

# The Munsee: A Clan, A Tribe, A Language?

By Norma Lasley

Muncy, Minsi, Monsey, Monsy, Monthy, Munsie, Munsey, to—Muncie.

Dr. Daniel Brinton (as quoted by Weslager, see below) called them "people of the stony country" or "mountaineers," as distinguished from "people down the river" or "people who live near the ocean." Researchers for the Smithsonian disagree, saying that the Munsee form of the word was probably an archaic word for "on the island," possibly referring to an island in the Delaware River. And this is only one of the confusing and conflicting pieces of information about this subgroup or phratry or clan of, or related to, the Delaware Indians.

Who were these people? Where were they from? Where did they go?

When first encountered by Europeans, they were on the east side of the Delaware River, across from the Delawares on the west side of that river. The Munsees and the Delawares are described as "closely related" or "kindred" or "tribal affiliates" by various sources. Sometimes they are referred to as Munsie or Munsee, sometimes as Delaware-Munsie. The Smithsonian volumes use Munsee as their common spelling, but C. W. Weslager uses Munsie as his common spelling.

The Munsees were distinguished by their language as much as anything else. The *Handbook of North American Indians* (Smithsonian, 1978-- ) states: "This name replaced Minisink to designate the consolidated group of emigrant Munsee speakers of whom the Minisinks were the major component. As a linguistic term Munsee includes all groups of any period that spoke dialects of the language spoken by the Munsee group, even though not all such groups were or are Munsees in the political sense." They also list 24 Munsee-speaking Bands, one of them being the Minisink, "...later called Munsee, after absorbing other groups."

The Munsees were not really a political division, as thought of by the Europeans, but more of a geographical and linguistic division. The Smithsonian work speaks of the language as "spoken, in an unknown number of dialects, from

western Long Island and southeastern New York State on the east to the Delaware Water Gap and the Raritan River on the south and west." The Minisinks and their neighbors, a composite group, continued to speak the language as they moved westward ahead of the Europeans, to the upper Susquehanna and then further west. Groups of Delawares, who went to the Canadian area of Muncy town, Moriaviantown and Six Nations Reserve, eventually came to speak the Munsee language exclusively, although that usage has faded rapidly in the twentieth century. Munsee was also spoken by small groups in Wisconsin, Kansas, and Oklahoma into the twentieth century.

In the past many historians have referred to three divisions of the Delaware, sometimes with animal totem designations. Today this division is questioned and thought by some to be a misunderstanding. Smithsonian researchers point out that early vocabularies recorded a "trade jargon," and say that linguistic differences between two of the supposed three groups were minor. This makes the later division of two groups, the majority Delaware and the Munsee, seem more logical. Some authorities believe that the Munsees also had animal totem designations for subgroups, but that they were lost before they could be recorded.

Both the Delaware and the Munsee moved up along the Susquehanna in the early 1700s. Weslager indicates that the population of the formerly scattered groups had declined rapidly and that this movement brought together scattered survivors in a common location for the first time. Other neighboring tribes such as the Shawnee and Mahican (no relationship to Mohegan or Mohican) also moved up along the Susquehanna and into lands claimed by the Six Nations.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the Munsees and the Delawares had been pushed further west and up along the Allegheny, accompanied by sporadic warfare, various



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## Notes:

As many will know, the Alliance has commissioned a woven coverlet with designs representing several historic buildings still in existence in Muncie.

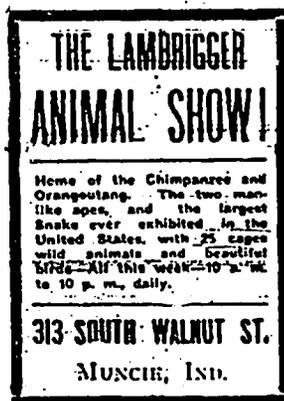
The Alliance is now planning a similar coverlet to represent the county. This might include historic sites, buildings or structures in the county.

There are many ways to do this and therefore we are asking for input for this project. Towns might be represented or townships might be represented, to illustrate two possibilities. Date of origin could be a guideline. Again, the sites might or might not still have structures (e.g., Elizabethtown in Washington Township).

Possibilities mentioned by DCHA Board members included round barns and old iron bridges (e.g., the Smithfield bridge). Do you know of a structure or site you think of as representative of or outstanding in the history of your (present or former) town or township? Please write or call with your suggestions.

A recent trip to Albany to look at Halfway Creek and environs proved to be mildly disappointing. Of course, the creek is still there and there is also a small park beside the creek with appropriate equipment. But we could see no sign or historical marker. We had hoped more would have been done to commemorate this site, as was suggested in the article of 1927, reprinted in this issue.

If pictures of Muncie at the turn of the (last) century intrigue you, you will want examine the reprint of *Muncie of Today* (1895). These reprints have been received and copies are for sale at the Alliance office. At \$15, the softcover copy is a bargain. It makes a nice gift—for yourself or for someone else.



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colonial government dealings, etc. Trade between the Indians and whites suffered from various efforts on the part of both sides to gain the upper hand. A particularly poignant quote comes from the (Christian) converted Munsee chieftain Papunhank in a communication with Governor Hamilton: "Brother, you see there is no Love nor honesty on either side."

Although Christian missionaries had worked with the Delawares since early in the 1700s, the establishment of a Moravian mission not far from present Bethlehem Pa., brought the Moravians and the Munsee together in an association that was to continue over the years. While some Munsees moved on west into present Ohio with the Moravians and other Delawares, some went to Ontario to found Muncy Town along the Thames River. Unfortunately the Christian Indians suffered from the hostilities as much as anyone, both in a British massacre of Gnadenhutten, Pennsylvania, in 1755, and in an American massacre of Gnadenhutten, Ohio, in 1781. Weslager gives a description of a May, 1768, party of fourteen canoes seen by the garrison at Fort Pitt. These canoes moving slowly down the Allegheny were filled with Indian men, women and children. "The officer of the day learned that the party comprised Munsies, who had recently resided at the head of the west branch of the Susquehanna. A few old-timers among these Munsies remembered when they had lived happily along the upper Delaware before they were forced to move to the Susquehanna...Now with the troubles between Yankees and Pennsylvanians, and new white families entering the upstream lands, they belatedly decided to join the Delawares and Munsies living on the Muskingum."

Some of the Munsees remaining along the upper Allegheny, along with the neighboring Senecas, supported the British cause in the Revolution and terrorized settlers in western Pennsylvania. The Munsee and Seneca villages on the upper Allegheny were destroyed by military operations in 1779. At the time of the Revolution the Delaware population west of the Alleghenies probably was less than 3000, according to Weslager.

As pressure for the various Indian Tribes to move on west continued, the Miami and the Piankashaw extended an invitation to the Delawares and certain other Indian tribes for them to live on lands in the Indiana Territory. The Piankashaw apparently specified certain lands along the White River for the Delawares. It is certain that by 1794 there were some Delawares living in the area.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the main body of the Delawares had established some nine villages along the West Fork of the White River in an area extending from just south of present Muncie to about Noblesville. Altogether there were as many as fourteen villages at one time or another along the White River extending on toward Indianapolis. Not all of them were occupied at the same time and not all were Delaware towns. The Shawnee and the Nanticoke were known to be among those who lived in the area. John and William Conner are said to have spoken the Munsee, Shawnee and Delaware dialects fluently, along with Chippewa and Wyandot.

A Moravian mission was established in 1801 east of present Anderson with a small group of Christian Delawares. By then the Delaware attitude to the missionaries was hostile, as a strong non-Christian faction had gained power and opposed all Christian missionaries. In particular, the massacre at Gnadenhutten, Ohio, was repeatedly thrown up to the missionaries along the White River.

Details of the story of the Shawnee Tecumseh and the Prophet may be read elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the treaty of 1818 resulted in the removal of the remaining Delawares and other tribes (excepting the Miamis in northern and northwestern Indiana) from Indiana to west of the Mississippi by 1821. Some 1,346 Delawares from Indiana were taken across the Mississippi River in 1820. Illness delayed a group from the White River area, who wintered during 1820-21 near Vincennes with little food. The Canadian groups continued in Ontario on the Thames River, with another mixed group including Munsees at the mouth of the Grand River.

Not only were many Delawares lost during the trek west, but there were problems in the new environment, surrounded by different tribes.

From Missouri, they moved on to Kansas and from Kansas to Oklahoma.

In a study undertaken in 1907, James Mooney enumerated some 260 Munsies with Stockbridges in Wisconsin, perhaps 45 Munsies with Chippewa in Kansas and 122 "Munsies of the Thames" in Ontario, Canada. By 1955, only a few of the oldest people spoke Munsee. A visit to the Canadian Delawares and Munsees by Weslager in 1970 found a few Munsee dialect speakers there. In the U. S. most of the Munsee were absorbed into the majority Delaware and the Oklahoma Delaware were absorbed into the general population, no longer living on reservations.

Now only the name, Muncie, lives on in Delaware County, but the story of those Indian villages still begs for our attention. Charles Thompson, in his biography of the Conner brothers, points out the difficulties of establishing the sites of these villages. The Moravian diaries and papers are one of the basic sources used in this reconstruction. The easternmost town was Buckongahelas' Town, which was on the river about three miles southeast of present Muncie. Tetepachsit's Town or Munsee Town was at the northernmost part of the loop of the river in present Muncie. Thompson describes nine of the villages westward along the White River as known to be Delaware. This includes both Munsee Town and Nanticoke, both originally the names of separate tribes, which became closely associated with the Delaware and apparently were absorbed into the Delaware majority.

It is to be supposed that a majority of the eight families mentioned by Thompson as being at Tetepachsit's Town or Munsee Town were indeed of the Munsee nation, as stated by Jacob Dunn. Sometime after Buckongehelas died in 1805, it appears that the forty families living at his village moved down the river to Munsee Town. The Munsee families would have been greatly outnumbered and it is easy to see how their identity could have been lost in a few years.

As mentioned above, the Moravian Diaries provide the best first hand descriptions of these villages from 1801 to 1806, when the missionaries left the area due to the increasing and unremitting hostility of the pagan Indians. The terrible effects of whiskey are made evident

in these diaries, which repeatedly speak of the Indians themselves bringing in quantities of whiskey that was then sold to others. As many as 30 gallons or more might be brought in (sometimes even though food was scarce and needed to be brought in) and the entire village—men, women and children—would binge until the whiskey was gone. The deleterious effect on the health can be imagined and this no doubt accounts for some of the health problems experienced by the Delaware in their years along the White River. The Delawares themselves attributed the illnesses and deaths to witchcraft, as is related by the Moravians

The Moravian diaries mention various individuals as being a Munsee or of the Munsee nation. Several times they are mentioned in a group of tribes, as Delawares, Munsees, Twechtowes [Miamis], Schawanos [Shawnees]. The diaries state that the Munsee language is not spoken and Munsee words are not understood in this area, the language used being Unami, the majority Delaware dialect.

The origin of the "Chief Munsee" legend would appear to be in a Helm quotation from a conversation with Mary Jane Gilbert: "When I was a child, I remember having seen as many as five hundred Indians (men and women) pass our house at one time, on ponies, in single file.... Chief Montsee (or Munsey) was among our visitors. He wore a nice broadcloth suit, with belt and beads, and always wore the feathers which are a part of the Indian head-dress. ... Chief Meshingomesa, as well as chief Montsee, stopped at father's house at various times."

Romantic this story is, but no adult seems ever to have mentioned a Chief Munsee, regardless of spelling. The basis for her memories would appear most likely to be stories told to her in her childhood. Her birth date is given as 1825 or 1826 and her mother died in 1830. The major removal of the (mostly Delaware) Indians from this area took place in the summer of 1820 as described above. (For other reminiscences by her, see *The Distaff Side* in this issue.)

Accounts of early pioneers in the county refer to small groups of Indians seen from time to time. Helm quotes Minus Turner, "At the time of my location here [1827], a remnant of Indians

frequently passed and repassed. They probably came here to hunt...." Apparently the only Indians actually living in the area after 1820 was the trio of Indian Jim and his parents, Indian Jake and Sallie. The removal was so effective that when C. C. Trowbridge made his inquiries regarding the life and language of the Delaware Indians in 1823, he had to send to Ohio to find a Delaware to answer some of the questions. (See Kienitz below for Trowbridge's major contribution to knowledge about the Delawares.)

It is interesting to note that Chief Meshingomesia (as it is most commonly spelled in the references) was definitely an historical figure, although he was a Miami and apparently did not become a village chief until after the death of his father in 1832. Meshingomesia was born about 1800 and lived until 1879. His village was along the Wabash River. He would have dressed in a suit and shirt as she describes and it is possible that he could have visited in Delaware County, although it would appear that there were no Miami living in the area at that time.

One last comment on the spelling of the name may be made. That is the observation that in modern literature, at least, the name of the Indian group is usually spelled with an 's,' and the name

of the town in Delaware County, Indiana is spelled with a 'c.' And, for one final note of confusion, we are called Munsonians.

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Used by permission of Conner Prairie Museum. Map is from article by Timothy Crumrin, as cited above.

# TOWN SITE OF ALBANY CHOSEN BACK IN YR. 1833

**William Venard Bought Land and  
Laid Out Present Town Location.  
—Early History Interesting.**

*From the Muncie Evening Press  
April 27, 1923*

Albany is one of the oldest towns of Delaware county, having been founded in 1833 when William Venard, having purchased the land, on which Albany is located, from Andrew Kennedy, who had originally entered the land, divided his purchase into town lots and founded the town.

Although Kennedy is the first man to enter land in the township, he was not the first settler. John Boyles took up his residence in Delaware township among the Indians while they still owned the land and he forms one of the picturesque figures of early township history.

His object in living among the Indians was always a mystery as he was not a trader and his relations were none too friendly with the tribes, as evidenced by the scars he bore on his face from fights with the red men. He lived among them so long, however, and followed so many of their customs that one of the early residents once remarked "that Boyles was as much an Indian in his habits as a white man could be."

His residence in Delaware township was discovered by Thomas Kirby, one of the early settlers of Muncie, who with a companion were on their way to an Indiana agency near Logansport when they came across him. It is not known how long Boyles had lived in the township prior to the time that Kirby and his companion found him as he was never very communicative.

But when he found that other settlers were coming fast, he did not move away to more remote locations. But determined to stay and he built a mill, the first in Delaware township. Boyles was so headstrong, so the story goes, that he built a mill race for power for his mill and found upon completion that he had built it in such a manner that the water would have to run

up hill to perform its work. Boyles had been warned by his neighbors that he was doing the job wrong but he refused to listen to them. He entered a tract of land in section 7 in 1832 but after the township had become more thickly settled, he moved away and nothing is known of his whereabouts after leaving Delaware township.

After Mr. Kennedy, who entered land where Albany now stands, in 1832, had sold his land to Mr. Venard he entered more land in section 15 and remained there until his death.

David Jones entered land in 1831 in section 2. At the first election after the organization of the township, he was elect[ed] justice of the peace and he and Benjamin Drummond filled that office jointly for several years.

Probably the next settlers were James Dean and Absalom and Abraham Boots, who came in 1832, Joshua Bantz, Joseph O'Neal and Lewis Stoner came in 1832 and in the spring of 1834, Reuben Strong entered land in section 2. James Orr, Sr., came to that [t]ownship in 1838 and following him there is a long list of the early settlers of the township.

The first road through Delaware township was from Deeds Mill to Smithfield, in Liberty township, [Note: Ellis says Deeds Mill in Smithfield to Albany; i.e., Deeds Mill was in Smithfield] which had become quite a trading center. When Rueben [sic] Strong came to the township in 1834, he was compelled to cut down some trees along this supposed road for his passage.

The first stock of merchandise in the township was kept by Granville Hastings on a site close to the old Sharon mill. This was in 1834. He constructed the original mill at Sharon