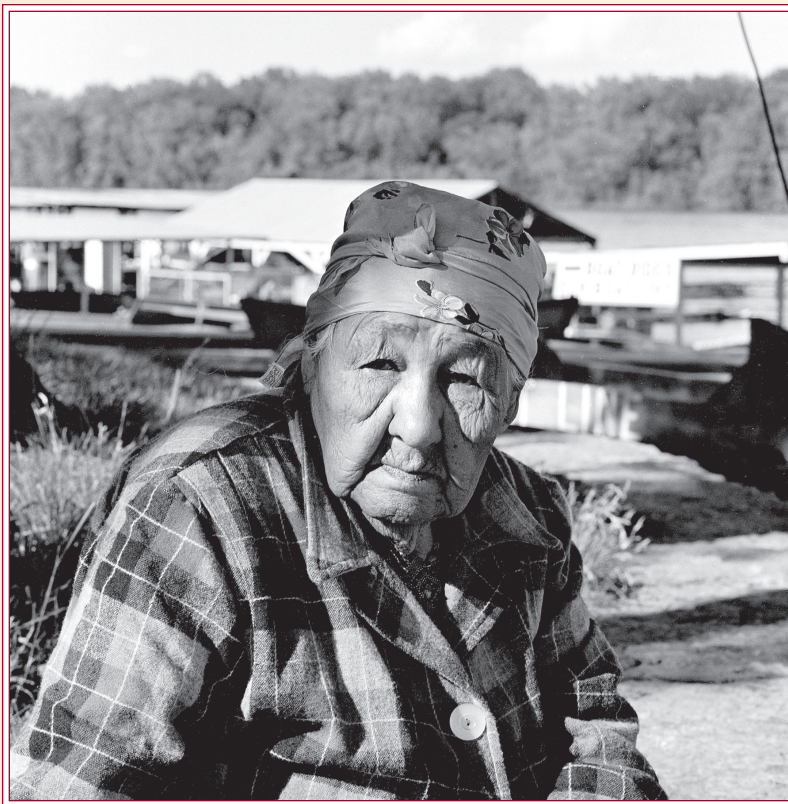


Emma Big Bear

Ho-Chunk Basket Maker and Local Legend

By Trudy Balcom



Emma Big Bear (Photo copyright Joan Liffering Zug Bourret, used by permission)

As the only Native American in the small river towns where she lived, Emma Big Bear was instantly recognizable, a familiar town character. To the townspeople she was a small, round, old woman who lived down by the river in a makeshift wigwam. The children who played by the banks of the river saw her frequently as she went about her daily activities.

She was also a mother, a wife and a skilled traditional basket maker. She knew how to hunt ginseng, skin animals and clean fish. In summer she planted her garden with seeds passed down to her by her family. She was a shrewd survivor who lived to be nearly 100. And she loved the river and woods she knew so well.

But in many ways she remained inscrutable to her neighbors, who could not really see her through the barriers of culture, language and racism. Emma Big Bear, a Ho-Chunk (Winnebago), and her husband William Henry Holt, also Ho-Chunk, came to Waukon Junction, Iowa, in 1917, after they married on the Win-

nebago Reservation near Thurston, Nebraska. It was Emma's second marriage. She was 47 and pregnant. He was 51. They probably arrived by train or on foot, as neither owned a car or a horse.

Why they came to Waukon Junction, a tiny village about four miles

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in western Wisconsin.*

downriver from Harpers Ferry, no one knows. They settled near the mouth of Paint Creek, on the banks of the Mississippi, and they stayed. Perhaps they came here because of the earthen mounds built by their ancestors that dotted the bluffs above their camp. Some of the mounds are now protected at Effigy Mounds National Monument, barely three miles to the south.

Emma and Henry lived near Waukon Junction for about 25 years. They

raised their daughter, Emmaline, and made their living in the traditional Ho-Chunk fashion: fishing, hunting, gathering and gardening. They lived in a simple cabin in winter, and in summer they stayed in a tent or a wigwam near the river. For money, they dug ginseng roots in the nearby woods. Henry helped Emma select, cut and prepare black ash wood to make baskets. Emma also made some beadwork jewelry. On summer days, they would jump a freight train, walk or hitchhike to the tourist towns of Marquette and McGregor, about six miles downriver, to sell their baskets, beadwork and ginseng. It was a settled, peaceful life.

For Emma and Henry, staying in a place of their own choosing must have seemed especially important. After the Ho-Chunk lost most of southern and western Wisconsin through treaties in the 1830s, they were forced to move to northeast Iowa in 1840, to Fort Atkinson, on the Turkey River. The fort was built to protect them from the Dakota and the Sac and Fox, who also hunted in the area, and to keep peace among

the tribes in a 40-mile-wide strip of land called the Neutral Ground. The Ho-Chunk remained at Fort Atkinson until 1848, two years after Iowa became a state. Then they were moved to Long Prairie, Minn., next to their enemies, the Ojibwa.

Between 1856 and 1865 the U.S. government moved the tribe of about 2,200 people twice more — to other reservations in southwestern Minnesota, and then in cattle cars to southeastern South Dakota, a trip that many old people and young children did not survive. In South Dakota, the tribe was again located near powerful enemies, the Nakota Sioux. They fled south to the reservation of the friendly Omaha tribe, in northeast Nebraska. In 1865, the U.S. government purchased a portion of Omaha lands to create a Winnebago reservation.

During the 25-year period that the Ho-Chunk were mercilessly shifted about by the government, they were also making journeys of their own. Over and over again, Ho-Chunk

In the summer she would spread her wares on the sidewalks to sell, and she charged tourists a quarter to take her picture.

families quietly returned to their homelands in western Wisconsin; and over and over again the authorities would escort them back to wherever the current reservation was.

Noted Iowa archeologist Ellison Orr, who later documented many of the Indian mounds in northeast Iowa, remembered seeing a band of Ho-Chunk heading east near McGregor in 1865, when he was a boy.

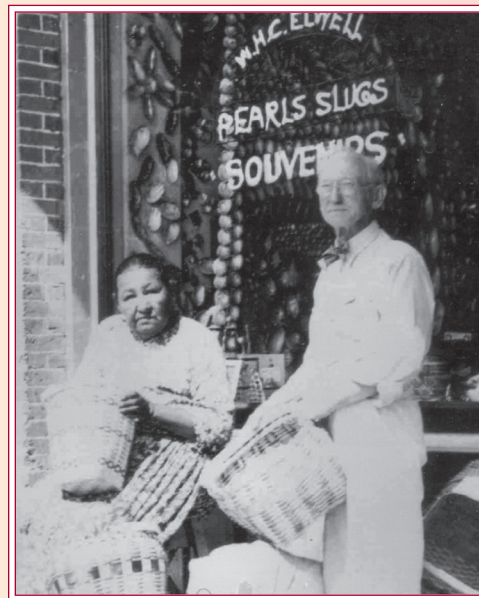
In 1875, the U.S. government began purchasing lands for a reservation in western Wisconsin. Emma's parents, Chief Big Bear (a descendant of Chief Waukon Decorah) and Mary Blue Wing, may have been removed to Fort Atkinson, but it is unclear whether they traveled to the other reservations as well.

Emma was born in about 1869 in western Wisconsin and spent most of her childhood there. She may have



Above: Emma and Henry's split-black-ash baskets are sturdy and beautifully crafted with hand-carved wooden handles. Some of the splints were dyed red or yellow. These baskets are in the collection of John Bickel, shown above. (Trudy Balcom)

Right: Some of Bickel's baskets were passed down from his grandfather, McGregor river-pearl dealer W.H.C. Elwell, shown here with Emma. Elwell, who sold Emma's baskets in his shop, was interested in Native American culture and collected the baskets himself. (Photo courtesy of John Bickel)



attended the Tomah Indian School, which opened in 1893, and taught students English language, reading, writing and practical "industrial" skills. Little more is known about her early life or first marriage.

In Waukon Junction during the 1920s and 30s, the Big Bear-Holt family were much like their neighbors. Nobody had much money. Many in the community relied on the river and the land for at least part of their income.

Vivian Huffman, 87, who lives in nearby Waukon, Iowa, was close to the Big Bear family. Her grandfather, John Atall, a trapper, let the family stay on his land along Paint Creek.

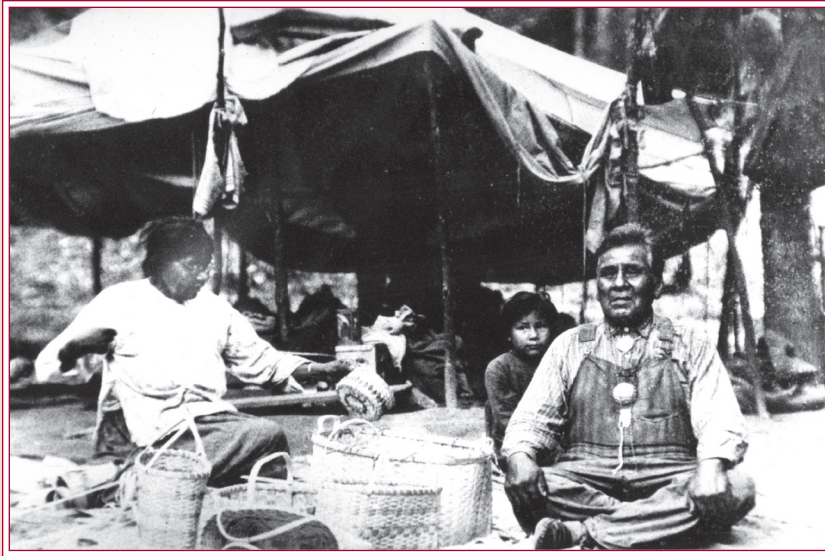
"They were nice people. My grandpa just let them live there," Vivian remembers. "Emmaline, their daughter, was my best friend."

Growing up, Vivian was a playmate of Emmaline's, and they both

attended the grade school at Waukon Junction. She would visit the family in their summer wigwam and help Emma and Emmaline make baskets. "She'd sit right on the ground, cross her legs and do it," Vivian remembers of Emma.

Vivian said they were quiet people, but not unfriendly. Emmaline, she noted, would chide her mother about not speaking English when Vivian was there. "Now mother, you know you can speak it. Speak it," Vivian recalls Emmaline saying. The family ate a varied diet of local food. Vivian and others recall that the family would take unwanted rough fish, raccoons and muskrats offered by their neighbors. As much as she liked Emmaline, Vivian recalls, "I never ate there."

As the years passed, Emma's life was marked by loss. Henry died from pneumonia after he fell through the



The Big Bear-Holt family had a summer camp by the Mississippi. This photo of Emma, Emmaline and Henry was taken by legendary McGregor photographer Margery Goergen. (Photo courtesy of Rogeta Halvorson)

ice of Paint Creek in the winter of 1944, at the age of 77. A few months later, in the summer of 1945, Emmaline died, possibly from tuberculosis. She was 27 and married, but stayed with her mother while her husband was away fighting in World War II.

After the death of her husband and daughter, Emma probably spent some time at the Nebraska reservation, where both were buried. When she returned to Iowa, Emma, who was by then in her mid 70s, built her-

The townspeople regarded her with a mixture of fascination, revulsion and a somewhat patronizing benevolence. She was a remnant from another time.

self a wigwam from scrap materials with the help of two visiting Ho-Chunk women. With no electricity, running water or telephone, it was located on the bank of the river at McGregor, where the Holiday Shores Motel is today. She continued to earn her living making and selling baskets, beading jewelry and tiny dolls, and digging ginseng. In the summer she would spread her wares on the sidewalks to sell, and she charged tourists

a quarter to take her picture.

John Bickel, an attorney in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, grew up in McGregor and still keeps a home there. He first remembers seeing Emma when he was about six years old. He would stop by to visit her while he was playing on the riverfront. Emma would invite him to sit with her for awhile, an invitation most kids didn't get. Bickel's grandfather, W.H.C. Elwell, had sold Emma's baskets in his McGregor shop in the 1920s and 30s, and had treated Emma's family with kindness, which Emma never forgot.

"She had a great fondness for my grandfather," Bickel recalled.

In the winter, she would skin muskrats and raccoons for trappers, keeping the meat and earning a little money. Boys from Marquette and McGregor could earn a few quarters for splitting her firewood. Tim Mason, of McGregor, remembers going to visit Emma with some other boys and a gunny sack of carp.

"We spoke by opening the gunny sack and pulling out a few carp for her inspection. She said a few words in her native tongue, but her sad old eyes spoke universally to us: she was pleased. Fresh fish in the dead of winter."

As Emma grew older, it became increasingly difficult for her to support herself in her traditional manner.

Emma Remembered

Efforts are currently underway to memorialize Emma and to honor her life through art and storytelling. Rogeta Halvorson, of McGregor, is on the board of the Mississippi River Sculpture Park in Prairie du Chien. Halvorson and other volunteers are raising funds for a life-size bronze sculpture of Emma Big Bear to be added to the Sculpture Park by July 2009, the 140th anniversary of Emma's birth.

The Mississippi River Sculpture Park is an unusual combination of art and history, located on St. Feriole Island near the Villa Louis historic site. Two dozen statues of historic figures are planned for the park; three have been completed. The park, the creative brainchild of Wisconsin sculptor Florence Bird, is widely supported by the community.

Halvorson is also a passionate student of Emma Big Bear history. She works at her family's winery, Eagles Landing, in Marquette, part of which is housed in Emma's former home. Last year, she invited some of Emma's family and townspeople to stop by and share stories about Emma on a summer weekend. The event was a success, so she plans to host it again this year, on July 19 and 20 at Eagles Landing Winery, 127 North St., in Marquette. The weekend will include presentations by Virginia "Ollie" Decorah Dixon, Dee Decorah Maisells and Gayle Funmaker, all relatives of Emma's, plus Native American crafts and a presentation by sculptor Florence Bird.

Everyone is welcome to attend. For more information, contact Halvorson at 563-873-2509. 🌊

She relied more on her neighbors' assistance and goodwill, but she retained her fierce independence as much as possible. If people saw her walking somewhere they would give her a ride, and the local butcher would save beef kidneys for her. The townspeople regarded her with a mixture of fascination, revulsion and a somewhat patronizing benevolence. She was a remnant from another time.

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In 1951 or 1952, as Mississippi floodwaters surrounded Emma's wigwam, she was evacuated by the Red Cross. According to a newspaper from the time, "...she is now living in a tent on shore near McGregor. Tent living is her choice."

In the late 1950s, Emma finally left her wigwam for a house at 127 North Street in Marquette. Some of her family had moved to Marquette as well, and she lived next door to her great-nieces and nephews, who regarded her as their grandmother. Virginia "Ollie" Decorah Dixon, who lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was one of those nieces. She remembers Emma as a loving, playful soul.

"She'd always buy trinkets from a gumball machine and hide those treats for me to find," Ollie recalled. But when Emma got tired, she would send Ollie away. "She liked kids, but she could only tolerate them so long."

After Ollie graduated from high school in 1962 and left Marquette, she did not see her grandmother again, something she regrets.

As Emma's health declined, she lived with relatives in Wisconsin Dells and spent time in the hospital in Madison. But she didn't want to stay

Emma Big Bear's basketry and beadwork are prized by residents of Marquette, McGregor and beyond.

there and didn't want to die there. She returned home as soon as she could, eventually settling at Northgate Manor nursing home in Lansing, Iowa, not far from the river. She died there on August 21, 1968.

When she was gone, the people of the communities where she had lived

realized that they had lost an irreplaceable member of the community.

Emma Big Bear's basketry and beadwork are prized by residents of Marquette, McGregor and beyond. Her work is displayed at many shops and locations in the area, including the Depot Museum and Eagles Landing Winery in Marquette and the Prairie du Chien Museum next to Fort Crawford, in Prairie du Chien, Wis. A few of Emma's baskets are held in private collections throughout northeast Iowa. 🍷

Trudy Balcom is a writer who lives in Harpers Ferry, Iowa. Her last story for Big River was "Backwater Touring" September-October 2007.

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