

The Tip of the Mitt Journal

Honoring 'Ya-way-ga-mug'

Petoskey's Hiawatha pageant in the land of the Ojibways

by Richard A. Wiles

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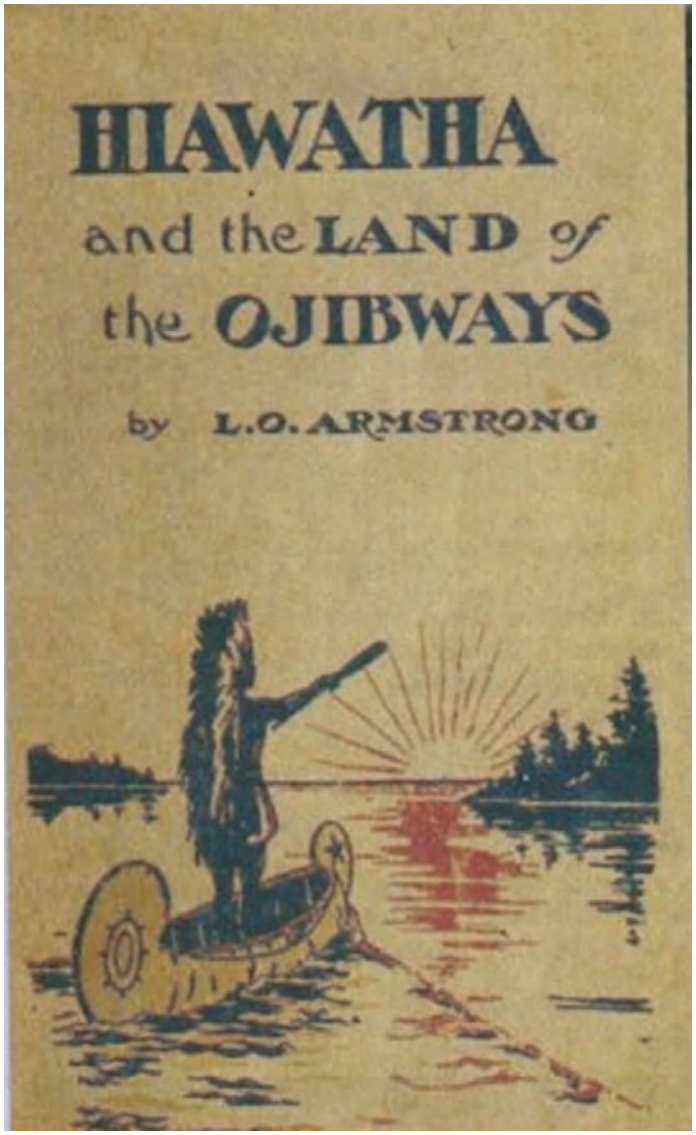




Louis Olivier Armstrong

The *Petoskey Record* newspaper carried a June 28, 1905, announcement titled, "Hiawatha and the Aquatic Sports," which outlined a new summer tourism attraction to soon take place northeast of Petoskey. The event was to be located close to the rail line of the Grand Rapids & Indian Railway at Lake Ya-way-ga-mug (Round Lake). The article stated, "Ya-may-ga-mug Lake will be a lively spot this summer. In addition to the fascinating 'Hiawatha Musical Indian Play,' there will be swimming, fishing, a water chute, an Indian village, handicrafts, and other exciting activities ..."

Besides announcing the opening of a new summer attraction, the article mentioned that the play's producer, Louis Olivier (L. O.) Armstrong, would be able to be found, "during the summer all day at Yawaygamug, and from 8 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. at the Cushman House hotel. All concessionaires should go out to Yawaygamug to arrange details. There will be something doing all the time at Yawaygamug this summer." Mr. L. O. Armstrong had brought his original four-year-old Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, summer production to Petoskey. He did that with the help of his new partner, the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railway.

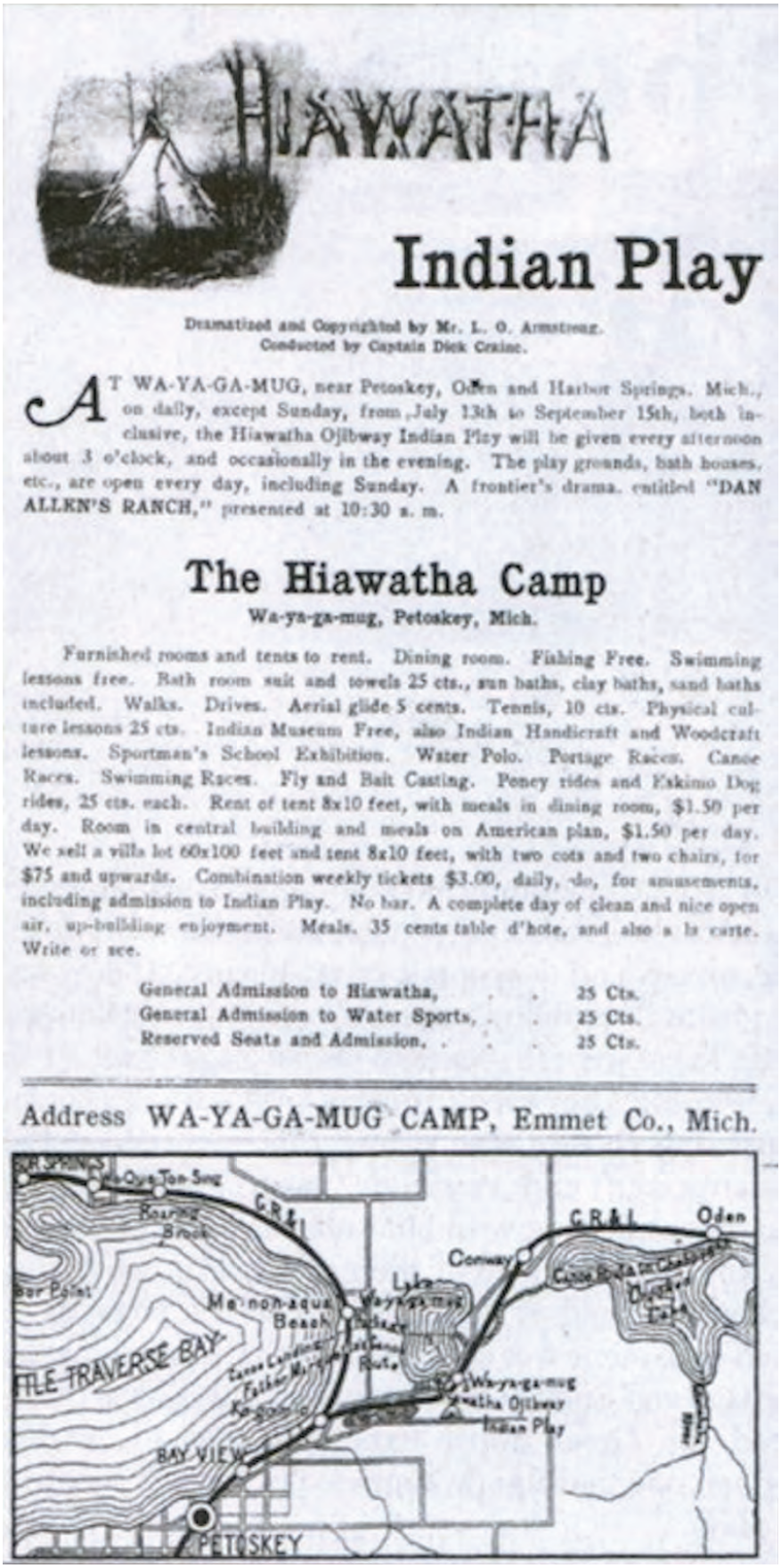
The musical play was coming to the Tip of the Mitt area from an area close to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada. It had been in production there since the summer of 1900. The play was presented on the St. Mary's River, (Kensington Point) south of a little summer resort town named Desbarats (a French word, pronounced "Debra"). The Canadian Pacific Railway had built a rail line to Sault Ste. Marie in 1888 (which included Desbarats to the east of the Soo), and the company was looking for ways to increase its summer tourist passenger traffic from the eastern cities west to the Great Lakes and beyond. In 1899, Desbarats resorter and Canadian Pacific Railway employee Armstrong came up with an idea to produce Longfellow's "Song

of the Hiawatha" in musical form utilizing a floating stage set in the St. Mary's River. The stage area was just south of Desbarats and could be reached by lake steamer from Sault Ste. Marie or by passenger train.

Armstrong worked out of Montreal as a "colonization agent" for the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which had laid track from eastern Canada to British Columbia in the mid-1880's. The Canadian government had made a provision that the land along the beltway of the railroad could be sold by the rail company to diffuse their building costs. Armstrong was involved in finding ways to lure businesses and settlers to those beltway areas for sale, so that they might buy the land.

By June of 1888, a subsidiary line had been laid down to Sault Ste. Marie, Canada. Soon after, Armstrong and his family began to summer in the Desbarats area of northern Lake Huron, just southeast of Sault Ste. Marie. It was a rail stop for the Canadian Pacific Railroad and was a sportsman's paradise. To the south of Debarats, the St. Mary's River separated the mainland from St. Joseph Island. Hundreds of smaller islands were in the same area.

Armstrong was also an amateur ethnologist and befriended the Soo area's local First Nation Anishnaabe group, the Shingwauk Band of Ojibway (later, the Garden River Band). In 1899 Armstrong accompanied a few of the band members to Boston. They were going to participate in the 1899 Sportsman Exhibition. The "Hiawatha" idea as a summer tourist



HIAWATHA

Indian Play

Dramatized and Copyrighted by Mr. L. O. Armstrong.
Conducted by Captain Dick Crane.

AT WA-YA-GA-MUG, near Petoskey, Oden and Harbor Springs, Mich., on daily, except Sunday, from July 13th to September 15th, both inclusive, the Hiawatha Ojibway Indian Play will be given every afternoon about 3 o'clock, and occasionally in the evening. The play grounds, bath houses, etc., are open every day, including Sunday. A frontier's drama, entitled "DAN ALLEN'S RANCH," presented at 10:30 a. m.

The Hiawatha Camp

Wa-ya-ga-mug, Petoskey, Mich.

Furnished rooms and tents to rent. Dining room. Fishing Free. Swimming lessons free. Bath room suit and towels 25 cts., sun baths, clay baths, sand baths included. Walks. Drives. Aerial glide 5 cents. Tennis, 10 cts. Physical culture lessons 25 cts. Indian Museum Free, also Indian Handicraft and Woodcraft lessons. Sportman's School Exhibition. Water Polo. Portage Races. Canoe Races. Swimming Races. Fly and Bait Casting. Poney rides and Eskimo Dog rides, 25 cts. each. Rent of tent 8x10 feet, with meals in dining room, $1.50 per day. Room in central building and meals on American plan, $1.50 per day. We sell a villa lot 60x100 feet and tent 8x10 feet, with two cots and two chairs, for $75 and upwards. Combination weekly tickets $3.00, daily, do, for amusements, including admission to Indian Play. No bar. A complete day of clean and nice open air, up-building enjoyment. Meals, 35 cents table d'hote, and also a la carte. Write or see.

General Admission to Hiawatha,	25 Cts.
General Admission to Water Sports,	25 Cts.
Reserved Seats and Admission,	25 Cts.

Address WA-YA-GA-MUG CAMP, Emmet Co., Mich.

attraction for the Desbarats area had been forming in Armstrong's mind since learning of a "Song of Hiawatha" dramatization being published by Minnie M. George of Joliette, Illinois. George was an elementary teacher who wrote textbooks for teachers. Her characters included Hiawatha, the Indian Chief, Nokomis, the grandmother, Minnehaha: the Indian maiden, Chibiabos: the musician, Arrow Maker-father of Minnehaha, and various Indian warriors.

Armstrong wanted to utilize Longfellow's "Song of the Hiawatha" poem, along with having the Desbarat's residents as his cast members. While in Boston, Armstrong facilitated a meeting between Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's daughters (he had died in 1882) and two of the visiting Garden River Band members. Armstrong explained what he had in mind and invited Longfellow's family members to travel by CPR rail to Desbarats in August of 1900. He planned to present a performance of his Hiawatha Indian Play and get their approval. They came to Desbarats, liked the performance, and gave the pageant their blessing.

The Anishinaabe Garden River Band members were accustomed to benefitting economically from summer tourists ever since the Canadian Pacific Railroad had arrived. Their Garden River Reserve was just north of Sugar Island, and just west of Desbarats. Prior to the arrival of the rails, steamships would bring summer resorters from the Sault by way of the St. Mary's River to buy baskets, grass mats, porcupine quill



boxes and other souvenirs. It made for a lucrative summer trade.

One of the band leaders in 1900 was George Kabaosa. He, and others of the band, agreed to participate in the summer pageant to draw more tourists. This would benefit the band, as well as the CPR company. But the Garden River Anishinaabe negotiated to maintain control of certain aspects of the theatrical production. They refused to portray the original Longfellow storyline of a "great famine," and they would not take part in the death of Minnehaha. They also would not sing her death chant.

Armstrong agreed to the band's desires. His purpose in presenting "Hiawatha" was revealed in a 1902 *Harper's Weekly Magazine* interview. It reported that, "Mr. Armstrong broached the subject of a dramatization of 'Hiawatha,' not only as a unique money-making exhibition, but as an inspiration to the Indians to revive a knowledge of their ancient customs, ceremonies, arts, and styles of dress. All of which was being lost."

-- Courtesy of Petoskey District Library Michigan Room

By 1900, the great American Indian Wars in the United States had come to an end. Great Lakes Region Native Americans, as did others, had been resisting the loss of their ancestral homeland since the arrival of the White European culture in the 1650s. At first, they welcomed the chance to trade their furs, maple syrup, and fish in exchange for metal goods, but Native people soon realized the trade-off was to be disastrous. They received numerous deadly European diseases, a dependence on blacksmiths and gunsmiths, and had to endure the constant onslaught of land-hungry Europeans. It was a hard price to pay.

Later, the Great Lakes Native Americans sided with the less land-hungry French during the 1750s French & Indian War. The bands of Indians and the French were mostly interested in trapping the land, versus the farm-oriented British. Then, the Bands of Great Lakes Indians sided

with the British against the Americans in the American Revolution. The British had granted them an Indian Preserve west of the Appalachian Mountains. The Americans were told to keep out. By the time of the War of 1812 conflict, Native American cooperation with Canada, and British forces, against the invading American Army was almost 100%. That War of 1812 cooperation helped to develop a strong "Anti-Indian" feeling among Americans. By the 1830s, the United States government began practicing an "Indian Removal Policy." It focused on moving all Native American people west of the Mississippi. That removal policy included the Ottawa Chippewa, and Potawatomie Bands of Indians in the Michigan Territory. But most were able to find ways to stay on their ancestral homeland.



Desbarats Indian Village on Kensington Point - 1901 through 1904

The last official battles between the United States military, and Native American people, took place in the 1890s. One being the Wounded Knee Massacre in North Dakota, and another the Battle of Leech Lake in northern Minnesota. By that time, it had become United States government policy to force Native Americans to assimilate into the majority white Christian society. Native children were taken from parents and placed in boarding schools where the "Indianness" in them could be eliminated. Armstrong saw his Hiawatha passion play as one means for Native people to openly express their culture, their traditions, their dance, music and dress.

The Hiawatha production was to portray a combination of Anishinaabe dialogue, song, music, and dance, interspersed with readings of lines from Longfellow's epic "Song of the Hiawatha" poem. There were 13 scenes to his play, with each scene representing a key event from the original 1855 poem. Armstrong chose those scenes that focused on the "romanticized" and "nostalgic" aspects of the poem. That meant dealing with Hiawatha's youth, his courting, and the marriage of the maiden Minnehaha. Scenes also depicted Hiawatha's becoming a respected community member, all the way through to his departure. A booklet was sold at each showing of the pageant in which each scene was detailed in both the Anishinaabe language and English. The opening scene always introduced the Great Spirit who promised to send a prophet, one that finally appeared in the last scene of the play.

Armstrong's play was very successful at Desbarats, beginning in the summer of 1901 with 52 separate performances. There were 62 performances in 1902, and the show traveled that fall to the Chicago Sportsmen's Exhibition. In the fall of 1903, the play was presented in New York's Madison Square Garden. The Desbarats performances ran through 1905. By then, Armstrong had parted ways with the Canadian Pacific Railway and had partnered with the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railway. He had some of his cast members teach and perform the play in Petoskey, Michigan that summer of 1905.

By 1905, Petoskey had become a railroad-created summer resort destina-

tion for all the Midwest. Vacationers and resorters arrived from Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Chicago, Detroit and Pittsburgh. Armstrong wanted to capitalize on that summer influx which was much greater than up north in Ontario, Canada. Round Lake was chosen for its likeness to the geographical setting of the original performance area at Desbarats. It was set close to the Conway GR& I rail station, but a stop at Round Lake was also created.

The April 26, 1906, *Petoskey Evening News* reported, "The management of the Indian production "Hiawatha" at Wayagamug has issued a circular setting forth the many attractions that will be offered in connection with the coming season at Round Lake ... there will be a Sportsman's School which will have the best guides who will give lessons in woodcraft, how to pitch the best camps, chop wood, build economical and safe fires, cooking, swimming, paddling and carrying a canoe, fishing, trapping, and shooting. Riding lessons will be taught, along with the use of a pack horse for out west. There will be Eskimo dogs at the Indian Village, along with birch bark canoes and Eskimo kayaks. Canoe and camping trips will be inaugurated daily. The object of it all is to bring out the best physically and mentally that is in man, woman and child ..."

"At Waygamug, you get spring-fed warm lake water with a clean white sand bottom ... Sand baths will be given on the lake shore at the bath houses ... As a special at Waygamug, Indian Lodge or wigwam life will be offered to the guests. The wigwam is 20 feet in diameter with a little fire in the center for chilly nights ... There is a central dining area where good plain food will be served, and dressing rooms for those choosing to stay in a wigwam.

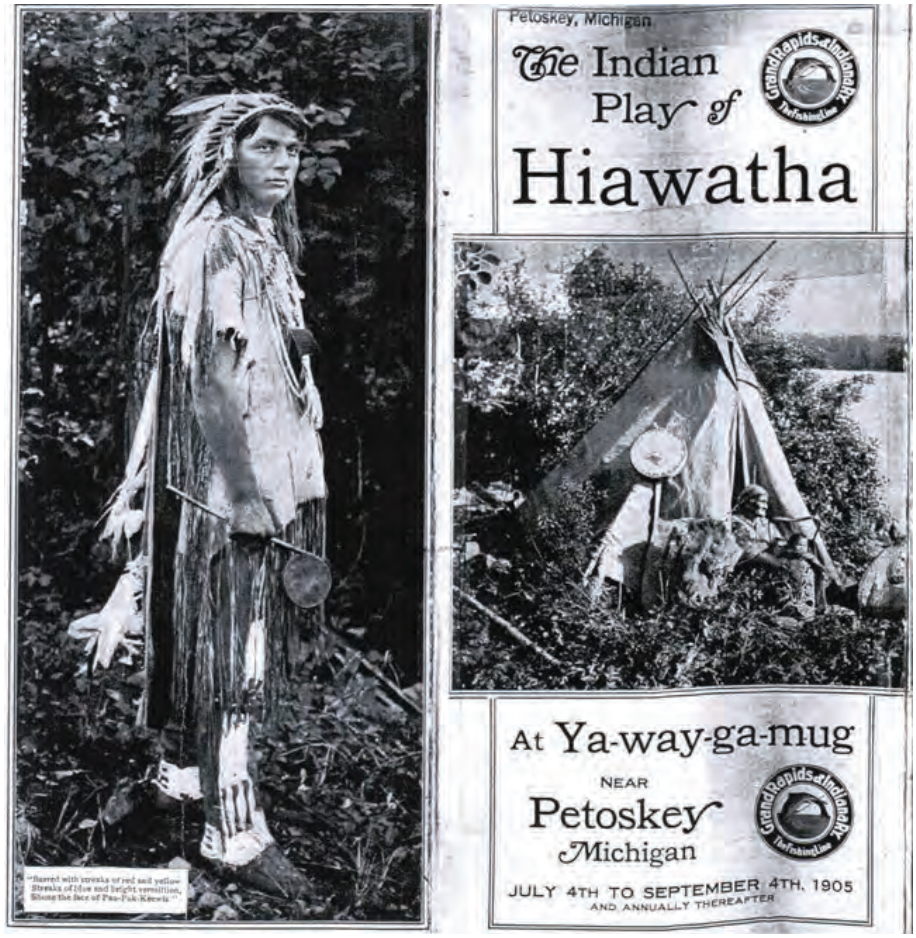


Margaret Wahbunosa (Thibault) - Minnehaha at Desbarats

Lectures will be given by famous out-of-doors men and women brought here from the Boston Sportsman's show of 1905-1906. Indian and French-Canadian voyageur songs will be sung during rainy days. Japanese maidens will serve tea and rice cakes in a Japanese teahouse. Artists will offer the finest material in the world.

There are good, large hotels in every direction around Waygamug, Petoskey and Harbor Springs. There are 12 daily trains and excellent roads to Waygamug. The Open-Air Company wants to create at Waygamug an atmosphere in which everyone will feel that they must keep at their best all-around to build up their energies instead of dissipating them."

From 1905 through the summer performances of 1915, "Hiawatha" at Lake Ya-way-ga-mug drew thousands of summer tourists who had come north to the Tip of the Mitt by



Joseph Beauvis-Kahnawake Mohawk actor playing Pau-Puk, Keewis

steamer or by the Grand Rapids & Indiana rails. The play had been performed at Debarats entirely in Anishinaabe. The Petoskey version of the play was done in English, with entire lines of the poem recited in verbatim by the local Native American actors; one of whom was Petoskey's Joseph Chingwa. He played the role of "Chiabiabos," the beautiful, sweet tenor in the group. Joe also played the part of the Great Spirit in the opening scene. Petoskey's beloved artist and art teacher, Frances Pailthorp, wrote that Armstrong encouraged all local Native American actors to make their own clothes for the Round Lake production. She said that they spent hours decorating their suits of cream doe skin with quill and bead work. It was a chance to show pride in traditional Native dress, a way to incorporate songs, dances, and ceremonial objects, and earn money from the summer tourists.

The stage for the Petoskey production was on an isthmus of land between Round Lake and a lagoon. A grandstand was built, and a 20-foot high cliff was manufactured out of a wooden tower covered by burlap bags. The set included a traditional Anishinaabe log house, a wigwam, birch bark canoes and a campfire.

The Desbarats production, and then the Petoskey production, romanticized the turn-of-the-century image of Native American people. What was seen in the pageants had nothing at all to do with the typical Native American in Michigan in the years from 1900-1910. Dr. James McClurken, history professor at Michigan State University, wrote "... Although the Hiawatha pageants ... had little to do with the reality of Anishinaabe history, local Native Americans enjoyed performing in them. The actors wore clothing that was in the style when Europeans first came, and the actors carried artifacts that their parents and grandparents used in important rituals before the Catholic missions were established ... Young people produced Anishinaabe crafts for sale to the tourists. Native Americans from all over Michigan and the mid-west came together for the pageants. They considered them a time of companionship and community."

Armstrong took his form of the Hiawatha pageant to Montreal, and then to Lake Champlain. The Petoskey production was carried on from 1909-1915 by Captain Dick Craine, a former Alaskan wilderness river boat captain who had his cast perform at mid-western summer Chautauqua meetings until the United States participation in World War I in 1918.

The Petoskey play was revised in the 1930s by the Petoskey Chamber of Commerce. That production utilized local Odawa Band members to perform at the city's Mineral Well Park, across from the Pere Marquette train station. In later years, the pageant would be held at Curtis Field. Eventually, "Hiawatha" developed into an

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Indian pageant to honor northwestern Michigan Native people.

In August of 1932, the Petoskey Chamber of Commerce included an Indian pageant during the Petoskey summer activities. It was held at Curtis Field, Petoskey High School's football and track stadium. Over 60 members of the local Native American bands of Indians took part in dances, drumming and songs. During the August 1933 Petoskey Days Summer Pageant, the activity was now called Petoskey's Annual Indian Pageant titled "Glorifying the Ottawa Indian" and was held at the high school stadium.

Later, in 1940, the Michigan Indian Foundation promoted the "Naming Ceremony" as a way to raise money, and to increase Native visibility with the town's white population. This was especially true for that of its prominent summer resorters. A prosperous non-Indian would be chosen each summer to receive his/her honorary Native name. The event was so successful that it had to be moved to Ottawa Stadium where some 4,000 people could be seated. The event later, with the help of the Northern Michigan Ottawa Association, became today's annual Pow wow event held in Harbor Springs.

Meanwhile, in August 1941, Petoskey held its last Indian Pageant during the World War II years at Mineral Park, along West Bay Street. That final pageant featured Joseph Chingwa, who had taken part in the earlier Round Lake Hiawatha pageants, one of the last Petoskey-based pageants. It was held at the Emmet County Fairgrounds in June of 1960. The Northern Michigan Ottawa Association based in Harbor Springs then took charge of the annual event.

On Oct. 7, 2015, due to the 20-year effort of Harbor Springs' residents Angie Williams and her mother, Ima Williams (along with the Petoskey Area Antiques Club), a State of Michigan Historical Marker was placed close to the former spot on Lake "Ya-way-ga-mug" near Petoskey. It was placed to forever honor the historic pageant.

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.



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