

White explorers never 'discovered'

OHSWEKEN — Most people have a misconception about the number of natives that used to live in Southern Ontario and in the rest of North America. White Europeans regarded the parts of North America which they knew nothing about as wild and empty. Writers usually called it "the wilderness." Actually it was badly misnamed. It was not a wilderness.

For example in Ontario, history books tell us there were Tobacco Indians or Petuns, Neutrals, Hurons and Algonquins, when the French arrived. The Hurons were actually a confederacy of four nations who spoke different languages. They were never given English names so most writers simply called them Hurons. The Neutrals were also made up of several separate nations and should really be called the Neutral Confederacy. The Algonquins were really Cree and Ojibway with their separate bands, such as Mississauga and Ottawa.

What the white Europeans took for empty wilderness was actually peopled with thousands of natives. There were dozens of Indian towns, sometimes surrounded by smaller villages, right here in Ontario. There were nearby clearings with huge fields of corn, beans and squash. The Catholic Jesuits who came to convert the members of the Huron Confederacy wrote about them. They called the many volumes they wrote, *The Jesuit Relations*. These books

Our Town

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related many stories but they were all in French.

In 1634, the Huron villages were ravaged by diseases brought by the Europeans. In five years, the Hurons lost half their population. According to the Jesuit census of 1640, taken after an epidemic of smallpox in 1639, the Hurons and Petuns numbered 12,000 people in 32 villages. This means that five years earlier, there were 24,000 here in what is now Southern Ontario. The woods were far from empty.

At the Woodland Indian Centre on Mohawk Street, there is a large map showing the location of hundreds of Indian trails. They criss-cross ho-de-no-sau-ne-ga, the original land of the Six Nations Iroquois, in what is now New York State. I counted 36 separate trails but there may have been more. There is no reason to believe that a similar trail system did not exist in the rest of North America. This was in

addition to the waterway system of lakes and rivers.

I remember in school, North America was depicted as a great wilderness to be discovered by brave explorers and developed by heroic settlers. Now my own research shows that the wilderness idea was a myth. How can you discover or find something that was not lost?

All the early explorers seem to have done was to get an early Indian travel agent to give him a guided tour. They travelled over trails that had been known and used for a thousand years. Even the water routes were well known by Indian traders. They knew exactly what was over the next hill or around the next bend.

If natives had written these books, the so-called explorers would have been called tourists. The exploring expeditions would be called sight-seeing tours.

If I go to California in September, I wonder if the locals will object if I claim the whole place for Canada? A lot of them speak Spanish, so maybe they won't even know what I'm doing.

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