

MTP 2010 Winning Scholarship Essay

Oza Windib: Giver of Veritas Caput

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In the early 19th century, the race was on to find the source of the Mississippi River: the second largest river in the United States. Many brave and famous explorers such as La Salle and Zebulon Pike searched in vain for the mighty river's source. Some, such as Giacomo Beltrami and Lewis Cass even claimed to have found it. But it wasn't until July 13, 1832 that Henry Rowe Schoolcraft "discovered" the true source of the Mississippi River: Lake Itasca. Henry Schoolcraft's name would be written down in history books for centuries to come, but what many history books seem to neglect is that Schoolcraft was led by Ojibwe warrior Oza Windib, who had already mapped Lake Itasca (then known as Lake La Biche).

Schoolcraft does deserve great credit for his accomplishments; he was the first European bold enough to ask the Native Americans where the source of the river was, the first European to visit Lake Itasca with the intention of finding the Mississippi River's source, and he also named Lake Itasca, combining Latin words *veritas* (true) and *caput* (head) because the "true head" of the Mississippi River was finally known. Despite these and many more accomplishments, it is important to remember that not only was Schoolcraft led to Lake Itasca by Oza Windib, but Oza had in his possession a map of the river's head, suggesting that Native Americans had known of the lake for quite some time. Oza Windib could have easily denied Schoolcraft's request to visit the lake, and who knows how long it could have been before the Mississippi River's source was found by the Europeans.

The Mississippi River is a fundamental part of Minnesota's history, culture, and life, and it played an important roll in the Minnesota territory, bringing settlers from many different lands to live off of the mighty river. Just as ancient civilizations such as Egypt, China, and Mesopotamia formed around mighty rivers such as the Nile, the Yellow River, and the Tigris and Euphrates, the first Minnesotans build their homes in the fertile basin of the Mississippi. Without identifying Minnesota as the home of its source, Minnesota would be just one of the 31 states included in its triangular drainage area. The discovery of Lake Itasca was more than an interesting tidbit of information; it revealed the Minnesota Territory as the source of life from which so many Americans flourished, and as the true head of the United States' second largest

river. By sharing this fact with Henry Schoolcraft, Oza Windib played one of the most significant roles in the history of the Minnesota Territory.

Unfortunately, very little is known about Oza Windib; even the maps he used have been destroyed. Much of what is known of him, however, is found in the journals of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who was a close friend of Windib's and completely acknowledged Oza Windib's part in finding Lake Itasca. For example, in Schoolcraft's *Narrative of an Expedition through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake, the Actual Source of this River*, he says, "It will be sufficient to remark that the object was successfully accomplished, under the guidance of Oza Windib" (236). Windib is often referred to as a leader in Henry Schoolcraft's group. He also speaks of Oza Windib's home, his small village of no more than 200 or 250 people. In his town he is a well respected leader, hunter, and warrior.

Although so little is known about this legendary Ojibwe leader, it is vital to Minnesota history that his story and legacy are preserved. He brought the Europeans an important gift of knowledge: the location of the source of the great Mississippi River. Minnesotan culture flourished due to his gift, and today he receives little to no credit for it. It is a tragic, yet typical, story of an aboriginal leader not receiving enough credit for their contributions. Too often when the conquerors write the history books, different cultures do not receive the spotlight they deserve. Schoolcraft was a great explorer, nonetheless, but Oza Windib should always be remembered for bringing Lake Itasca to the European people. His story reflects a unique sharing of knowledge between two cultures, Native American and European, where there was much tension and dispute. His selfless journey to Lake Itasca gave him little fame, yet the fame that he brought to the Minnesota Territory was vital in its transformation and growth. He showed the people of the new world that the Mississippi River was not merely an ambling river with no origin, but a fierce and mighty source of life that flowed from one of the northernmost territories all the way down to the bottom of the country; bridging cultures that spanned over a 2000 mile area. That is how Oza Windib played one of the most important roles in the history of the Minnesota Territory: by giving Europeans the knowledge of the *veritas caput*.

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