

THE CLANS OF THE OJIBWA

Before the Europeans came to the area of the Tahquamenon River, neighboring Native Americans of the Ojibwa tribe created social groupings called clans, each identified by its own totem or sign. There were five original totems or clan signs: *Noka* (bear), *Awaw-e* (catfish), *Bus-in-ause* (echo-maker – crane), *Ah-ah-wauk* (loon), *Waub-ish-ash-e* (marten). The clan sign native to the Tahquamenon River area was the Bus-in-ause (echo-maker, crane).

These clans eventually divided into small hunting groups until 21 signs were used by the Ojibwa: crane, catfish, loon, bear, marten (weasel-like mammal), deer, wolf, pike, merman (male mermaid), lynx, sturgeon, eagle, rattlesnake, cormorant (black duck), goose, sucker, whitefish, beaver, gull, hawk and moose.

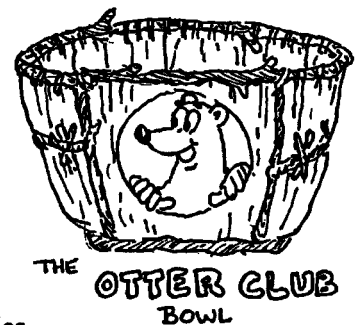
The clan system held an important role in the government, division of labor and social makeup of the Ojibwa Tribe. The clan sign or totem was like a coat of arms and was used for identification, ownership and decoration. It was inherited (passed down) to clan members from their fathers and was preserved through hieroglyphics (writing with pictures) carved in wood or painted on bark. When a family member died, a clan sign was placed at the head of the grave. Often when the groups hunted together, a clan sign was placed next to the animal to show ownership. When traveling far from home a member of a clan could expect shelter and hospitality from a clan “relative” even though the two had never met.

The clan signs were often carved or painted on items made of birch bark, including houses, canoes and many different types of utensils and containers. The bark was removed from the trees in winter and the inner bark was scraped away to create designs. Native American women, who made the utensils and containers, punched holes in the bark with bone awls (pointed tools), then stitched the seams together with roots, basswood fiber or animals’ tendons. Sometimes the women made designs by folding the birch bark in half and biting the design with their teeth. The items were often waterproofed with tree gum, and then painted with the clan sign.

Paper Birch Bark Clan Bowls

Materials: Leather shoelaces, yarn or heavy string for lacing
Rough planks of wood
Two 15” circles of white paper

1. Place circles on the rough wood and rub with the side of a crayon.
2. With the crayon sides out, glue the two circles together.
3. Crumple, then flatten the circles.
4. Cut out four triangles from the outside edge of the circles.
5. Decorate the sides of the bowl with clan signs mentioned above or design your own.
6. Punch holes along the edges of the circle, and on the sides of the triangles.
7. Bring the sides of the triangles together and lace them together.
8. After sides have been laced together, lace around the top of the bowl.



More Ideas:

Sheets of birch bark paper could be used to make quivers (holders for arrows), canoes, wigwams, journals or other containers.