

Chief John Young

Nominated by the North Wood County Historical Society

Local tradition holds that when the Wisconsin Central Railroad reached Marshfield in 1872, the fledgling community had a population of just seven on hand to greet it. It included Louis Rivers, his wife, Mina, and daughter, Della, his brother, Frank, and Mr. and Mrs. Peter Johnson and their year-old daughter. Besides these white settlers though, Chief John Young's tribe of Potawatomi formed the greater portion of the local population. They too were on hand to greet the train's arrival.

Within what we know today as Marshfield there once were several Indian camps. The 1923 Wood County History records that "in the northern part of Marshfield, near the city park (Columbia Park) and on Central Avenue, near A (Arnold) Street, there was an Indian camp or village. Here they had a dancing place and cemetery and wigwams covered with mats."

The same history continues, "There was also a camp where the Fourth Ward School now stands (southwest corner of East Fourth Street and South Vine Avenue). As the white village grew the Indians moved farther northward. Their last camp was on the bank of the creek north of the city."

Over the years, reports in Marshfield newspapers identified still other Indian camp sites. An October 1941 interview with 93-year-old August Riedel of Granton pinpointed a late 1870s Indian Village on the site of the Marshfield Brewery property (now a Marshfield Clinic parking lot east of Pine Street and south of Ives Street).

The most recognized Indian village, though, was known as the Indian Farm just northeast of Rozellville. Here beginning as early as 1872 the Potawatomi, led by their chief, N-So-Wah-Quet, known better as Chief John Young, would live until 1898. Chief Young's band of up to 250 members had held peaceable possession of the farmland, clearing about forty acres and raising crops of corn, potatoes, and beans.

The *Marshfield Times* reported May 20, 1898, "The old Indian Farm, situated a few miles east of Rozellville was sold last week to Meyer Bros. The land has been occupied



by Chief John Young and his people these many years.” The next month the *Marshfield News* reported that the new owners had given notice to the Indians to leave the property. Then the Indian band moved farther northward, settling in Taylor County.

As frequent visitors on Marshfield’s city streets the town’s newspaper pages contain many news items about Potawatomi activities. Many of them about the chief whom the *Marshfield Times* described in 1887 as “a model Indian, the oracle of his tribe and a figure greatly respected by the white folk as well. Captain John was reputed to be a master of German as well as of English.” (Captain John was another name used for Chief John Young at the time).

An old safe whittled out of wood by Chief John Young is among the treasured artifacts of the North Wood County Historical Society. Painted black, it has every appearance of an iron safe, but it was used to store cigars in the former Upham Store. Many a Marshfield cigar smoker received his daily allotment from that safe. The old safe passed through two fires. It was rescued from the Upham Store when Marshfield burned in 1887 and, years later, from a lumber yard fire.

Chief John did a great deal of traveling. Annually he returned to the Kansas reservation to collect the annuities due him from the federal government. In 1892, with the assistance of William Upham, he met President Harrison at Washington DC, “with the view of having the annuities due his people paid to them here, thus saving the expense of going every year to Kansas.” During the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair, Chief John was one of the attractions as a dancer and Chief in the Indian village on the midway.

Chief John passed away during June 1910. The *Marshfield News* fittingly noted the passing of a prominent early community member on its front page. The *Prentice News* provided details including that the chief’s death was caused by sun stroke and that he was buried at McCord with all the pomp and dignity becoming a chieftain.

As we pause and reflect on our community’s history, it is important to recall not only the contributions of the white settlers, but to also remember the native people to whom this beautiful community we claim by tax deed, mortgage or otherwise once belonged.