

Otankik

On the Edge of the World that Bore *Chicagou*

Gerould Wilhelm
Director of Research
Conservation Research Institute
Revised June 2018

How lovely it must have been 200 years ago to stand in the shade of a great, open-grown White Oak on the brow of the great sweeping bluff southwest of tiny town of *Chicagou*. The area got its name from a Miami term for “the place where the plant that smells like a skunk grows”—namely *Allium tricoccum*, the Wild Leek, the comely, broadleaved onion that grew in the open oak woods just north of slow-flowing river that debouched through the sandy shore into the lake. On the bluff, fifty feet above the vast low prairie flats to the north and east the humid haze of the great lakeshore obscured the distant horizon. To the north, the bluff faded away marked by the wooded promontory of Mount Forest Island and the great low cut in the mid-continental divide known as the Great Portage. To the south the bluff marked a large arc eastward to the sand dunes and wooded swamps, the sand hills looming progressively larger and more complex as the ridge line turns north and east towards Michigan.

To the west were gently rolling prairies interspersed here and there with open groves of timber, which the native people called *mtigwaakii*, the “place where there is wood.”

“No heaven need wear a lovelier aspect than earth did this afternoon, after the clearing up of the shower. We traversed the blooming plain, unmarked by any road, only the friendly track of wheels which tracked, not broke the grass. Our stations were not from town to town, but from grove to grove. These groves first floated like blue islands in the distance. As we drew nearer, they seemed fair parks, and the little log houses on the edge, with their curling smokes, harmonized beautifully with them. One of these groves . . . we reached just at sunset. It was of the noblest trees I saw during this journey, for the trees generally were not large or lofty, but only of fair proportions. Here they were large enough to form with their clear stems pillars for grand cathedral aisles. There was space enough for crimson light to stream through upon the floor of water which the shower had left. As we slowly splashed through, I thought I was never in a better place for vespers.” Fuller (1844)

While the groves were notable, all was appurtenance to the prairie, which the native people called *mskoda*, the “burned over bare land.” A traveler described the rolling prairies in the vicinity of *Otankik*, the “area around the town” in July, 1840:

“. . . I started with surprise and delight. I was in the midst of a prairie! A world of grass and flowers stretched around me, rising and falling in gentle undulations, as if an enchanter had struck the ocean swell, and it was at rest forever. Acres of wild flowers of every hue glowed around me, and the sun arising from the earth where it touched the horizon, was ‘kissing with golden face the meadows green.’ What a new and wondrous

world of beauty! What a magnificent sight! How shall I convey to you an idea of a prairie? I despair, for never yet that pen brought the scene before my mind. Imagine yourself in the centre of an immense circle of velvet herbage, the sky for its boundary upon every side; the whole clothed with a radiant efflorescence of every brilliant hue. We rode thus through a perfect wilderness of sweets, sending forth perfume, and animated with myriads of glittering birds and butterflies.—

*A populous solitude of bees and birds,
And fairy formed, and many colored things.*

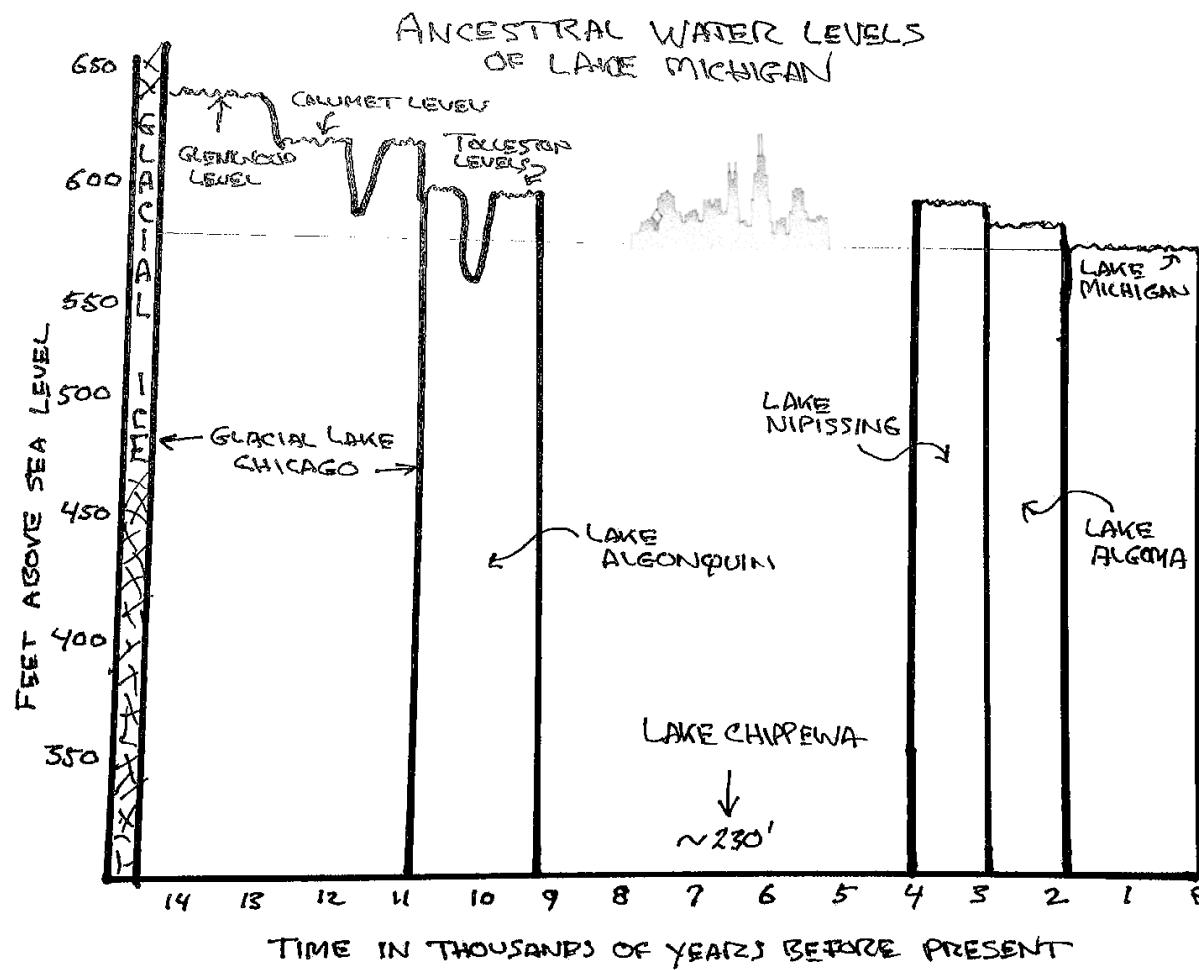
"T'was, in fact a vast garden, over whose perfumed paths, covered with soil as hard as gravel, our carriage rolled through the whole of that summer day. You will scarcely credit the profusion of flowers upon these prairies. We passed whole acres of blossoms all bearing one hue, as purple, perhaps, or masses of yellow or rose; and then again a carpet of every color intermixed, or narrow bands, as if a rainbow had fallen upon the verdant slopes. When the sun flooded this Mosaic floor with light, and the summer breeze stirred among their leaves the iridescent glow was beautiful and wondrous beyond any thing I had ever conceived. . . . The gentle undulating surface of these prairies, prevent sameness, and add variety to its lights and shades. Occasionally, when a swell is rather higher than the rest, it gives you an extended view over the country, and you may mark a dark green waving line of trees near the distant horizon, which are shading some gentle stream from the sun's absorbing rays, and thus, 'Betraying the secret of their silent course.' Oak openings also occur, green groves, arranged with the regularity of art, making shady alleys for the heated traveler. What a tender benevolent Father have we, to form for us so bright a world! How filled with glory and beauty must that mind have been, who conceived so much loveliness!" Steele (1841)

The Indian village that lay upon the verge of the bluff was not randomly founded. It was situated on high ground above the wet prairies and marshes that stretched across the ancient glacial lake bed toward Chicago. As land forms go, this bluff was not very old. It was formed scarcely 15 thousand years ago as the receding glacier made one final advance, placing the last wall of the great dam that formed a mid-continental divide—all the rain falling north and east of it flowing to the Atlantic Ocean. Geologists call it the Tinley Moraine—named after the town of Tinley Park.

The bluff marked the eastern edge of the great morainic divide and had become a major trading route, along which many peoples moved from the trading center of *Kekionga* in the east [Fort Wayne]. The Sauk Trail arrived from the east. The Vincennes Trace passed through from the south, from the Mother of Rivers, the *Splawacipiki* [Ohio] and descended northward toward Chicago. Other trails lead westward into the heartland to the great rivers that flowed ultimately to the Father of Rivers, the *Mississippi*.

This land had not always been so high above the plains below. The First Peoples of the region, or the *Otankik* of their ancestors, probably had been established here as early as fourteen thousand years ago, when the waves of what is now known as the Glenwood Stage of Glacial Lake Chicago lapped the shores nearby—a full 60 feet higher above sea level than the current level of the lake and the melt waters cut through the moraines in the area of Mount Forest and

flowed west to the Des Plaines River and into the trench caused in part by the Kankakee Torrent about 19,000 years ago and became the Illinois River.



The First Peoples lived among grazing herds of Woolly Mammoths and Mastodons in shelters made of White Spruce, Black Spruce, and perhaps White Pine and Red Pine—the melting glacier still an imposing mile-high backdrop far to the north. Although their primary diet was meat, nutritious Buffalo Berries were common and probably much desired in season, perhaps along with early cultivated selections of maize, winter squash, and climbing beans. The diverse landscape, replete with fens, wet prairies, groves, and marshes, provided these First Peoples with all they needed for cooking, heating, construction, pharmaceuticals, dyes, and all the other necessities of life—all within walking distance. The area now known as Blue Island appeared to float far off-shore to the north. The site of the future city of Chicago still lay deep under water.

For fifteen hundred years or so, the waters pounded the nearby shore just a few feet below the village, but change was in the air. Almost suddenly, a great surge of water from lakes in the Huron and Erie basins flowed through the Grand River Valley of central Michigan into our inland sea. This torrent soon eroded a gash in the moraine at a point in the mid-continental

divide now called the Chicago Outlet. This eroded weir allowed the level of the lake to drop about 20 feet, at which level it remained for another thousand years or so. Blue Island became connected above the surface to Mount Forest Island, and Worth Island appeared in the lake, surrounded by water of what is called the Calumet stage, a lake level that was about 620 feet above sea level—still 30 feet or more above Chicago. Blue Island became a great trading center as well, situated as it was near the gateway to the western rivers and trading peoples in far and distant lands where the sun sets. The landscape had changed markedly, the pines and spruces now sharing the space with oak trees, but there was much more to come as the massive glacier melted away.

For reasons poorly understood, but probably related to the torrents that dug out the North Shore Channel south of Devon Avenue, Lake Chicago experienced another sudden drop in lake level, perhaps reaching a level as low as the contemporary level of Lake Michigan, about 580 feet above the level of the Atlantic Ocean. The land of upon which Chicago was later built was exposed for the first time, but there was no portage available across the divide to warrant it any special attention from traders, or if a portage did exist, it was short-lived. The villagers of *Otankik* now looked out over a sea about 50 feet below them, but the major transportation route along which they lay remained active. Such was the scene for about 500 years. It is probable that they experienced desultory quakes of the earth as the land began to rebound and buckle from the relief of the weight of the dissipating glacier.

Then, a great lobe of the glacier advanced again, blocked the outlet of Glacial Lake Chicago at the Straits of Mackinac, and again the southern waters discharged through the Chicago Outlet at Mount Forest Island. The lake level returned to the Calumet level, forcing man and beast to reestablish permanent residence in the vicinity of the *Otankik* and other bluff towns, which probably never had been abandoned. Its position high above the old lake bed flats along the trade route, with its steady breezes and long-established and well stewarded resources, was too salubrious for people to abandon readily.

The erosive flows of this southern discharge through the outlet and into the Des Plaines River eventually led to another lowering of the level of Lake Chicago about 11,000 years ago, which has become known as the Tolleston Level. The waters that surged through the divide final reached bedrock of the Niagaran formation—over which the waters of Lake Erie fall at Buffalo, New York—about 595 feet above sea level. At this time, the villagers fished in the waters of an inland sea 40 feet below their town. Strong updrafts from the lake along the bluff created a new atmospheric climate for them and again great flats of wet prairies, prairie marshes, and sloughs re-formed for several miles to the east.

After another five-hundred years or so, the northern outlets were blocked again, and the Chicago Outlet resumed its deep cut through glacial drift of the mid-continental divide. Sand ridges and spits that had formed under Lake Chicago appeared, probably clothed with Jack Pines, Paper Birches, and Bearberry. After just a few hundred years, the waters of Lake Huron, Lake Chicago's great northern sister, flowed back into the Michigan basin, inundating these old lake-bottom flatland prairies once again—which marked the end of Glacial Lake Chicago. The

sea that took its place resumed the level of Tolleston and has become known as Lake Algonquian. *Otankik*, in all likelihood, continued to thrive through all the raucous change in the eastern waters and marshy plains to their east at the foot of their bluff.

Lake Algonquian remained at a level about 40 feet below their village for about 300 years, insofar as it can be determined. Then, the most dramatic changes of all occurred about 10,000 years ago. Because of changes going on in the St. Lawrence River Valley, far to the east, waters of the great inland seas of Lake Huron and Lake Algonquin ran into Lake Erie and to points east. The great lake basin of our inland sea all but emptied out. The waters east of *Otankik* vanished utterly, leaving great plains of sand spits and sand ridges. Dunes began to form from wind-blown sands to the east. The only thing left of our great inland water was a small area in the deepest part of what is now Lake Michigan. It lay miles from what is now Chicago and is known to geologists as Lake Chippewa, the level perhaps not much more than 250 feet above sea level—the future site of Chicago now more than 300 feet above the surface waters. Even the from land at what once was sited Fort Dearborn, First Peoples could look many miles to the east into a deep basin that husbanded a relatively small lake.

This situation sustained for about 5,000 years. It is almost certain that the trade route was vacated, or at least took on a difference in importance, and a culture unknown to us developed in the basin that now lies under Lake Michigan. Forests and prairies developed. Indeed, the conifer forests had long abandoned the bluff lands and been replaced by prairies of tall grass, interspersed with groves of oak and hickory on the better drained morainic ridges and bluffs of glacial outwash. We know virtually nothing of the people that must have thrived in this great basin of the ancient Glacial Lake Chicago.

About 5,000 years ago, as the last of the land glaciers had melted away and the tundra-like landscapes were long gone, the North Bay Outlet in Ontario closed with the uplift of the land as it rebounded, utterly free at last from the weight of the great ice mass. The waters from Lake Huron flowed back into the Lake Michigan basin. The Chicago Outlet again discharged water and the level of our great inland sea returned to that of Lake Algonquin, about 20 feet higher than it is today.

But what a flood it must have been from the perspective of the 5,000 year-old culture that would have inhabited the fecund basin of old Glacial Lake Chicago around Lake Chippewa. Again, the low prairie flats east of *Otankik* resumed their sodden character and the bluffs of the ancient moraine became a preferred highway. No doubt, the village was re-engaged with people—perhaps now in conflict with peoples who had come to occupy these breezy uplands in their long absence.

The *Anishnabeg*, including peoples now known as Ottawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi, record a great flood in their creation story. According to Blue Panther, Keeper of the Stories, it goes something like this:

The god Michabo was hunting with his pack of trained wolves one day when he saw the strangest sight—the wolves entered a lake and disappeared. He followed them into the

water to fetch them and as he did so, the entire world flooded. Michabo then sent forth a raven to find some soil with which to make a new earth, but the bird returned unsuccessful in its quest. Then Michabo sent an otter to do the same thing, but again to no avail. Finally he sent the muskrat and she brought him back enough earth to begin the reconstruction of the world. The trees had lost their branches in the flood, so Michabo shot magic arrows at them that immediately became new branches covered with leaves. Then Michabo married the muskrat and they became the parents of the human race.

Certainly, the massive refilling of the basin could not have gone on unnoticed. This new lake, known to geologists as Lake Nipissing, lasted at the level of lakes Algonquin and Tolleston, about 600 feet above sea level, for about a thousand years. Then about 3,000 years ago, the outlet at Lake St. Clair, which largely was composed of glacial till, eroded rather quickly, lowering the level of our inland sea by about 10 feet. The Chicago Outlet, which by now was largely lined with dolomitic bedrock of the Niagara Formation—the selfsame formation over which the waters of Lake Erie fall at Buffalo, New York—discharged much more slowly and finally became abandoned. Geologists call this level, about 590 feet above sea level, Lake Algoma, which lasted about a thousand years. It was about this time the contemporary prairie remnants of nearby Markham came into being, one among very few remnants of aboriginal vegetation that approximate the diversity that once flourished in the area. With continued erosion of the St. Clair Outlet, about 2000, years ago, the body of water we call now Lake Michigan was born.

The Chicago Outlet, now closed off completely from Lake Michigan, could still be canoed during periods of serious spring snow melt, the portage across the mid-continental divide little more than a couple of miles in length. The north and south branches of the Chicago River, which served the flow of water from the marshy and wet prairies of the newly emerged lake plains, met at Wolf Point then turned east to Lake Michigan. Now released to flow into Lake Michigan, the Root River at Racine, Wisconsin, emptied a great amount of sand, which migrated southward along the Lake and eventually formed what is now known as the Waukegan Moorlands, much of which is preserved at Illinois Beach State Park. Nothing is left of the landscape upon which Chicago later was built, but a reasonable facsimile of it can be seen today where Dead River enters the lake from the ambient moorlands at Zion, Illinois.

The 2 millennia that ensued, however, would face yet another period of geologic and cultural upheaval, which began scarcely 200 years ago. As one can see, the Lake Michigan basin has within its genes a history of flux. Even today its own lake levels are mercurial, subject to the vagaries of levels in lakes Huron and Superior. Over the last several decades, levels of Lake Michigan have varied as much as four feet. One cannot imagine her race is run. But the energy underneath the Draconian changes she has borne recently is not so much geologic as cultural.

The Chicago Outlet that led from Lake Michigan to the Des Plaines River and points beyond would become the reason a great city would arise at the southern end of the lake. It became a transshipment route from the water-borne cargo vessels of the day to the Mississippi

River, at first by way of the Des Plaines River, later by constructed canals and contrived channels. Even though the land was in Indian Territory, European merchants in 1816 gained from the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi access to a 20-mile-wide transportation easement that flanked the outlet. The southern boundary of this easement runs straight through to our village of *Otankik*, so until 1832 the native people became *de facto* gate keepers to this easement.

At the end of the Black Hawk War in 1832 and with Chicago's incorporation in 1833, European settlers flooded into the area, displacing the native people of the region just as completely as did the flood waters of Lake Nipissing. This human flood also obliterated the native flora and fauna nearly to point of extinction and transformed life giving rain water into muddy torrents. The waters of the great inland sea again flow west through the Chicago Outlet, but this time by way of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, and on to the Mississippi River through six locks and dams. The passing of the prairie was emotional for some who lived through it:

"When my father broke the last of the prairie on our farm he used a "riding plow" pulled by four horses. The tough, wire-like roots of the bluestems and prairie clovers twanged with a thousand ringing sounds as each step of the horses pulled the sharp blade forward through the sod of ten-thousand years. As the soil was turned, a black ribbon, reinforced with the living foundation of the prairie, thudded into the trench made by the preceding round of the plow. Bee nests were up-turned, mice scurried from their ruined homes, and raucous gulls swarmed behind, picking up worms, insects, and other small creatures evicted from the sanctuary of their grassland homes. This first plowing did not subdue the prairie—some of the grasses took root and grew again. Not for several years were all the cut roots and dried stems rotted and incorporated into the soil. But eventually the land grew corn, and then wheat, and then clover as insect pests increased and the crops had to be rotated." In Costello (1969)

The rest is history. This “area around the town,” has always been on the edge of momentous things born of people and process. The key question today is: What decisions will people make regarding the future of the land and people of this place at the southwestern region of Lake Michigan. Will the people develop the consciousness to respect and honor the land and the water—even though they have chosen to secure their necessities from people and places far away, about whom they know little or could care less. Will Grandmother Earth, *Nokmes Kignan*, weep or smile?