

Chief Big Foot: A Proud Heritage, Legacy, and Region

Nestled in south-central Walworth County, running along the pristine waters of Geneva Lake, lies the present-day villages of Williams Bay and Fontana, Wisconsin, once home to a Potawatomi tribe under the leadership of Chief Maunk-suck or Big Foot. This area is rich in century old Native American roots and heritage.

The Potawatomi tribe was part of the Nishinabe triad or "The first man lowered to Earth by the Great Spirit." Comprised of the Ojibwe, or Chippewa, the Ottawa, and the Potawatomi, each played a vital role in the Nishinabe nation for they were known as the nation of the Three Fires.

The Ojibwe, "Keepers of the Faith," were responsible for the sacred scrolls and the Waterdrum of the Midewiwin of Grand Medicine Lodge. The Ottawa, "Trader People," were food gatherers and hunters. The Potawatomi were "Keepers of the Sacred Fire," or Manido ish-ko-day. It was their responsibility to keep the coals burning even when in migration. They believed, "The flames of the Sacred Fire should never be allowed to die."



How Chief Big Foot's Village may have looked

During the late 1820s and early 1830s, the westward expansion began moving into the area now known as Wisconsin. A Thriving Potawatomi village, under the leadership of Chief Big Foot was quickly discovered by Mrs. Juliette Kinzie and her husband, John. They recorded in 1831:

"We descended a long, sloping knoll, and by a sudden turn, came in full view of a beautiful sheet of water denominated Gros-pied by the French, Maunk-suck by the natives, and by ourselves, Big-foot from the chief whose village overlooked its waters."

Mrs. Kinzie also described Chief Big Foot as: "The chief was a large, raw-boned, ugly Indian with a countenance bloated by intemperance, with a sinister, unpleasant expression. He had a gray-colored handkerchief upon his head, and was otherwise in his best, in compliment to the strangers."

Garbed in the traditional brightly colored turban and buckskin clothing, Chief Big Foot and his band of 500 strong, respected and loved the area but due to the 1833 Chicago Treaty, they were compelled to migrate to southwestern Iowa in 1836. Here, they settled on the Nishnabotna River. A decade later, the band was again transplanted to Kansas. Although his death was not recorded, it is believed he was buried in a Catholic cemetery.

Although not a powerful influence in history, his name is recorded on three treaties. The Treaty of Green Bay, August 25, 1828, set the boundaries between the Indians and lead mines of southwestern Wisconsin. Chief Big Foot signed this treaty as Maun-gee-zik, or big foot. The Treaty of Prairie



"The Last Glance" by Jay Brost

du Chine, July 29, 1829, which involved huge land cessions, records his signature as Maw-geh-set. Finally, the Chicago Treaty of September, 26, 1833, which ceded all Potawatomi lands east of the Mississippi River, Chief Big Foot becomes Mang-e-sett.

No matter the name, Chief Big Foot loved and revered the Geneva Lake area. Legend has it he received the name Big Foot from the huge show shoe tracks he left in the snow while in pursuit of a deer.

Chief Maunk-sauk, or Chief Big Foot, is not found in many history books nor did he play a major role in American history. But, his legacy, demeanor, love for nature, character and integrity remain firmly imbedded in the mystique of the area. Although physically gone, the spirit of Chief Big Foot remains.

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