

# Chief Weesaw: The tribe's torch bearer

Chief Weesaw married the daughter of Topenebee. He had two other wives but the princess was his favorite.

She was given the place of honor and walked next behind him, the other wives following her.

The name Weesaw signifies "He, the Torch Bearer." Jimmerson refers to the "Pottawatomie brave" as follows:

"One warm winter day, about the last of January (1835), I stood at Beeson's corner, in the Village of Niles, looking down the street running parallel with the river, and saw a large crowd of men and boys coming toward me.

"The central object was an Indian of more than ordinary consequence, apparently 50 or 55 years of age, tall and straight as an arrow, with a cast of countenance as grave and dignified as almost to amount to solemnity.

"He seemed the sagacious lawmaker more than the swift-footed warrior. He wore a shirt of blue cotton stuff, with leggings and moccasins ornamented with many colored porcupine quills.

"On the outer edge of each legging was arrayed a row of little bells, from the size of an ounce ball to that of a grapeshot, the largest being placed at the thigh, the remainder decreasing in size as they neared the ankle.

"A snow white blanket, with ornamented borders hung loosely over his shoulders, a large silver broach, nearly the size of a tea saucer, fastened his shirt at the throat; around his wrists and also his arms, above the elbows, were elaborately worked silver bands; from his ears hung large silver drops, or ear rings.

"His head dress consisted of a white band of otter skin dressed with the fur on; between it and the forehead was thrust a bunch of eagle's feathers, which, with the large silver crescent that assisted in confining them to their place, added greatly to his stately and dignified bearing.

"This was Weesaw, chief of the Pottawatomies.

"As he walked along with his crowd of admirers to the village inn, ever and anon answering their

inquiries in brief gutturals, with a dignity that bespoke one used to command, he seemed every inch a man, one in whose breast dwelt noble purposes — generous impulses.

"But sad was the fate of this untutored red son of the forest. A short time after I saw him in the streets of Niles, he was shot by one of his own band while trying to pacify two of the quarrelsome drunken members."

He was a lover of strong drink. Other writers state he was killed by his own son in a drunken brawl.

The winter camp of the Weesaw band of one hundred was in Newton Woods, Section 29, Volinia Township, Cass County, Michigan until 1825.

The summer camp was in Little Prairie Ronde in the same township, mostly in section 2, and was still being used in 1825.

This band made sugar in the maple woods four miles west of the summer camp.

About 1830, Weesaw moved his village to the south side of the St. Joseph River on or near the corner

of Sections 15, 16, 21 and 22, Niles Township, and about two miles downstream, or north, from Niles.

By the Treaty of Tippecanoe River of Oct. 27, 1832, which he signed, Weesaw's band was ceded five sections of land, Topenebee, one section, Pokagon, one section, and Pokagon's wife, one section.

It is doubtful if the Weesaws ever obtained title to the three sections of land mentioned. A letter from Lucius Lyon to the Commissioner of Land Office dated Dec. 26, 1835, reads as follows:

"Understanding that an attempt has been or will be made by two or more persons to obtain from the United States a patent for the three sections of land reserved for Weesaw by the Treaty of Tippecanoe of 1832, I am requested by Mr. C. K. Green of Niles, Michigan, to file in the proper office the enclosed papers to prove beyond doubt that Weesaw, the Indian Chief residing near Niles in Michigan, is the person to whom the grant was made, and I am requested by Mr. Green to procure the patent for said land as early as

possible."

On Dec. 27, 1835, Mr. Lyon wrote Mr. Green as follows:

"Commissioner of the Land Office informed me on my arrival here that the location of Weesaw's three sections and nearly all the grants to individuals by the same treaty had been made wrong and could not stand. The objection is that they would be located on lands to which the Indians making the treaty had no special claim .... The whole matter has been referred to the Attorney General for his decision, which decision I understand will not be given for some time ..."

Darius Cook states that Weesaw died in 1836 and later wrote that Weesaw had been buried in a sitting position in the bank of Moccasin Bluff near Buchanan.

Legend has it that he was buried in the bend of the river between Niles and Buchanan. It would appear that this method of burial was not unusual. McCoy mentions having seen such a burial.

Even though the records show

that Chief Weesaw died in September of 1836, one Weesaw was alive on July 21, 1837, as he attended the council at Lake Kewaw-nay, Indiana. There is no doubt that the old chief had a son because in one of the Treaties, one Weesaw is mentioned as "Old Weesaw."

It is said that sometimes in time of drouth, Weesaw would kill a deer and cut off the head and neck deep into the shoulders and hang it on the limb of a tree and pray for rain.

If that failed, he would kill a dog and burn it and if that method did not succeed he would make the Indians build small fires up and down the bluff for a long distance. By the time all this was done it usually rained.

On his return from a trip to New York State he brought back a special seed corn which he planted and replanted every year. He was very proud of it, and one of his last requests to the members of his tribe was never to let his seed corn die out.



A Potawatomi brave at rest

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