

Chief Busticoggan topic of new book

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A life-long interest in local history and genealogy has prompted former Northome resident Robert Porter to write his newest book involving the Borderland.

"The Lost Gold of Busticoggan" is his newest work based on the life of the legendary Chippewa chief.

The locally known folk hero had his own small reservation a few miles east of Effie and spent his lifetime traveling through Itasca, Koochiching and St. Louis counties.

The life of Busticoggan ended in 1910 when he and several other Chippewa visited Washington, D.C., to protest the loss of their land.

Busticoggan and another chief were asphyxiated in their downtown hotel after extinguishing the room's gas light with a blanket.

Porter said he first became interested in the life of Chief Busticoggan after reading through memoirs written by his grandmother.

The documents, written in the 1930s, mentioned the chief and some of the alleged acts he had been a part of, including helping northland loggers during an 1874 small pox epidemic.

In June 2002, Porter and Jerry Logdahl of Northome were asked to guide a television crew from KARE 11 News into the Wildwood site of the smallpox epidemic. There, a mass grave contains remains of an Aitkin, Minn., logging crew that Chief Busticoggan was unable to save.

The television crew was shooting a documentary on smallpox shortly after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and concerns were raised about the possibility of smallpox being used as a terrorist weapon.

Porter said he spent about five years gathering information for the book, much of that time spent interviewing people from the Effie and Northome areas sharing his interest in local history.

Porter added that much of the information he received came from Bob Anderson, long-time Effie storeowner and former state forester Bill Marshall.

Anderson has also done work dealing with Busticoggan, including writing a biography of the chief.

"I really enjoyed doing it," Porter said of talking with people who are the children and grandchildren of individuals alive at the time of Busticoggan.

Along with the personal interviews, Porter made trips to the Library of Congress and the National Archives in New York.

"I love dusty old records that have been ignored by others," Porter said.

He said his trip to the National Archives, shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, was especially exciting because there were very few people there and he was able to solicit the services of a full-time professional researcher to assist him.

Another high point during his creation of "Busticoggan" was visiting with the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa near Orr to continue his research. He said he enjoyed the beauty of the area as well as the culture of the people living there.

Porter has written a number of books about local history and historical figures.

He said that one of his works written many years ago, "Northwoods Pioneers," is still getting praise.

"People still stop me and say they enjoy reading about the old pioneers," he said.

Porter was born in rural Plum Creek Township in Koochiching County about 22 miles east of Northome where he attended school.

After high school Porter attended the University of Minnesota and then Bemidji State University, graduating with an education degree.

Porter was a teacher of English, social studies and American history in White Bear Lake, Minn., before his retirement.

Currently residing in Center City, Minn., he continues to substitute teach and does some part-time reporting for the Chisago County Press where he is able to write a dedicated column called "A Brief Glance at History," always continuing his research of the past.

Porter's book is available at stores in Effie, Northome and Bigfork and also is sold at the Itasca, Aitkin and Koochiching County Historical Societies.

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