

First People to Live in St. Joseph County: the Miami

The Miami Indians were a group of people living in this region. They were also called the "Twightwees" which means "the cry of the crane." In the late 1600s, the St. Joseph River was known as the "River of the Miami's." Their villages were not very permanent. The search for food and battles with other Indians caused them to move around often.

The Miami men were strictly warriors and hunters. Two jobs of the men were hunting food and protecting their families from attack. When they were not hunting or fighting, their time was spent preparing arrows and other tools needed for the hunt.

The Miami women did a variety of hard work for their family. When a new campsite was found, the women set up the wigwams and then prepared a meal of Indian corn, fish or meat from a dog or buffalo. When it was time to move again, the women had to take down the wigwam. They strapped it to their backs, along with all of their belongings and often a papoose (something to carry a small child in). They then marched behind their husbands to the next camping ground. This may have taken several days or weeks of travel. Both men and women of the tribe thought the division of work was fair.

The children also worked. Children would help with planting and harvesting crops, and gathering nuts and berries. Girls helped to build wigwams and to weave bison fur into soft cloth for blankets and clothing. The boys hunted with the men and learned how to become warriors.

Just north of South Bend where the St. Joseph River is shallow, the Miami built a famous fishing place. They put large white limestone slabs across the river from one bank to the other. Several Miami would stand near these stones with spears, while others went upstream in canoes. As the canoes came downstream, the men would slap the water with their oars and churn it so as to drive the fish ahead of them. The men waiting at the rocks could easily see and spear large pickerel and sturgeon as they swam over the white rocks. So many fish were caught in this way that the canoes carrying the catch to shore sunk to the water's edge with the weight of the fish.

The Miami were living here when Robert LaSalle arrived in 1679. He found them to be friendly. They were not permanent residents, often leaving to return perhaps years later. On one such return they found Potawatomi living here in the St. Joseph River Valley. These two tribes were part of the large Indian nation of the Algonquins. They were at one time neighbors in the place we know as Wisconsin. They were friendly towards each other. The Miami looked upon the Potawatomi as their little brothers. When the Miami found the Potawatomi living here, they continued on to the east and set up their village where Fort Wayne is today.