

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

Nestled in south-central Walworth County, running along the pristine waters of Geneva Lake, lays the present-day village of 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 Ojibwa, 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 Ojibwa, “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 gathers and hunters. The Potawatomi were “Keepers of the Sacred Fire,” or Manidoish-koday. 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.”

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 du Chien, July 29, 1829, which involved huge land successions, 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.

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 embedded in the mystique of the area. Although physically gone, the spirit of Chief Big Foot remains.

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