Chief Oshkosh
Leader in Troubled Times
# Table of Contents

Introduction 2
Early Life 3
Times of Change 5
Treaties 6
Chief Oshkosh Says “No” 9
Conclusion 10

Glossary 12
What makes a leader?

Think about the characteristics of great leaders. Some leaders are known for their bravery, some for their new ideas, and some for their ability to organize or inspire. Leaders often need to make hard decisions, and other people depend on them.

Chief Oshkosh of the Menominee was a leader. During his lifetime, his people faced hardships, such as warfare, health problems and loss of their land. Sometimes Oshkosh compromised, and sometimes he took a stand against those who were challenging his people’s way of life.
EARLY LIFE

Oshkosh was born near what is now the city of Nekoosa in central Wisconsin in 1795. He was a member of the Bear Clan. Not much is known about Oshkosh’s early life because the Menominee did not write down their history. Instead, they told stories aloud to each other. This is called oral tradition.

From what we know about Menominee history, we can guess that when Oshkosh was young, he would have learned to hunt and fish. He also might have played games like lacrosse and treated his family grandparents with respect. Oshkosh probably lived in a small village and moved with his family based on the seasons.

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.
We do know that Oshkosh fought on the British side in the War of 1812 when he was 17 years old. After the war ended, he became the Bear Clan’s leader.

Oshkosh was also once put on trial for murder. But the judge released him because he was a Menominee citizen and United States (U.S.) laws did not apply to him. 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.

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**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.
In Oshkosh’s time, the U.S. was still a new country. It was growing quickly both in population and size. So, settlers began to explore and live on lands further and further west.

When this happened, American Indians were forced from their homes. They were told to move and share land with other tribes. This happened to the Menominee. Four tribes from New York had to move west onto Menominee land territory in 1822.

**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 in 1825 with all the tribes that lived in what is now Wisconsin to discuss their borders. The Menominee were at this meeting. Their head chief had died without leaving a male heir. This meant that the Menominee did not have a head chief at the meeting, and it was hard for them to negotiate with the United States.

Oshkosh was the leader of the Bear Clan, which was the clan responsible for leadership. So the U.S. gave Oshkosh a peace medal in 1827 that made him the Menominee’s head chief and negotiator.

The Menominee did not want to give up their lands, but the U.S. was too powerful for them. They convinced Oshkosh and his people to sign several treaties in the 1830s. Each treaty forced the Menominee to cede, or give up, their territory. The Menominee got money and goods in exchange for their land.
Wisconsin became a state in 1848. That year, the chiefs were told to sign a treaty that ceded the remaining Menominee land. The U.S. said that they would take the land without paying for it if the Menominee did not agree. So, Oshkosh and the other chiefs signed the treaty. The U.S. promised to give the Menominee $350,000 and some goods, plus 600,000 acres in what is now northern Minnesota.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Land Ceded</th>
<th>Goods Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<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><strong>Current Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitowoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishicot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winneconne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oshkosh and his fellow chiefs went to Minnesota to visit the new land where they were supposed to move. They found that the territory was located between two battling tribes. It also did not have all the plants the Menominee people needed to survive. Oshkosh decided it was time to say no to the U.S.

Chief Oshkosh went with other leaders to Washington, D.C. He told President Fillmore that his people could not live on the Minnesota land. The President decided to let the Menominee stay in Wisconsin for one more year. This time Oshkosh and his people decided to write a treaty. It said that the Menominee would not move. Instead, they would keep 276,480 acres of their land in Wisconsin. This was only a small part of their land, but only in their own forests could they get everything they needed to survive.

The U.S. agreed with Oshkosh and signed the Wolf River Treaty in 1854.
Conclusion

Chief Oshkosh lived the rest of his life on the land he helped his people keep. He was married three times during his life. Oshkosh had three sons and one daughter. He died in 1858 and was buried on the banks of the Wolf River. His body was reburied in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1926.

Oshkosh is remembered for teaching about **sustainable forestry**. He said to “take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen.” Doing this has helped the Menominee keep their forests green and healthy. Today people from around the world study Menominee forestry methods.

**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 faced hard decisions as he led his people through difficult times. He spoke out for the health of his people and the conservation of their forest. Sometimes he chose to fight, and other times he chose to compromise. Chief Oshkosh is remembered today for his role in the Menominee’s struggle to stay in their homeland forever.

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