



Chief Okemos

Chief Okemos was born near Knaggs Station, the year of which ranged from 1739-1775. His English name comes from “Okemans”, which means “Little Chief.”, for he only stood 5’ tall. In later years, he always claimed to be 110 years old. He was a powerful ally of Tecumseh, and, depending on which account you read, a cousin or nephew of Pontiac. He was also a familiar figure on the streets of Lansing.

Okemos was a man of great courage and stamina and because of this, he was made Chief. He survived a rifle shot in the side, a saber cut in the head, and a slash that cut his shoulder blade into two pieces. Women of his tribe nursed him back to health for months. The battles he fought in spanned more than 22 years.

On November 4, 1791, Okemos led his warriors to defeat General Arthur St. Clair on the Miami River in northern Ohio, near the shores of Lake Erie. This greatly concerned President George Washington..

August 20, 1794 – Major General “Mad” Anthony Wayne defeated Okemos and his men at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, or Battle of Maumee River in northern Ohio.

About 1800, Okemos and the Ottawas, along with the Pottawatomie, defeated the Shawnees near Three Rivers, Michigan. Later that year, Okemos’ tribe helped repulse the Chippewas, who were trying to invade Michigan from Wisconsin and the northwest.

The Battle of Tippecanoe, in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, took place November 7, 1811. A brother of Tecumseh called “The Prophet” led the Native Americans to defeat by Major General William Henry Harrison. The battle took place on the Wabash River north of Lafayette, Indiana. Okemos and his men escaped. He joined the British forces and fought in the war of 1812 with a colonel’s commission.

The Battle of Sandusky was fought in January, 1813. It was fought on the Seneca Plains in northeast Ohio. The Native Americans waited near a road cut for passage of the American Army and supply wagons. American troops approached and the Native Americans attacked. More American troops appeared and the Native Americans were defeated. Three days later, Native American women found three survivors, which included Okemos. They nursed the survivors for months. Okemos had wounds on his forehead and a gash on his back that never healed. For this, the Native Americans surmised that he must have been favored by the Great Spirit and named him Chief out of respect. Later that same year came the siege of Ft. Mies in northern Ohio. Two biographers, Albert Cowles and Rufus Hosmer, recount putting three fingers in a hole in Okemos skull. The injury was sustained at Fort Mies.

The Battle of the Thames was Okemos' last battle. It took place October 5, 1813. Major General W. H. Harrison defeated General Proctor and the Native American allies. Chief Tecumseh was killed, Chief Okemos injured. The battle took place in Ontario, Canada, on the Thames River, 30 miles north of Chatham.

Okemos presented himself to Colonel Godfrey at Fort Wayne, Detroit, in the spring of 1814 and said simply that he would fight no more. Through Lewis Cass, governor of the Michigan Territory, a peace pact was affected. It was never broken.

In the 1830's, smallpox and cholera wiped out most of Okemos' tribe. He was said to have had four wives and appeared at events with eight to 12 young Native Americans, all of whom he said were his children. Okemos spent the 1840's and 1850's roaming old hunting and camping grounds. He often camped near what is now the Turner-Dodge house in northern Lansing or on the Grand River near Waverly Road.

According to an article in the Portland Observer of 1873, Okemos died in December 1858. One account says that a small band of Indians came into DeWitt, drawing with them a sled upon which was Okemos' remains. They filled a pouch with tobacco, a horn with powder, and a bag with bullets. They placed the remains in a coffin, which was unusual for Native Americans, and continued their journey to the Indian village of Shimnecon.

Hall Ingalls, a local resident who was a friend of Chief Okemos and spoke the Indian language, tells a different story. He said that Okemos died at Shimnecon after several days' illness and that he was asked to bury the chief. In a direct quote from an unnamed and undated newspaper article said:

“The grave the Indians dug was larger than usual, for it had to hold the personal effects of the chief as well. It was four feet deep, seven feet long and wide. Mr. Ingalls had the Indians gather bark, a floor was laid on the bottom and the grave was also sided with bark.

It was so close to the hut where the remains were lying that but a few steps were required. The body was lowered and then covered with blankets. Blankets were placed under the head so that the August sun fell upon the face. At the Chief's right side were his two guns. At his left his tomahawks, scalping knives and other personal effects were placed and over the whole went another blanket as a shroud. Bark was then laid over the whole and the grave was filled with earth."

Three years later, vandals were caught digging valuables they thought were buried with the Chief. Hall Ingalls and his brother placed a number of stones in the hole which had been dug. The Daughters of the American Revolution placed a marker at the site. Mr. Ingalls was able to vouch for the fact that Okemos was indeed buried there.

In 1859, the Michigan Legislature changed the name of the village of Hamilton to Okemos in the Chief's honor, but Danby Township has the honor of being his eternal resting place.

Sources: The Sebewa Recollector, June 1994, Volume 29, Number 6; "Danby Township – Grand River Heritage" from the Grand River Heritage Water Trails Assn.; The Portland, Michigan Centennial Book.