Chief Oshkosh
Leader in Troubled Times
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What makes a leader?

Think about the qualities that great leaders possess. 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.

For example, Clara Barton risked her life to bring supplies to soldiers on the battlefield during the Civil War and started the American Red Cross. Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired people to help end racism in the United States. Chico Mendes helped organize protests to stop deforestation in the Amazon rainforest.

Chief Oshkosh of the Menominee was also 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 the Menominee way of life.
Early Life

In 1795, a boy named Oshkosh was born near what is now the city of Nekoosa in central Wisconsin. He was a member of the Bear Clan in the Menominee tribe. His grandfather was a sachem, or peace chief, of the Menominee. Not much is known about Oshkosh’s early life, as the Menominee used oral tradition. This means that they told stories aloud to each other about their history and lives rather than writing them down.

From what we know about the traditional Menominee way of life, we can guess that when Oshkosh was young, he lived in a rectangular house made of bark in the summer and a dome-shaped wigwam covered with mats in the winter. He would have moved around with his family based on the seasons, and learned to hunt and fish when he was quite young. He might have played lacrosse with his friends and his cousins. He probably joked around with his aunts and uncles and treated his grandparents with respect.

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
Oshkosh was also a warrior. He fought on the British side in the War of 1812 when he was 17 years old. After the war, he became the leader of the Bear Clan.

At one point in his life, Oshkosh and two other Menominee men were accused of attacking and killing a man from the Ottawa tribe. Oshkosh supposedly stabbed the Ottawan after he killed a Menominee. Oshkosh’s actions were acceptable according to Menominee laws. At their trial, the judge released the men because United States’ (U.S.) laws did not apply to them since they were Menominee citizens.

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.
In Oshkosh’s time, the U.S. was still a new country. It was growing rapidly both in population and size. Beginning around 1787, the U.S. began to explore and settle on lands further and further west. This became known as Westward Expansion.

As Westward Expansion continued, American Indians were forced from their homes onto other tribes’ land in the west, to make room for U.S. settlers. The Menominee felt pressure from the United States to share some of their territory with other tribes. In 1822, they agreed to share their land with four tribes from New York: the Oneida, Stockbridge, Munsee, and Brotherton. In return, the New York tribes agreed to give the Menominee five thousand dollars in goods.

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.
The Menominee’s land was now shrinking. In 1825, the U.S. held a meeting with all tribes that lived in what is now present-day Wisconsin to set their borders. The Menominee’s head chief had died without leaving a male heir. Therefore, the tribe did not have a head chief to lead their negotiations with the U.S.

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 designated him as the head chief and negotiator for the Menominee.

Chief Oshkosh and other Menominee leaders did not want to give up their lands, but they could not stand up to the more powerful United States. Oshkosh tried to cooperate with them instead. He sent warriors to help the U.S. fight battles, and he himself fought in the Black Hawk War for the U.S. to demonstrate his support.

This was not enough for the U.S. government. They demanded more Menominee territory. The U.S. convinced Oshkosh and the other leaders to sign several treaties. Each treaty forced the Menominee to cede, or give up, their land in return for money and goods like food, tobacco or tools. The Menominee signed treaties ceding millions of acres of land during the 1830s.
Then in 1848, the year Wisconsin became a state, the Menominee chiefs were told to sign a treaty that ceded the rest of their territory. The U.S. threatened to take the land without paying for it if the Menominee did not agree. Oshkosh and the other chiefs reluctantly signed the treaty. In exchange the Menominee were promised $350,000 plus 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>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>2.5 million acres</td>
<td>$20,000 saw mill blacksmith shop clothing food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>4 million acres</td>
<td>$457,000 2,000 pounds of tobacco, 30 barrels of salt, farming equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>4.5 million acres</td>
<td>$350,000 600,000 acres of Minnesota land</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**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>
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<tr>
<td>Winneconne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chief Oshkosh Says “No”

Oshkosh and his fellow chiefs traveled to Minnesota to visit the land they were promised. This territory was located between two battling tribes, and it did not have all the medicinal plants the Menominee needed for survival. Chief Oshkosh decided it was time to take a stand against the U.S.

Oshkosh returned home and told his people about the problems with the new land. He then traveled with others to Washington, D.C. to meet with the President. He told President Fillmore that the Minnesota territory was unsuitable. The President agreed to let the Menominee stay on their land for one more year. This time, the Menominee decided to write their own treaty. They would not take the 600,000 acres in Minnesota; instead, they proposed to keep 276,480 acres of their original territory.

In 1854, the Menominee and the United States government signed the Wolf River Treaty. This gave the Menominee a permanent home along the Oconto and Wolf Rivers.

The Menominee were told to move almost 400 miles to land along the Crow Wing River in Minnesota.
During his life, Chief Oshkosh was married three times and he had four children—three sons and one daughter. He died in 1858 on the tribal lands that he helped his people retain. He was buried on the banks of the Wolf River. But in 1926, his body was dug up and reburied in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, a city that is named after him.

One of Oshkosh’s greatest accomplishments was establishing sustainable forestry practices that the tribe still utilizes today. Chief Oshkosh said to “take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen. When you reach the end of the reservation, turn and cut from the setting sun to the rising sun, and the trees will last forever.” These practices help keep the Menominee forests green and healthy, and they serve as a model for others. People from around the world now use the Menominee system of sustainable forestry.

**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 difficult choices as he led his people through trying times. He spoke out for the health of his people and the conservation of their forest. Sometimes he chose to fight, and sometimes he chose to compromise. He is remembered today as the leader who helped the Menominee remain in their homeland in Wisconsin.

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