Wisconsin Biographies

Chief Oshkosh
Leader in Troubled Times
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Life</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of Change</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treaties</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Oshkosh Says “No”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What makes a leader?

Think about a person who is a leader.

Is she brave? Does he have new ideas? Does she help others?

Chief Oshkosh was a leader. He helped his people in many ways. He stood up to the United States (U.S.) when they tried to make the Menominee move. He also taught people how to take care of the forest so it would stay green and healthy. He made hard decisions when his nation was in danger.

Chief Oshkosh
(1858)
Early Life

Oshkosh was born near Nekoosa, Wisconsin in 1795. He was a member of the Bear Clan in the Menominee Nation. We do not know a lot about his early life because his tribe did not write down their history. They used oral tradition. This means they told stories out loud about their past.

From what we know about his people, we can guess that Oshkosh probably learned to hunt and fish when he was young. He may have lived in a small village and moved with his family when the seasons changed.

The Menominee used to live in either dome-shaped wigwams or rectangular, bark covered lodges. They do not live in wigwams or lodges anymore. Today, Menominee live in houses or apartments just like most Americans.

National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, BAE GN 00606 06158300
We do know that Oshkosh fought in the War of 1812 when he was a teenager. He became leader of the Bear Clan when the war ended. Oshkosh also went to trial in a U.S. court because some people thought he murdered a man. But the judge let him go because he did not have to follow U.S. laws. The Menominee had their own laws.

Did you know...?
Native Americans were not considered U.S. citizens until 1924 when the Indian Citizenship Act was passed.

Community Organization

The Menominee Nation is divided into five main clans. Each clan is expert in a different area.

**Bear Clan:** Leaders

**Eagle Clan:** Warriors

**Moose Clan:** Security

**Crane Clan:** Builders

**Wolf Clan:** Hunters and Gatherers

This mural is in the Menominee Indian High School. On it are images representing the five tribal clans.
The U.S. was growing very fast in Oshkosh’s time. Settlers began to move west. But American Indians were already living on these lands. So, the U.S. pushed the Native people further west to make room for settlers.

Four tribes living in New York were told to move so that the U.S. could have their land. They moved to Wisconsin to share the Menominee’s land. The Menominee now had less land of their own.

**Menominee Forest**

Maeqtek is the Menominee word for “tree.” Trees are very important to the Menominee way of life. In the past, the Menominee used trees to build homes and canoes, and depended on the forest to provide animals and plants for food and medicine.

The Menominee took great pride in taking only the materials they needed and clearing away dead trees and plants to help keep the forest healthy.
TREATIES

The U.S. held a meeting with all the tribes in the area in 1825 to talk about their borders. But it was hard for the U.S. to negotiate with the Menominee because they did not have a head chief. Their leader had died without leaving a male heir. Oshkosh was the leader of the Bear Clan. So the U.S. gave him a peace medal in 1827, making him the head chief of the Menominee.

The U.S. wanted the Menominee’s land. They told Oshkosh and his people to sign several treaties in the 1830s. Each time the tribe signed a new treaty, they had to cede more land. The tribe got money and goods in return for their land.

Peace medal given to Chief Oshkosh in 1927
Wisconsin became a state in 1848. At this time, the Menominee were told to sign a treaty to cede the rest of their land. The U.S. told the tribe that if they did not sign the treaty, they would take the land without paying for it. So, Oshkosh and the other leaders signed it. The Menominee were now supposed to move to Minnesota.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treaties the Menominee Signed</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Land Ceded</th>
<th>Goods Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1827</td>
<td>1 million acres</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                               | 1831 | 2.5 million acres | $20,000 saw mill  
|                               |      |             | blacksmith shop  
|                               |      |             | clothing  
|                               |      |             | food        |
|                               | 1836 | 4 million acres | $457,000  
|                               |      |             | 2,000 pounds of tobacco, 30 barrels of salt, farming equipment |
|                               | 1848 | 4.5 million acres | $350,000  
|                               |      |             | 600,000 acres of Minnesota land |
Changes Over Time

The Menominee people have lived in Wisconsin for a very long time. Their original land was over 10 million acres. Presently, the Menominee own 235,523 acres. Of that land, about 223,500 acres is forest. The Menominee live on a reservation. This is an area of land that was set aside for people to live on after the treaties were signed. The Menominee faced losing their land once again when the U.S. Congress passed a law terminating, or ending, Native American reservations. The Menominee then made their reservation a county so they could continue to live there. Menominee County still exits today.

Wisconsin Towns and Cities

Many places in Wisconsin were named by the Menominee or other Native people who first lived there. Today we still use some of these names. Others have been changed. Below is a list of some communities with their current and Menominee names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisconsin Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitowoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishicot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winneconne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chief Oshkosh and other chiefs went to Minnesota. They saw that the land there was not good. It was between two fighting tribes. The plants they needed to keep them healthy did not grow there. Oshkosh decided to tell the U.S. that his people would not move to Minnesota.

The tribal leaders went to Washington to meet with the President. He said that they could stay in Wisconsin one more year.

Then Chief Oshkosh and his people wrote their own treaty that said the Menominee would not move. They would get to keep a small part of their land and live there forever. The U.S. agreed, and signed the treaty in 1854.
Oshkosh lived the rest of his life in Wisconsin. He was married three times, and he had three sons and one daughter. Chief Oshkosh died in 1858. He was buried on the banks of the Wolf River. His body was later moved to Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Oshkosh is remembered today for teaching about sustainable forestry. He said to “take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen,” so that “the trees will last forever.” The Menominee listened to him, which is why the tribe still has healthy and green forests.

**Firewater**

During Oshkosh’s time, he and some of his people suffered from alcoholism. Oshkosh recognized the negative impact that drinking too much alcohol had on his people, including health problems, fights and broken families. “I set my face against firewater,” said Oshkosh. “Firewater is the secret poison that destroys my young men. I would rather see all my money thrown into the river than lose a single warrior by drunkenness and brawling.” Ultimately, alcohol would play a factor in Oshkosh’s death. He died from injuries he received after he became drunk and got into a fight with his sons.
Oshkosh led by making choices during hard times. He spoke out for the health and safety of his people. His leadership taught people how to stand up for what they want. Chief Oshkosh helped the Menominee stay on the land they love.

There is now a statue of Chief Oshkosh in Menominee Park in Oshkosh, Wisconsin reminding people that he was a leader. In what ways have Oshkosh’s actions impacted your life?

Where is Oshkosh’s body?

Oshkosh was buried on tribal lands near Keshena, Wisconsin. Chief Reginald Oshkosh gave permission to move his grandfather’s body to Menominee Park in Oshkosh. On May 26, 1926, a large parade was held, and Oshkosh’s body was reportedly moved and reburied. However, a newspaper reported that it was all a hoax. Some think that a mystery woman’s body was moved and reburied and that Oshkosh’s body still remains near Keshena in a secret grave. What do you think? Do some research and see what you can find!
Glossary

cede (v) ........... to give up or surrender something like land or power

citizen (n): ........ a person who is a member of a country, state or community

clan (n): ........... a group of people that share a common ancestor

goods (n): ........ materials like clothing, weapons, food, etc.

leader (n): ........ a person who guides or inspires others

negotiate (v): ...... to talk and trade with another person or group in order to reach an agreement

reservation (n): ... land set aside for a group of people to live on

sustainable
forestry (n): ........ a system for taking care of the forest so that people now and in the future can have healthy land and water

treaty (n): ........... an agreement between two or more nations; usually about peace or land
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