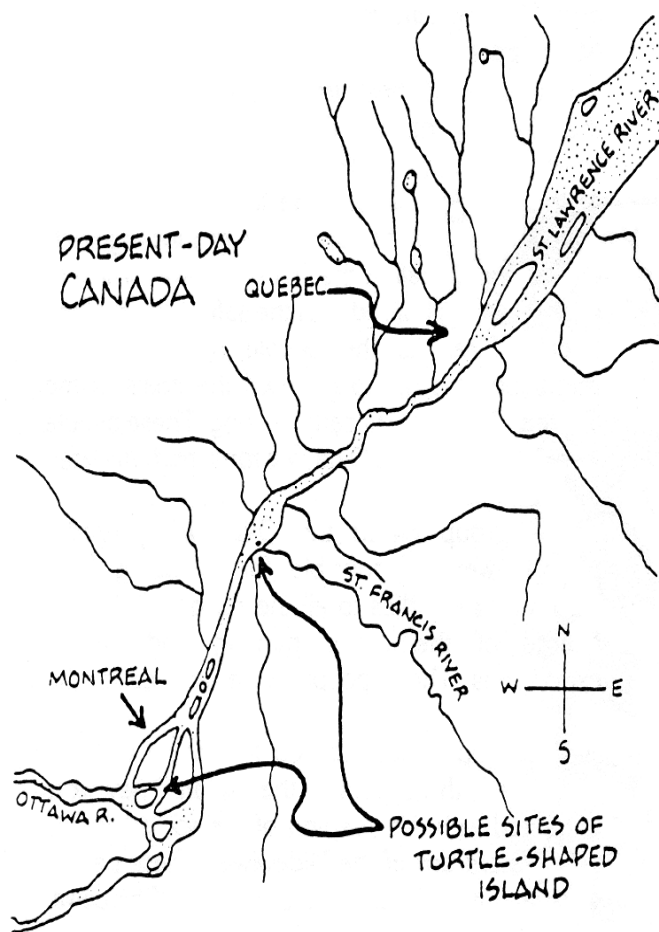
the West. The turtle was in a river that ran into the setting Sun.

The woman told her husband of her dream. Her husband took the dream to the old men of the Midewiwin Lodge. These elders accepted this dream in its totality and instructed the people to explore the rivers in search of such an island.



Such an island was finally found in the St. Lawrence River. There has been much discussion today as to where this first stopping place of the migration was located. There is a place a short way northeast of present-day Montreal where the St. Francis River runs into the southern shore of the St. Lawrence. This is the only river of the region that flows to the West. At the place where this river joins the St. Lawrence there is a small island. Many years ago, the French found a fairly large Indian village on the mainland just across from the island. This island fits the description of the turtle-shaped island in the woman's dream.

Some people today think that this island was the first stopping place of the migration. Others have pointed to a small island just where the Ottawa River runs in line with the path of the Sun but it flows to the East.



It is likely that the main body of the migration camped on and around one of these islands. There were many Spirit Ceremonies and cleansing ceremonies held there as the people sought additional instructions.

After some time, the people resumed their journey to the West. They were told that along their journey they would have to stand and protect themselves from harassment and pursuit by other nations. They knew if they could stay true to the teachings of the Midewiwin that they would remain strong. The Anishinabe knew that they were to honor all

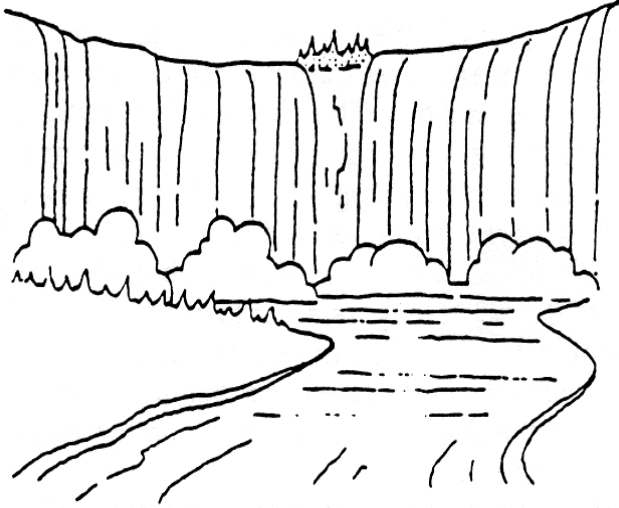
and fear none. They were not to advocate war or violence, but when faced with conflict, they were not to shrink from it.

One of the major adversaries of the migrating Anishinabe was called the Nah-du-wayg'. They were the Six Nations that made up the Iroquois Confederacy.

Along the migration there was a group of men who were charged with keeping the Manido ish-ko-day' (Sacred Fire). It was a flame that should never be allowed to die. The Sacred Fire gave strength to the warriors and kept the people of the migration together. All the campfires of the people were to come from the coals of this Sacred Fire. In this way continuity was given to the lives of the Anishinabe.

There were family groups and clan groups that differed in the interpretations of the prophecies. Some of these groups decided to stop along the way of the migration and set up permanent camps for their followers. It was said that from the head of the migration where the Waterdrum and Pipe were carried, the campfires of all the Anishinabe and their offshoots lit the landscape at night like stars for as far as the eye could see. Those that stayed behind were given their own flame of the original Sacred Fire.

It is now thought that the people slowly moved down the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River. Their second major stopping place was at the Ani-mi-kee' wa-bu (the place of the Thunder Water). This is very likely the place referred to by Waynaboozhoo on his journey to find his father and the place the Ojibway later called Kichi-ka-be-kong' (Great Falls). The water and thunder came together here and made a powerful place. When the people stopped here, the Sacred Megis Shell rose up out of the water and greeted them. The Sacred Fire was moved to this location for some time. This place is



better known today as Niagara Falls.

From here, the people moved to a place identified by one of the earlier prophets as “a place where two great bodies of water are connected by a thin, narrow river.” This river was described as a “deep and fast ribbon of water that slices through the land like a knife.” Many lives were lost in crossing this river. This third stopping place was very likely the shores of the Detroit River that connects Lake St. Clair and Lake Huron in the North to Lake Erie in the South. It is said that again the Sacred Megis appeared to the people out of the water.

It was at this second stopping place that the Anishinabe drove back a large group of Iroquois warriors who were pursuing them. Later, the Iroquois gave the Ojibway a Wampum Belt made out of a very special kind of shell. The O-pwa'-gun (Pipe) was shared among these two nations. At last peace was sealed between them.

In this period, three groups began to emerge in the Ojibway nation. Each group took upon themselves certain tasks necessary for the survival of the people. There came to be a very strong spiritual sense that bound these groups together.

The group called the Ish-ko-day'-wa-tomi (fire people) were charged with the safekeeping of the Sacred Fire. As the people moved on the migration, this group guarded the coals of the Sacred Fire as it was carried along. These people were later called the O-day'-wa-tomi, and still later, the Potawatomi.

The group called the O-daw-wahg' (trader people) were responsible for providing food goods and supplies to all the nation. They took charge of the major hunting and trading expeditions. These people were later called the Ottawa.

The people that retained the name Ojibway were the faith keepers of the nation. They were entrusted with the keeping of the sacred scrolls and Waterdrum of the Midewiwin. These people were later mistakenly referred to as the Chippewa.

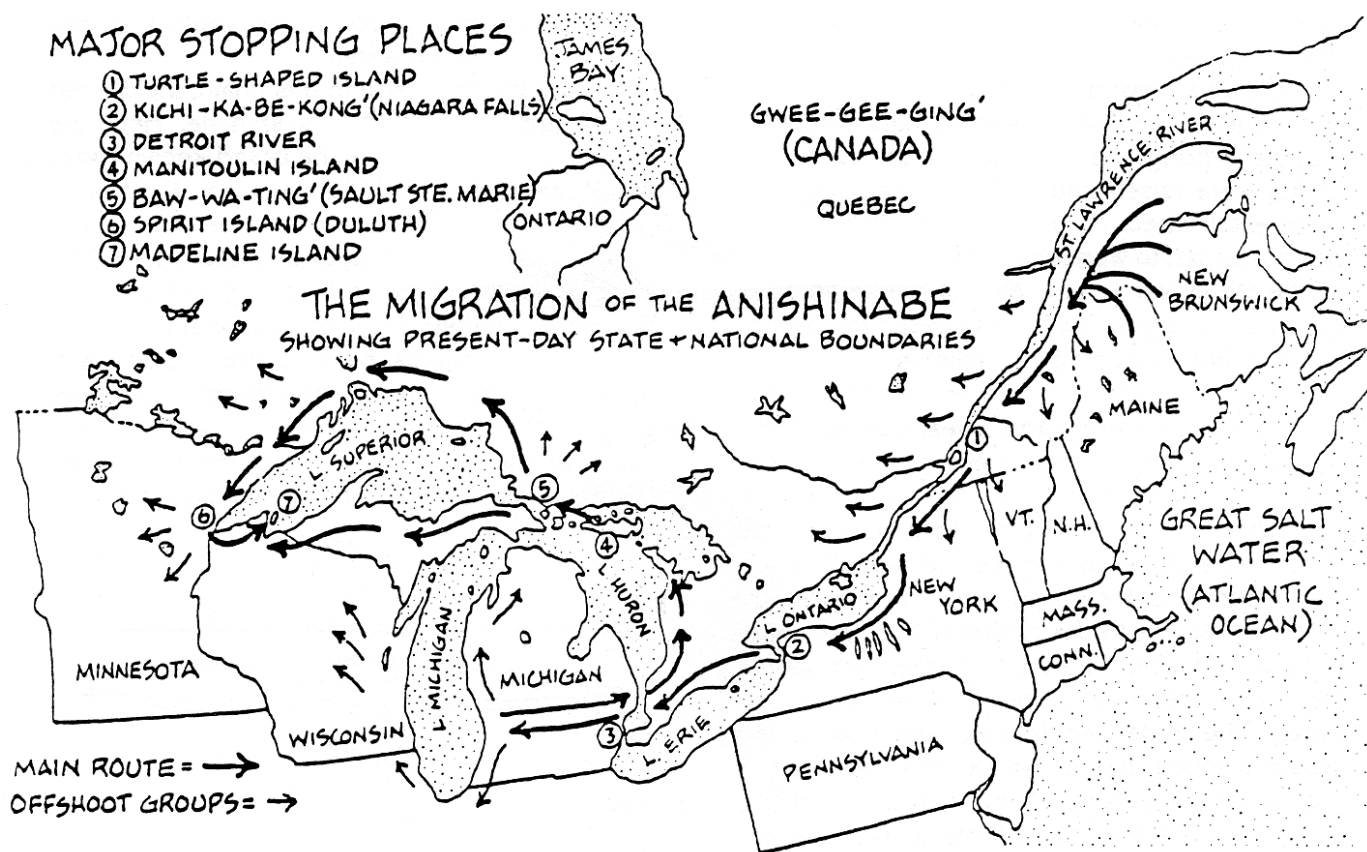
All the Anishinabe people became known as the nation of the Three Fires to recognize how these groups provided for all their needs.

There were those among the Three Fires that were known as peace makers. Others spoke out for military preparations to protect the nation. Still others felt the purpose of the Three Fires was to see that the prophecies were fulfilled. Huge gatherings of the Three Fires were held to discuss all of these things and decide on future actions.

By necessity, the alliance grew in military strength, but never was the spiritual origin and purpose of the Three Fires forgotten or abandoned.

The Three Fires were later courted heavily by Indian leaders from East to join combat expedition against the Light-skinned Race. Certain ones responded to these requests but never was there a massive military effort on the part of the Three Fires. If the entire strength of the Three Fires had been focused on military actions, then the history of this country would most certainly be different.

The people picked up the Waterdrum and continued their westward journey. They were attacked along



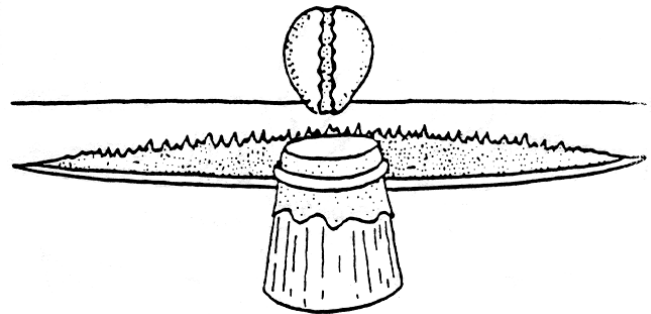
the way by the nations later called the Sauks and the Foxes. The people pushed on until they came to a large body of fresh water. Here, the Sacred Fire rested for a long time. This is the place that was referred to in the prophecy of the Second Fire. It is possible that this camping place of the migration was on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. At this point many people drifted off by groups to look for a place to cross the great water. They knew that their journey must take them to the west, but some of the people traveled South in an attempt to go around the water. Many felt that the direction of the migration

had become lost and that the people had missed their fourth stopping place. Time passed so that there were many births and deaths among the people. Giti-gan-nug' (gardens) were raised and o-day-na-wing' (villages) were established. As related in the Second Fire, people began to wander away from the teachings of the Midewiwin Lodge. Many became preoccupied with satisfying the things needed for physical survival but neglected the spiritual side of life. Many lost the direction in their lives that comes from Spirit Ceremony and Sweat Lodge. Only a few of the people, mostly elders, were able to keep the

Sacred Fire alive. But the prophecies said that “a boy would be born to show the Anishinabe back to the sacred ways.” It was prophesied that he would show the way to “the stepping stones to the future of the Anishinabe people.” That boy did come among the people. He had a dream of stones that led across the water. The Mide people paid attention to this dream and led the people back to the river that cut the land like a knife. They followed the river to the North. The river turned into a lake, and at a place where the river was formed again, they rested a while on an island. This island is known today as Walpole Island. They continued following the river further and came to the northern sea of freshwater that they had heard about when they first came to this region. They followed its eastern shore until, at last, they discovered a series of islands that led across the water. By moving the people by canoe, a way was found to the West over these “stepping stones.” And so, the prophecy of the Third Fire came true for the people. They found “the path to their chosen ground, a land in the West to which they must move their families.” Here they would find “the food that grows on water.”

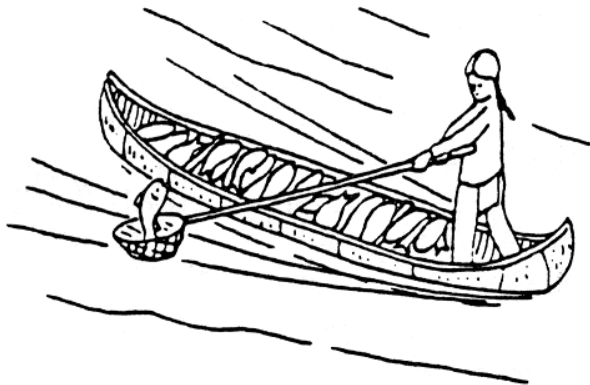
On the largest island in this chain, the Sacred Megis appeared to the Anishinabe. Here the people gathered. This is the island known today as Manitoulin Island. Slowly, the Anishinabe gathered until Manitoulin Island became known as the capital of the Ojibway nation. Here, the Midewiwin Way grew in following and the Clan System flourished. Truly, the boy with the dream did lead the people back to the sacred ways. Manitoulin Island became the fourth major stopping place of the migration. It is said that the voice of the Waterdrum could be heard even several days journey from Manitoulin Island.

For some time the main body of the migration stayed on this island, but it was not until the people settled at Baw-wa-ting’ that the Waterdrum was given a home in which to rest and sing. Here again, the people found the Megis Shell. There was a small island here where powerful ceremonies were held. People now call this place Sault Ste. Marie. The fishing was excellent in the fast water. Skilled fishermen could run the rapids with a canoe while standing back-wards in the bow. They would be carrying an ah-sub-bi’ (net) on the end of a long pole. By the time they got to the quiet water of the river, their canoe would be full of beautiful Mi-ti-goo-ka-maig’ (whitefish). There was so much food in the village that this place came to support many families. Baw-wa-ting’ became the fifth stopping



place of the migration. Many years later, in the time of the Fifth Fire, Baw-wa-ting’ would become a big trading center between the Anishinabe and the Light-skinned Race.

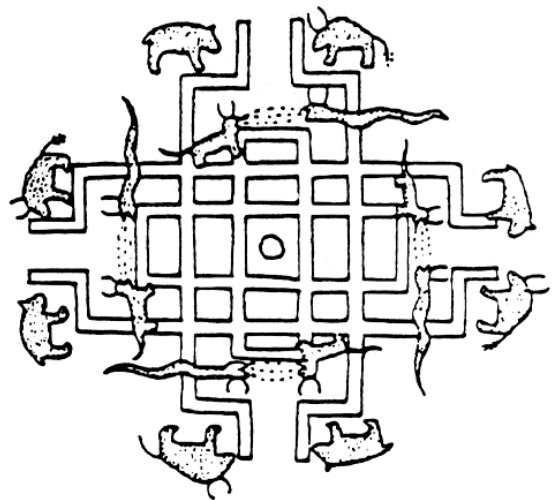
From Baw-wa-ting’, the migration split into two large groups. One group followed the shore of another great body of water to the West. The other group followed the northern shore. Both of these groups were attacked by the people they called Bawahn’. They were called this to denote their way of talking in deep voices. Their hunting territory was



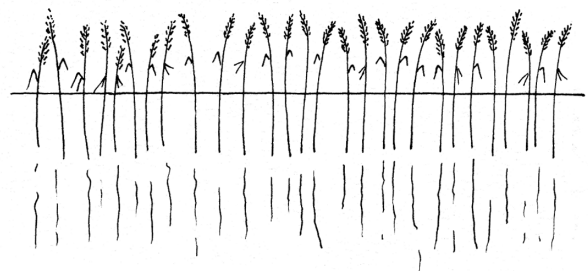
being invaded by the migrating newcomers and they fought fiercely. These conflicts illustrate the way that both of these nations were devoted to their purposes in life. The Ba-wahn' were later called Dakotas by the Light-skinned Race.

The northern group of Anishinabe carved muz-i-nee-bi' ah-sin' (rock markings) and symbols on the huge rock cliffs that led down to the great water. They marked sacred places and made records of their journey on the rock walls. They went all the way to the western end of the water. They named the bay there Wee-kway-doung'. Here they settled on an island. The Sacred Shell rose up to the people from the sands of its shore. This island today is referred to as Spirit Island at the west end of Lake Superior. Parts of the southern group came to this place, too. They also left carvings on the rocks along the southern shore of Lake Superior. It was near Spirit Island that the words of the prophets were fulfilled. Here the Anishinabe found "the food that grows on water." Here they found Ma-no'-min (wild rice).

Wild rice has always been regarded by the Ojibway as the sacred gift of their chosen ground. Any effort today to over-harvest or commercialize wild rice has met with failure. Wild rice has always been generous to those who gather and use her in a respectful way.



This island in the bay became the sixth major stopping place of the migration. The elders of the Midewiwin Lodge sensed that the long journey of their people was near its end. But something was missing. One of the prophets long ago had spoken of a turtle-shaped island that awaited them at the end of their journey. The southern group had seen an island fitting this description that lay in the water off of a long point of land. The people sought out this island and placed tobacco on its shore. The Sacred Shell rose up out of the water and told the people that this was the place they had been searching for. Here, the Waterdrum made its seventh and final stop

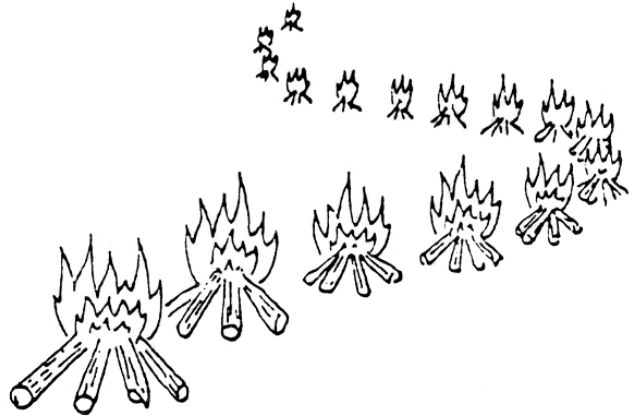


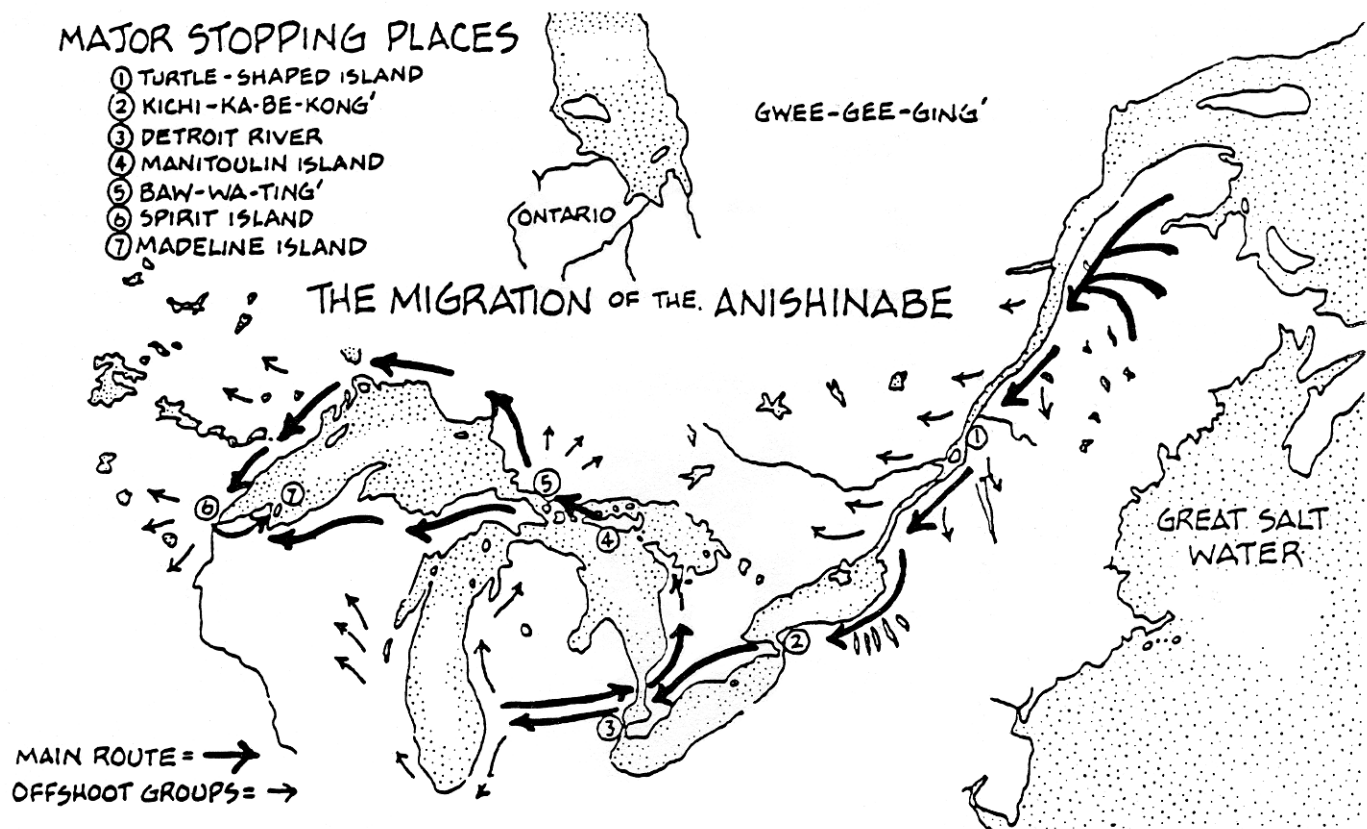
on the migration. The Sacred Fire was carried here and here it burned brightly. This island was called Mo-niing-wun'-a-kawn-ing (the place that was dug) by the Ojibway. It was later called Madeline Island.

This name has survived to this day. The main body of the Anishinabe people gathered here and they became strong and powerful.

At last the migration to the chosen ground was at an end. It is thought that the migration started around 900 A.D. It took some 500 years to complete. It is amazing that the Sacred Fire could be kept alive for so long. The dream of the original seven prophets was carried for many generations. It was carried along a string of fires with many campfires left behind. That the people were able to accomplish such a thing is truly a miracle of the Creator.

We descendants of these great people can gather strength from their strength. We can gather courage for our lives today from their courage of yesterday.





Source:

*Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: Voice of the Ojibway*, Indian Country Press, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1979, pp. 94-102. Used by permission.

Study the map of the Anishinabe migration and add the following present-day names for land and water features as well as states, provinces and cities:

Niagara Falls	St. Lawrence River
Sault Ste. Marie	New York
Detroit	New Brunswick
Duluth	Pennsylvania
Canada	Atlantic Ocean
Ontario	Lake Ontario
Quebec	Lake Erie
Minnesota	Lake Huron
Wisconsin	Lake Michigan
Michigan	Lake Superior