New Glarus: Pre-Settlement Years

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New Glarus is at the eastern edge of what geologists refer to as the "driftless area" of southwestern Wisconsin. This area was not covered or sculpted by the last Ice Age glacier. The result is the scenic deep valleys and rolling prairie uplands that we see today, especially further west of New Glarus. The land was rich in lead ore (lead sulphide, known as galena), with zinc sulphide at lower levels. The typography resulted in the ore being above the water table and often exposed on hillsides – an accident of nature that was to have a major effect on the region's history.

For centuries, the "driftless area" was part of the homeland of the Hochungra (Ho-Chunk or Winnebago) nation. They most likely are descendants of the mound-building culture that flourished in parts of the Upper Midwest more than 2,000 years ago. When the Ho-Chunk first encountered Europeans in 1634, the tribe was concentrated in villages along the Fox River in northeastern Wisconsin. Their numbers were small, having been decimated by warfare with the Illinois confederation to the south and the Anishinabe tribes that were encroaching on their territory to the north. However, as the Ho-Chunk numbers recovered the tribe eventually re-occupied lands in southern Wisconsin.

Other tribes, such as the Sauk, Fox and Kickapoo, also were migrating into the area as they were pushed and pulled by the evolving westward migration of European descendants. The latter tribes likely did some lead mining and smelting, using primitive methods. Records of the first government land survey of what became the Town of New Glarus (noted below) mention that a number of Indian trails crossed the area and that there was a former Indian village camp site just to the northeast. There also had been two tribal villages to the east and southeast along the Sugar River. The one further south was a Ho-Chunk settlement headed by chief Spotted Arm.

The contact with the Europeans resulted in a major change in lifestyle for the indigenous Americans as they became dependant on goods obtained through the fur trade, especially farming tools and hunting weapons. And here, too, the exposure to Europeans caused the devastating situation of many native people dying of diseases to which they had no natural immunity.

By the mid-1820s non-native settlers were arriving in southwestern Wisconsin in great numbers, drawn by the ease of extracting the lead ore. Many of the early settlers came from the South, via the Mississippi River, and some brought slaves with them. The mining activity spurred the development of two centers of commerce – Galena (in Illinois) and Mineral Point, both of which figure significantly in the early history of New Glarus. While a few of the miners struck it rich, most barely made a living. Typically they farmed during the summer and mined during the winter. Occasionally there was friction between the new settlers and the native people, so small forts were built throughout the area – the closest being near Blue Mounds to the north and Ft. Hamilton near Wiota to the southwest. These were in addition to the three United States military

forts that guarded the trade route connecting the Great Lakes and the Mississippi – Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien, Fort Winnebago at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, and Fort Howard at Green Bay.

In 1829 the Ho-Chunk signed an agreement ceding all of their land south of the Wisconsin River to the United States. This followed the dramatic surrender of Red Bird, their war chief, at Portage in 1827 and an ill-fated effort to obtain his pardon. Most of the Native Americans were then relocated west of the Mississippi. However, in 1832 the Sauk chief Black Hawk brought some of his people back across the river into Illinois to assist other Indians in planting corn. That led to the so-called Blackhawk War in which the region's militia and U.S. soldiers chased Black Hawk and his large band into Wisconsin. Residents fled to the forts. Hundreds of miners left the area, never to return. The end result was the massacre of many native men, women and children at Bad Axe (south of La Crosse) as the Sauk tried to return across the Mississippi.

Prior to the 1829 treaty, the land had been claimed in succession by France, Great Britain and then, after the Revolutionary War, by the United States. It was loosely administered by the territorial governments of Ohio until 1800, Indiana until 1809, Illinois until 1818, and then Michigan. Under Michigan management, the Wisconsin region was divided into two counties, with this area part of Crawford County, based at Prairie du Chien. Then in October of 1829, the southern part of Crawford County was reorganized as Iowa County, with Mineral Point as the county seat. It wasn't until after Wisconsin was organized as a territory on July 4, 1836, that an effort was made to create a separate county here. After a false start, Green County came into existence in 1839.

During this early lead mining era, the first settlers arrived in what was to become Green County – probably in 1828. They were drawn by the mining possibilities at what became known as the Sugar River diggings (to the southeast of New Glarus) and the Skinner diggings (to the south near Monroe). While many miners were transients, the first to stay was William Devise, a Virginian. Devise built a smelting furnace at the Sugar River Diggings in the spring of 1829 and after the Black Hawk war he sold the furnace and concentrated on mining until 1850. A lot of the early miners were from England and Ireland. In 1843 Exeter village was laid out at the diggings and by 1850 it had a population of 150. Today, little remains of Exeter other than some old stone foundations and a cemetery. Many miners left the area in 1849 during the California gold rush.

One frequently-noted remnant of the mining era is the Old Lead Trail, a route used to haul ore from Exeter to Mineral Point. That there was a trail is certain, but its importance at times has been exaggerated. There were several routes connecting Mineral Point to mining areas, and most were referred to as "lead trails." While most of the lead was shipped out via the Mississippi, there eventually were two principal lead trails connecting the mining area to the Great Lakes – one was through Janesville to Racine and the other along the "military ridge" through the Madison area to Milwaukee. It would take an ox team eight to 10 days to make the trip to Milwaukee, usually returning with lumber and supplies. It has been noted that the first land survey (described below) does not show any indication of the lead trail in Green County.

The U.S. General Land Office surveyed the region in 1833, in preparation for land sales. The surveying township where the Swiss colony was centered is Town 4 North Range 7 East (now the Town of New Glarus). The surveyor's notes don't reveal much as they describe the alternating forests and prairies, noting that the typical trees were white oak, burr oak and aspen. Several Indian trails were observed. "No one lives within the town," wrote surveyor James W. Stephenson. "Nor have I seen any evidence here of prospecting for mineral – yet it has the appearance of a mineral country." Indeed, the only trace of mining shows up on an 1861 plat map. When the shafts were dug and whether or not they were successful is not known.

Land began to be sold in 1835, with the regional land office at Mineral Point. The standard price for what was known as "Congress land," was $1.25 an acre and the minimum purchase was 40 acres. Many sales were made using military land grants.

From various early histories we know that there were a few families living in the township, but they were all squatters – that is, none had purchased the land that they were using. The closest villages remained Exeter to the southeast and the newer Greene's Prairie to the west. Monroe had become the county seat and Madison, the territory's new capital city, was only about 30 miles to the northeast.

Oddly, although the land had been for sale for 10 years no one purchased property within the township until after the Swiss colonists arrived in 1845.

Among the squatters were these families:

- **Robert Parkin** (and possibly son James Parkin). He later purchased land in the Town of Exeter, just east of New Glarus.
- **Thomas Lemon**. He lived near the area that is now New Glarus Woods State Park.
- **Theodore Greenwood**. He was the first to buy land after the Swiss arrived, choosing property in the northeast part of township.
- **James Slater**. He later purchased property in the northwest part of the township.
- **Joseph Britton**. He also later bought land in the northeast part of township.
- **Robert Morley**.
- **Stephen Armstrong**.
- _____ **Jackson**. (Perhaps Christopher, who later had land in the northeast part of the township.)
- _____ **Harvey**

Theodore Rodolph, who helped his fellow Swiss start the colony of New Glarus, wrote many years later that two of the squatter families – the Armstrongs and the Greenwoods – had to be bought off, apparently because they were on the land that was purchased for the colony. However, he knew the families. The Armstrongs had been former neighbors and Mrs. Greenwood had been a domestic helper for his mother.

Additional resources used in this account:

The Geography of Southwestern Wisconsin, by W.O. Blanchard, 1924.
Indian Nations of Wisconsin, by Patty Loew, 2001.
Indian Mounds of Wisconsin, by Robert A. Birmingham and Leslie E. Eisenberg, 2000.
Tract books of Mineral Point Land Office.