

# Grand Portage Ojibway Indians Give British Medals to Historical Society

Carolyn Gilman

IN AUGUST, 1979, the Minnesota Historical Society received an unusual gift from a prominent Ojibway family from Grand Portage. It consisted of two British peace medals and two Union Jack flags that had been passed down from generation to generation for nearly 200 years in one of the leading families of the Grand Portage band of northeastern Minnesota. When John Flatte, the last hereditary chief of this long line, died in April, 1979, he expressed a wish that these heirlooms should go to the Minnesota Historical Society. Accordingly, his sisters, Lucille Cooke and Louise Sikorski, and his widow, Helen Flatte, made the gift on August 7 in a ceremony at the State Capitol. About a month later Mrs. Flatte also died, so this article is in a sense a memorial to her foresight and generosity.

The two British peace medals given to the society are both made of silver and are similar in appearance, each being about three inches in diameter. The older medal is undated but can be traced to the 1770s or 1780s. It may be the one struck in 1778 and used until about the time of the War of 1812 to honor Indian chiefs for meritorious service. On the obverse it carries a portrait of young King George III, and on the reverse is the royal coat of arms. The second medal, dated 1814, was created to be given to allies of King George in the War of 1812. The thirty years or so between the two medals saw the aging of the king, strikingly portrayed in the two busts. The coat of arms on the back also changed, reflecting King George's abandonment of his claim to the throne of France.<sup>1</sup>

The two flags are both the "red ensign" design — that is, the Union Jack appears in the upper left-hand corner

on a red field. This was the flag meant to be flown on all merchant ships. The flags themselves offer a clue to their dating. The first one, which is in a very fragile condition, is a Union Jack of the style used from 1707 to 1801. It consists of the red cross of St. George (symbolizing England) superimposed upon the diagonal white cross of St. Andrew (symbolizing Scotland). In the second flag the red cross of St. Patrick (symbolizing Ireland) has been added to the diagonal white stripes. This indicates that the first flag was made before 1801 and the second after 1801. It is reasonable to assume that the flags went with the two medals.<sup>2</sup>

In Indian diplomacy, medals and flags were used to cement alliances with powerful chiefs. The custom dated back to the days of French power over North America; Spain, Britain, and the United States, and later special interest groups such as fur companies perpetuated the custom. The importance of medals to American Indian diplomacy was summarized in 1829 by head of the Indian Office, Thomas L. McKenney: "without medals, any plan of operations among the Indians, be it what it may, is essentially enfeebled." Fifteen years earlier a British officer wrote: "Formerly a chief would have parted with his life rather than his medal." In times of shifting power and shifting loyalties, medals and flags, as symbols of allegiance to a European power, became the focus of intense bargaining. Americans wishing to secure the friendship of a tribe would attempt to gather in all the medals of former powers — Spanish, French, and British — and replace them with the medals of American presidents. Such exchanges symbolized the formal shift of national allegiance within the Indian tribes. It is one reason why it is extremely rare to find a British medal still in the possession of the Indian tribe it was given to.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we know very little about the particular medals and flags given to the Minnesota Historical Society. We can trace them confidently only as far back

*This is a slightly expanded and edited version of a talk Carolyn Gilman gave at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in the house chambers of the Minnesota State Capitol on October 26, 1979, some two and one-half months after the Grand Portage Ojibway presented their British peace medals and flags to the Minnesota Historical Society. Ms. Gilman, an exhibits researcher in the MHS education division, is on leave as an intern at Colonial Williamsburg.*  
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<sup>1</sup> Melvill A. Jamieson, *Medals Awarded to North American Indian Chiefs 1714–1922*, 17–25, 27, 31–34 (Reprint ed., London, 1961); Frederick W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, 1:833 (Washington, D.C., 1907).

<sup>2</sup> Barlow Cumberland, *The Story of the Union Jack*, plate 1, 112–117, 129 (Toronto, 1897).



**BACK IN 1905**, ethnologist Frances Densmore made this photograph of Louis May-mush-kowash, principal chief of the Grand Portage band, holding three medals and wearing two arm bands on the front porch of his cabin. The third medal, in addition to the two British peace medals, was an 1853 Franklin Pierce medal that was later sold.

as the 1890s. We do not know to whom they were given, nor under what circumstances. We are not even sure they were given to a chief who lived at Grand Portage. Since the Flattes emphasized that it was an ancestor of theirs who had received the tokens, we can assume it was an Ojibway chief. Despite this seeming scarcity of

information, however, we can reconstruct much of the history surrounding the medals and flags, for they are symbolic of the Ojibway role in the two great wars between Britain and America — the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

IN THE BICENTENNIAL year, staff members at the Historical Society were hard pressed to think of connections between Minnesota history and the Revolutionary War. There were a few subjects for articles in the Summer, 1975, issue of *Minnesota History*: a small British expedition to Grand Portage, the northern boundary settlement of 1783, and a white Revolutionary War soldier buried in Minnesota. Unfortunately, we had hit upon one of those blind spots that historians are occasionally horrified to realize they have. There is not just one Revolutionary War soldier buried in Minnesota: there are hundreds. Our state has a distinguished record of military involvement in the Revolutionary War, although most inhabitants of the area fought on the British rather than the American side. The only reason we did not happen to think of these soldiers is that they were of the wrong race.

The most important figure in Minnesota Revolutionary War history was the British general named Wabasha. This man represented a blending of the two main cultural elements of the area's population at that time, for he was Ojibway on his mother's side and Dakota on his father's. British Lieutenant-Governor Patrick Sinclair of Michilimackinac regarded him as "a man of uncommon abilities" who was "Jealously attached to His Majesty's Interest." A British lieutenant wrote that Wabasha's warriors were "nothing inferior to regular Troops in regard to Discipline in their own way." In 1780, when George Rogers Clark was wreaking havoc to the British cause on the frontier, Wabasha led an expedition against the Spanish and Americans near St. Louis. In subsequent years he steadfastly resisted the blandishments of the Spanish, who tried to win him over to their cause, and the Upper Mississippi area he controlled remained a stronghold of British feeling.<sup>4</sup>

The Ojibway of the Great Lakes were not inactive either. They were among several tribes who responded to the call for troops to fight against the Americans in 1776. They gathered at Fort Michilimackinac, in present Michigan, in the spring of that year, and set out on the auspicious day of July 4, 1776, under a mixed-blood leader named Charles de Langlade of Green Bay. Their purpose in going east was to help relieve the city of Quebec, which was reported to be besieged by the Americans. They arrived too late to join the fighting, but were thanked and rewarded with "suitable presents" by the British governor of Canada, Guy Carleton, stationed at Quebec.<sup>5</sup>

After this expedition the Ojibway seem to have

<sup>3</sup> Francis P. Prucha, *Indian Peace Medals in American History*, xiii (Madison, 1971); *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 13:114 (Madison, 1895).

<sup>4</sup> William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 219 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 5 — St. Paul, 1885); *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 11:147 (Madison, 1888); *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 10:391 (Lansing, 1888); Louise P. Kellogg, *The British Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, 164–169, 175, 178 (Madison, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> Kellogg, *British Régime*, 135–136.

gathered at Mackinac practically every spring until 1782. We do not know exactly where they fought all of these years. In 1777 Ojibway warriors were present at a council in Detroit with Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton. In 1778 the commander at Fort Michilimackinac sent east a party of 550 Indian recruits. In 1779 the Ojibway were among several tribes who attended a council in Quebec with General Frederick Haldimand. And in 1778 the Grand Portage Ojibway were host to a contingent of soldiers from the King's Eighth Regiment under Lieutenant Thomas Bennett. These soldiers were sent to the great trading emporium on Lake Superior to keep peace among the traders and to see that nothing interfered with the valuable commerce passing through that point.<sup>6</sup>

All the Ojibway activity in the war is rather surprising when one considers that they were also absorbed in a war on the home front during these years. The conflict between the Dakota and Ojibway had begun with a battle at Mille Lacs Lake in the 1740s, continued throughout the 1770s, and climaxed in about 1780 with a battle on the St. Croix, where the Ojibway led by Waub-o-jeeg, or White Fisher (whose family came originally from Grand Portage), defeated the combined forces of the Fox and Dakota Indians. Despite this drain on the energies and manpower of the Ojibway, they recognized the importance to them of the conflict between Britain and the colonies. They joined in on the side most advantageous to their interests.<sup>7</sup>

The Ojibway commitment to the British cause was a choice of the lesser of two evils. One of Great Britain's primary investments in the New World was the fur trade. For the good of that trade they needed the friendship of the native work force as well as wilderness for the fur-bearing animals to breed in. The Americans wanted land to develop, settle, and transform into an agricultural paradise. King George III had enraged the colonists and pleased the fur traders by setting a western limit on settlement in 1763. From the Indian point of view, this proclamation was a victory, for it reinforced European recognition of Indian title to the land. It seemed that Britain, if only for reasons of profit, would be more inclined to recognize the rights of Indian nations than the Americans.

Ojibway involvement in the Revolutionary War ended in 1782. In that year a terrible epidemic of smallpox invaded their land in a far more deadly way than any occupying army. The beginning of the smallpox epidemic had its roots in a ceremony where medals and flags were exchanged. According to tribal tradition, a party of Ojibway went to Mackinac in 1782 to reimburse the commander there for the losses of a British trader who had been robbed on the Upper Mississippi. The commander, Patrick Sinclair, assured the Ojibway of his good will and gave their leader a medal, flag, coat, and

bale of goods, requesting that the chief not unfurl the flag or distribute the goods until he arrived back in his own village. The leader complied until the party had reached Fond du Lac near present Duluth, where he called his followers into a council, unfurled the flag, put on the medal, and distributed the goods. According to William Warren, historian of the Ojibway, "Shortly after, he was taken suddenly sick, and retiring to the woods, he expired by himself, as the discovery of his remains afterwards indicated. All of those who had received a portion of the goods also fell sick, one after another, and died. The sickness became general, and spreading to different villages, its fearful ravages took off a large number of the tribe." The disease raged for two years and traveled as far as the plains of Saskatchewan before it finally died out. Naturally, there was great suspicion that the gifts of the British had been intentionally impregnated with smallpox — a practice of germ warfare the British had used with efficient results in the Ohio Valley. But there is no evidence of genocide in this case. The British were striving desperately to make alliances and create support among the Indians of the Great Lakes, and a campaign to eradicate them by smallpox would have been at cross-purposes to this policy.<sup>8</sup>

IN THE WAR of 1812, the reasons for Ojibway alliance with Britain were similar to those in the previous war, but Ojibway involvement was much heavier. In the West, the War of 1812 started as a conflict between North America's native inhabitants and the invading Americans, with the British intervening later on as allies of the Indians. The religious and military revival sparked by the Shawnee leader Tecumseh and his brother Tenkwatawa, or the Prophet, was the immediate cause of the war. In early summer of 1808 messengers came to the bands of western Ojibway, bringing news of the Prophet and his visions of the future. They urged the Ojibway to cleanse themselves of the evil ways of the white men and turn their backs on tricksters who had used the sacred Midéwiwin society to gain power.

The response among the Ojibway was immediate. On Chequamegon Bay the shores of Lake Superior were said to have been littered with blankets, mirrors, and other trade goods, as well as with medicine bags cast into

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<sup>6</sup>*Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 10:277; *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 11:111–112, 181; Nancy L. Woolworth, "Grand Portage in the Revolutionary War," in *Minnesota History*, 44:199–208 (Summer, 1975). The British sources seldom specify whether the Ojibway fighting with them were from Lake Superior or farther east.

<sup>7</sup>*The Land of the Ojibwe*, 13, 14 (*The Ojibwe: A History Resource Unit*, secondary booklet — St. Paul, 1973); Warren, *History of the Ojibway*, 52.

<sup>8</sup>Warren, *History of the Ojibway*, 259–260; Lawrence S. Mayo, *Jeffery Amherst: A Biography*, 235 (New York, 1916).





*HERE ARE the two British silver peace medals, each about three inches in diameter, that the Flatte family presented to the Minnesota Historical Society. King George III aged considerably in the thirty years or so between the earlier medal (above, left) and the other, dated 1814. On the reverse sides (below) the coat of arms changed, too. The earlier medal is at left.*





the water by Ojibway obeying the Prophet's commands. After a few seasons, word reached Lake Superior that war had broken out between the followers of Tecumseh and the Americans. Tecumseh was urging unity among Indian tribes to avenge the dead of the Battle of Tippecanoe in Indiana and drive the Americans back east. In 1812 a party of 150 Ojibway set out from Lake Superior to Detroit to aid Tecumseh. Many were discouraged along the way by negative reports of Tecumseh's prowess and the Prophet's powers. But Ojibway soldiers fought at Mackinac and elsewhere along the Great Lakes. Some were present at the battle of the Thames River in Ontario when Tecumseh was slain.<sup>9</sup>

The year 1814, which is inscribed on the second of the peace medals given to the Minnesota Historical Society, was a year of defeat for the Ojibway. It was not military defeat, for the Indians and their British allies had generally been successful in capturing the pivotal posts of the West. It was a diplomatic defeat. The concept of a neutral Indian state west of the Appalachians and south of the Great Lakes had been supported by the British for twenty years. British commanders had repeatedly assured their Indian allies that they fought for this principle and would never give it up. At the treaty table in Ghent, Belgium, they did, however, give it up and along with it all their claim to the land south of the Great Lakes. The British commanders in the West were outraged. One wrote in indignation, "Our negociators, as usual, have been egregiously duped." The Indians were even more outraged at the cavalier surrender of their lands to the enemy. The British commander at



**MIKE FLATTE** was chief in the 1920s when this photograph was taken of him wearing the medals and holding a faded Union Jack. At left he is shown (left, foreground) with other Grand Portage Indians especially dressed for the occasion.

Mackinac wrote, "A breach of faith, is with them an utter abomination, & never forgotten. . . . The surrender of *this* most important Island . . . will be *to them*, such conclusive proofs of our disgrace, & absolute submission to the American Government, that it would be most grossly deceiving ours, to hold forth the expectation of being joined by a single Indian, in the event of another war. Their neutrality is *then the utmost*, perhaps that we can hope for."<sup>10</sup>

That neutrality was precisely what the medals struck in 1814 were used to achieve. The British garrison at Mackinac, after surrendering to the Americans, moved to Drummond Island near the outlet of Lake Superior, where they strove to repair relations with the northern tribes. A great council was held there in June, 1816, and 500 to 600 Dakota, Winnebago, Menominee, Ottawa, and Ojibway gathered to hear the speeches of the British. The Lake Superior Ojibway in particular were courted, as the commander wrote, "In order that

<sup>9</sup>*Land of the Ojibwe*, 19, 20.

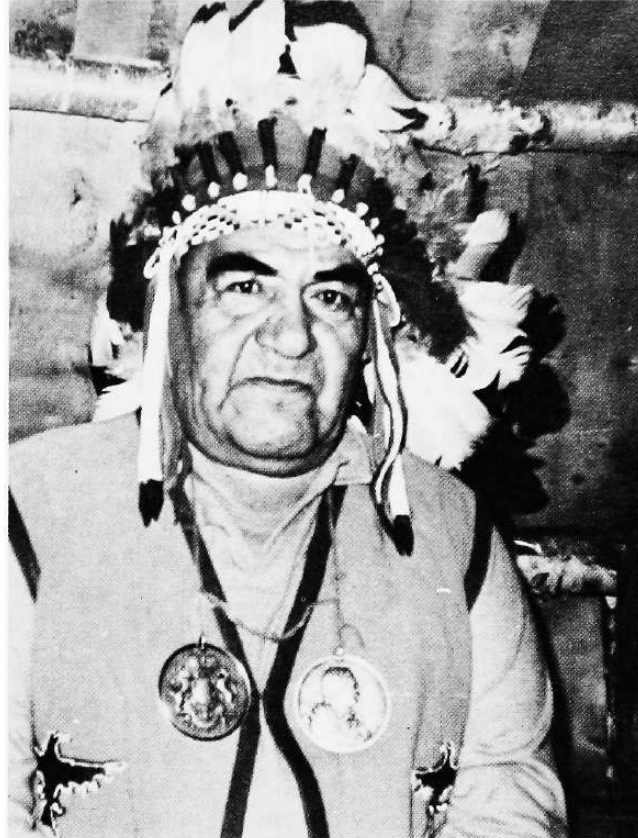
<sup>10</sup>Kellogg, *British Régime*, 327; *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 16:104 (Lansing, 1890).

they . . . may hereafter supply the place of those that I foresee we shall lose on the Mississippi.” But the days of British influence in the Northwest were limited. By the 1820s, expeditions sent out by the American government were plying Lake Superior, negotiating with the Ojibway, establishing agencies, and gathering up the old medals of allegiance.<sup>11</sup>

But the Grand Portage band did not give up its medals. British traders had continued to operate at Grand Portage until 1805, and then they moved forty miles north to Fort William. Still, they maintained their hold on the emotions and loyalties of the Grand Portage Ojibway. The Grand Portage band was closely related to the Indian people living on Thunder Bay and frequently visited and intermarried with them. As late as 1843, three Ojibway chiefs from Grand Portage told American officials that they considered themselves to be British subjects. Their loyalties lay with their kindred at Thunder Bay and with the Hudson’s Bay Company traders over the border.<sup>12</sup>

The existence of British medals and flags at Grand Portage has been known to the outside world since 1905. In that year ethnologist Frances Densmore, who worked extensively among the Grand Portage band, photographed Louis May-mush-kowash, the principal chief of the band, holding three medals and wearing two silver arm bands. In her diary, Densmore sketched and described two of the medals — the 1814 British one and an 1853 Franklin Pierce medal which was sold some years after. Later photographs reveal that two epaulettes and a silver half-moon gorget were also part of the set. Soon after Densmore left Grand Portage, the old chief died. He passed on the leadership of the band and the British tokens to his son, Joe Louis May-mush-kowash.<sup>13</sup>

It was Frances Densmore who first drew the Minnesota Historical Society’s attention to the medals in 1930. In that year she was again collecting Indian artifacts at Grand Portage, this time under the sponsorship



JOHN FLATTE, Mike’s son, wore the two remaining medals in 1970 for this picture. The last hereditary chief in the Grand Portage line, he died in April, 1979. According to his wishes, the medals were presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by his sisters and widow.

of the society’s museum. By then the medals and flags had passed on to Mike Flatte, husband of Joe Louis May-mush-kowash’s daughter Susan. On July 14, 1930, Densmore wrote to Willoughby Babcock, then curator of the Historical Society’s museum: “I have talked with Mike Flatt [*sic*] and seen his medals. I am greatly impressed with the importance of his material. . . . He quite agreed with me that they ought to go to the State Historical Society. . . . We impressed upon him the danger of fire when he is away from his house. . . . He said he would think it over, and that he may go and call on you next week.” Babcock wrote back on a hopeful note: “I shall be glad to see Mr. Flatt if he calls on me. The medals are historically too valuable to be kept in his home, and I hope that he will decide to place them with us.” Despite Densmore’s efforts, however, the medals did not come into the Minnesota Historical Society’s museum. In 1944, when a Thomas Jefferson medal was given to the society, Grace Lee Nute noted in *Minnesota History*, “Other medals, gorgets, and similar pieces are known to be in private hands in the state or nearby. It is to be hoped that their owners will be stimulated by the present donor’s generosity to part with their own

<sup>11</sup>*Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 16:275, 479.

<sup>12</sup>This paragraph and the information on Grand Portage genealogy below are based on research done by Alan Woolworth, especially a memorandum in his possession entitled “The Ojibwe Indians and Chiefs of Grand Portage, ca. 1824–1979.” The author wishes to thank Woolworth for his assistance. The name of Louis May-mush-kowash can be found in 51 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 247, p. 59 (serial 2747).

<sup>13</sup>Densmore’s photograph and other later ones can be found in the audio-visual library at the Minnesota Historical Society. For the diary passage, which Densmore later misinterpreted as referring to two drums, see Charles Hofmann, ed., *Frances Densmore and American Indian Music*, 26 (*Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation*, vol. 23 — New York, 1968).



cherished objects in the interest of the public." The existence of the Grand Portage medals was still on historians' minds.<sup>14</sup>

Mike Flatte continued to hold the artifacts until his death in August, 1953. Then he passed them on to John Flatte, his son, with whom they remained until he in turn died in April, 1979. It was John Flatte's wife and

THE BLACK-AND-WHITE photographs used in this article are all from the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual library. MHS Staff Photographer Elizabeth Hall made the color photos on p. 29.

sisters who donated the medals and flags to the Historical Society. We believe that this move will not be a loss to the Grand Portage band, but on the contrary will help make historians realize that those Ojibway and their ancestors played a crucial role in the mainstream of North American history.

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<sup>14</sup> Densmore to Babcock, July 13 and 18, 1930, Babcock to Densmore, July 15, 1930, all in General Correspondence File, 1930, MHS Archives, in the Minnesota Historical Society division of archives and manuscripts; Grace Lee Nute, "Indian Medals and Certificates," in *Minnesota History*, 25:270 (September, 1944).

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Iron Frontier: The Discovery and Early Development of Minnesota's Three Ranges.* By David A. Walker.

(St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979. x, 315 p. Illustrations. \$16.00.)

PROFESSOR WALKER'S study of the great iron frontier of northern Minnesota at last provides us with the accurate and succinct account of the opening and early development of the Vermilion, Mesabi, and Cuyuna ranges that we have long needed. In a minimum amount of space, he has successfully told the complicated story of this development as no other historian of the iron industry has done. He has mastered the geological, financial, and legal technicalities of the story and has been able to present them lucidly so that the most uninformed lay reader will have no difficulty understanding the details and the significance of this history.

Quite properly, Walker provides a brief account of the opening of the first great midwestern iron frontier along the southern shore of Lake Superior — the Marquette, Menominee, and Gogebic ranges of Michigan and Wisconsin — as a necessary introduction to the central drama in Minnesota with which he is mainly concerned. Though it makes sense to include them in the book, the eastern ranges are not a prototype of the three great ranges that lay to the north and west of Lake Superior, for the latter were to present quite different problems, both natural and man-made, from the others.

It is one of the great ironies (no pun intended) of the history of the Minnesota iron ranges that here lay an incredible treasury of wealth which a few men of vision and greed, but with no capital, had to beg the great capitalists of the East — Charlemagne Tower, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie — to accept when they offered it up with open hands. The initial reluctance of eastern capitalists to accept this bid for a bonanza, as Walker makes clear, is not difficult to understand. The inaccessibility of these ranges, the fact that, with the Mesabi at

least, a new kind of soft, powdery hematite ore presented new problems of utilization, and the critical impact of the economic depressions of 1873 and 1893 — all provided deterrents in the first instance but great opportunities for exploitation later on. For Carnegie, in particular, these remote Minnesota ranges were to bring the final stage in achieving the verticality of steel production he sought and were to transform his company into an industrial empire.

Walker writes in his preface: "The trend in business and economic history seems to be moving away from a focus on the individual toward analysis of inanimate institutions and corporations. In many ways I regret this new direction because it tends to ignore the central fact that men and women create history." This is a sentiment which this reviewer shares. Walker could have done more than he does, however, to make more vivid and distinct the remarkable characters in his story. The characterizations are correctly drawn, but they are in rather muted pastels instead of the bold, impressionistic streaks of color that a Tower or members of the Merritt family demand.

My main criticism of the book, however, is concerned not with what Walker has given us but rather with the regret that he has not given us more. He goes into great detail, for example, in relating the complicated story of the legal battles between Rockefeller and Frederick T. Gates versus the Merritt family. No one has ever told that story better, even though Walker carefully avoids any final judgment as to who was telling the truth. But the development of the western Mesabi and the Cuyuna range gets rather short dismissal in a final brief chapter. It is particularly interesting to note that, after having stressed the point that the depression of 1893 marks the real

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