

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

CHIEF SHAVEHEAD

Chief Shavehead was a Potawatomi leader who lived in Cass County, Michigan during the late 1700s and early 1800s. He was the only Cass County chief who refused to sign a peace treaty with the American Government. During his life time, Shavehead witnessed the Potawatomi roam one million acres of prime forested real estate that included a span of property from Detroit, rounding the tip of southern Lake Michigan to Milwaukee, plus land in Illinois and Indiana. His people lived a dignified life attuned with nature, reaped the benefits of those natural resources, and were part of a culture rich with tradition. By the time he died, Chief Shavehead bore witness to those very same people losing almost all ownership rights to their land, reduced to a poverty ridden minority, and driven from their ancestral homes. His personal story is tragic, and the historic implications so profound, that his life, during this time in history, should be viewed with deeper understanding.

The fact that Chief Shavehead's, and his people's, home base was in Section 19 of Porter Township and extreme southeastern Cass County had never been in question, as Shavehead Lake is named after him, local history books describe incidents in his life in vivid detail, and old newspapers refer to his exploits. A post office was named after him from 1768-1825 in Covert, there was a Shavehead School, and Shavehead Prairie retains his name. Shavehead Trail provided settlers with an efficient transportation route. However, his real identity has been debated for generations. At least one early pioneer believed he was the son of Tekonsha who lived from 1768-1825. Father Verwyst, an early missionary, suspected that even the name "Tekonsha" was a "corruption of the Potawatomi word "attikonsan" meaning "rein-deer or little caribou," or "at-tik-on-saun." Despite confusion over his original identity, he was called "Shavehead," by early settlers because he followed his people's ancient traditions, and shaved his head, except a strip down the back and a tuft of hair on the top of the skull.

During Shavehead's life, when white settlers first arrived, there were three distinct bands of Native American Indian Potawatami in Cass County. First, the Weesaw Band inhabited the Schoolcraft Prairie Ronde Region. Second, the Pokagon Band occupied areas in west Cass County, and part of Berrien County, later to buy land in Silver Creek Township. Third, southwest Cass County was inhabited by Chief Pokamin's people (Diamond Lake area) and Chief Shavehead's band of seventy-five to one hundred Indians (Porter Township, Young's/Shavehead Prairie, the banks of the St. Joseph River, and the shores of Shavehead Lake). Eventually, all the bands of Potawatmi were considered to be friendly, except Chief Shavehead and his people. Unfortunately, he had good reason for his attitude toward the white man, and his bitter downfall was complex.

Shavehead's dislike of white pioneers intensified as time passed. He had fought in the War of 1812, in Chicago, at the Battle of Fort Dearborn, and still the flow of eager easterners of European descent kept coming. He began showing disdain for his own people, who accepted this assault on the Indian way of life or showed friendliness to the interlopers. He began attacking wagons trains, and log cabins in the dead of night. When the Chicago Trail was completed in 1836 between Chicago and St Joseph County, through Cass and Berrien County, he started attacking the mail stagecoaches, and stealing valuables. His reputation was that of a warrior, and he "was feared by both other Native Americans and whites." Some historic accounts claim he boasted of scalping early pioneers and militia, and kept a string of their tongues and skulls as trophies, which was probably an exaggeration. Whenever he was caught by the settlers, history tells us, he was beaten.

Harry Garrett retold a tale, that in his youth, Shavehead fell in love with the nineteen year old daughter of Chief Pokagon. The Indian maiden, Peek-a, did not return his affection, because she was in love with Meena,

a Pokagon brave and best friend of Shavehead. The love triangle ended when Meena drowned in the St. Joseph River on a hunting trip, and Shavehead was accused of murder. It is doubtful that the killing happened because the two men had been friends since childhood. In any event, the story claims that Peekwa was despondent over the loss of Meena, the man she loved, and died soon after, adding to Shavehead's sorrow and bitterness.

From a real estate stand point, Shavehead had major reasons for his bitterness toward the whites. Starting in 1795 and ending in 1833, a series of land cessions were forced upon southern Michigan Native Americans through military intervention, and relentless political maneuvers. These episodes were followed by numerous treaties which systematically stripped the Indians of their land. "On August 3, 1795, Chief Topenabee, on behalf of the Potawatomi, signed the Treaty of Greenville, Ohio" freeing the land for white settlement. On July 4, 1805, the Chippewa were forced to sign away their Michigan property rights. On November 17, 1807, Territorial Governor William Hull met with representatives of four more Great Lakes Native American Indian tribes. The Treaty of Detroit was signed, and Indian claims to southeastern Michigan, and northwestern Ohio were severed. Only several small areas were reserved for their use, one consisting of "two sections of one square mile each." Another treaty at Greenville, Ohio on July 22, 1814 took more land from the Indians. On September 29, 1817 in Toledo, Potawatami lost additional property. In the 1820s, Chief Leopold Pokagon was forced to sign a document conceding more land. "The Chippewa and Ottawa signed away their land on August 17, 1821. The 1828 treaty made at Carey Mission in the Settlement of Niles, took all local remaining land except a triangular area in Niles Township. On October 27, 1832, all of southern Michigan was lost in another battle and the treaty that followed. A treaty with the Chippewa took place September 26, 1833, and was proclaimed on February 21, 1835. In 1833, at the Treaty of Chicago, the Cass County Potawatamits' sold one million acres of land, including the property under Chicago (called "She-gong-ong") for three cents per acre, and their fate was sealed; planned removal to western reservations in 1838. The Indians were forced to sign so many treaties, one chief alone was said to have scrawled his name on twelve different documents. History tells us Chief Shavehead refused to sign even one treaty.

To make matters worse, the government reneged on the deal with the Native Americans, and "refused to pay a dime to the Indians." Chief Leopold Pokagon made numerous trips to Washington DC to try to obtain the money owed the tribes. When Abraham Lincoln served as President (1861-1865), the Potawatomi's case was reviewed and partial payment was made. The rest of the "claims remained unpaid" until Grover Cleveland was President (1885-1889 & 1893-1897). In 1896, sixty-three years later, the Potawatomi were given final restitution for their real estate. It wasn't until September of 1994 that the United States Government, under President Bill Clinton "officially recognized" the Potawatomi as a nation, and restored Tribal Recognition. Shavehead and his heirs never received a penny, because he had refused to sign the treaties.

As "hunters, gatherers and minor corn growers," Native Americans, like Shavehead, faced a food shortage, in Southwestern Michigan, when the number of white settlers increased. Pioneers supplemented their diets with local animals and fish. The Indian's way of life required large acres of land over which to wander and hunt. When the "carrying capacity" (level at which nature could replenish the natural food supply, versus the number of person taking food from an area) was exceeded, the deer, and other meat sources, sharply declined. To add to the problem, natural wooded habitats were turned into farmland, and the indigenous animal population faced a habitat reduction. When the influx of pioneers reduced the wild animal supply, and property ownership set boundaries lines over which the Indians were forbidden to cross, Shavehead and his tribe's days of free-roam hunting expeditions were ended. Father McCoy, of the Carey Mission, wrote in his journals about his concerns for Indian women and children who would come to the Carey Mission in Niles, starving, and begging for food. Few Cass County pioneers, really understood what their presence was doing to the Indian's food supply.

To "add even more fuel to this fire," the experience of "cultural shock" for Shavehead and the American Indians was daunting. Within a short period of time, a population of free roaming hunters and gathers had to become knowledgeable stationary farmers, or starve. While long term farming was a common practice among

those of European ancestry, it was alien to the Indians. They did not understand how to coax large yields from cleared land. Their need to freely forage clashed with surveyed boundaries lines, individual property ownership, and productive agricultural methods. The Native Americans were ill-equipped to quickly deal with such a scenario, through no fault of their own, so they barely existed at starvation levels. The axioms that "change is inevitable," that "adaptation is essential for survival," and that "extinction is the fate of those who can not cope" may be historically evident. However, the most important axiom was overlooked for the Indians, "time is required for a culture to change, and a society to adapt without pain and suffering." Time to adjust, was not something Shavehead or the Indians were given by a government overly eager for expansion.

Shavehead and his small tribe did try to devise ways to earn money, so they could buy food from pioneer farmers. One of the first significant roads surveyed and built in Southwestern Michigan was the Old Chicago Road, which followed the Chicago Indian Trail. The building of the Chicago Road started in 1825 by an Act of Congress, and "was completed in 1836." It meandered from Chicago, Illinois, across Berrien County, through Cass County, to St. Joseph County, Michigan, and beyond. Following that road, Shavehead realized that the St. Joseph River was being forged at Mottville in St. Joseph County. There was a grist mill on the east side of the river that Cass County pioneers often visited. Following the example on other portage points, Shavehead laid claim to that part of the St. Joseph River in Mottville Township, built a large raft, strung rope across the water way, and established a ferry service. He then "demanded tribute from the settlers" to transport them back and forth across the water. He took his declared ownership of the area beyond certain settler's liking, when he demanded a toll from those who preferred to wade, or drive their wagons, through the water. He often used extreme force to extract payment. Asahel Savary of Centerville, a farmer, reportedly, used a whip on Shavehead for demanding a such a payment. The thrashing and threats, thus ended Shavehead's business venture. The loss of his income source, the flogging, and degradation, added to his poverty and hatred of the settlers.

The white man's liberal availability of illegal whiskey was an additional stumbling block that led to Shavehead's downfall, as well as his fellow Potawatomi. At the exact time, they needed their wits about them, hard liquor befuddled their minds.. Settlement trading posts paid little heed to the consequences of selling alcohol to the Indians, as long as there was profit to be made. French fur trappers and traders were the first to barter with Indians in this manner. Human bodies, who for thousands of years never evolved a tolerance for liquor, suddenly were drenched in it. When Southern Michigan's population was sparse, milk for children in trading posts was not available, but bottles of alcohol lined the rough-hewn shelves. Drawn to the sudden influx of settlers, and the marketing potential that alcohol addiction had on the Native Americans, whiskey entrepreneurs set up three major frontier production and distribution centers in the local region. The largest was on the lower St. Joseph River, in Niles, Michigan, "near the Carey Mission." The other two were located on the Kankakee River, at Fort Wayne, Indiana and in Peoria, Illinois. From those points, whiskey was transported and wholesaled to surrounding small wilderness settlements, usually by river rafts. The fact that "the red man became well oiled with fire water," was a concern for government officials, because of the problems it caused. It was not a deterrent to a minority of illegal profit minded corn whiskey distillers. The effects of drunkenness and alcohol addiction had a debilitating effect on to many of the Indian's nuclear families. Domestic violence increased, and once proud patriarchal warrior providers were reduced to emasculated drunks. To often, treaty payments, and what little white man's money they could earn, was spent on liquor, enriching white men's pockets. At the very time. these intelligent and strong people needed to think logically for the sake of their own survival, alcohol stole clear heads and rational thought. If the government had been successful in putting an end to illegal distilleries, financial and property outcomes may have been different. The reality of the situation was never stated more clearly, than when General Lewis Cass advised Chief Topinabe to "keep sober, if possible, and make an advantageous bargain for his people" (at the Treaty of Chicago). The Chief replied, "Father we do not care for land, nor the money, nor the goods. What we want is whiskey."

"Rotgut alcohol," sometimes called "moon shine," because it was often secretly made at night, also, effected the Indian's leadership. While most chiefs abstained, Isaac McCoy, a protestant missionary, wrote in

his journal that Chief Topenebee, in 1826, becoming intoxicated," fell off his horse to his death. One pioneer wrote that upon walking into Cassopolis one day, he spotted a group of settlers surrounding Chief Shavehead, who was "drunk on corn whiskey, his weakness." Shavehead was "bragging of the scalps he had taken, battles he fought against the white man, and "the bloody deeds he performed at the Massacure of Chicago," as the white settlers "watched him with disgust." Alcohol stole, with his own tongue, the very respect from the whites, Shavehead needed, to be an effective leader and advocate for his people. Looking back at this appalling situation from our point in history, it is obvious, the white man not only pilfered a million acres of prime real estate, they introduced vices that weakened resistance to the deed.

Though some aspects of the reality of the situation are shameful, "reports of old settlers indicate" that Southwestern Michigan pioneers were divided into two camps when it came to the local Native American Indians, and Shavehead. The majority of the white pioneer population were sympathetic and humanitarian. Their attitude was one of "live and let live." They befriended, employed and bartered with sober Indians. Most felt extremely guilty over how a remotely located federal government treated the local Indians. The "majority of whites and Indians respected one another," while a minority carried the "Indian-hating passion of frontier days," when fear of attack drove men to extreme emotions. This scenario had repercussions for Shavehead, as there was a "level of settler hostility toward the chief." When Shavehead did something particularly unpleasant, certain "settlers would catch him unawares, and inflict a severe beating." The attacks "had the effect of curing his depredations, but making him even more sullen." Worse for him, every serious attempt he made to adapt to his new environment, and survive, was thwarted with violence..

George Meacham, in his writings, claimed that "when the Sauk War was fought in Wisconsin with Indian Chief Black Hawk," Army General Joseph Brown ordered Chief Leopold Pokagon in Cass County, Michigan, "to take care of Shavehead." The general wanted him watched or guarded so that he could not join the enemy should they penetrate the (local Southwestern Michigan) country (side)."

How Shavehead died is unknown for certain, as there were several accounts of his demise. First, according to Roy C. Beardslee, in 1840, "there was a gathering of Indians and whites at Stone Lake, at the edge of Cassopolis." Old Shavehead was drinking heavily, and Job Wright made several comments about him. Wright was known as the "Hermit of Diamond Lake Island," because he lived a solitary existence on the island, and only came to the Cassopolis Trading Post to sell his furs and buy supplies. Wright was "one of the very few soldiers who escaped the Fort Dearborn Massacre in 1812." He lost his wife and children in that Potawatomi attack, and claimed that he was firing his rifle behind a covered wagon, when he saw Shavehead with the Indians warriors who were attacking them. Wright further declared that he and Shavehead were sworn enemies, and that the old Indian burned his cabin to the ground, requiring him to build another. According to the story, Roy claimed that when Shavehead left the gathering, Job Wright followed his trail, and Shavehead was never seen a live again. Second, an additional tale claimed he died at a "sugar camp," where the Indians processed maple syrup. Third, another stated that while living alone, he "died of old age and poverty."

Shavehead's "final resting place" was never clearly established. One story said that he was buried at White Pigeon. Another claimed that Shavehead was interned in a Van Buren County, Michigan wooded area. The report stated that his grave was opened and desecrated by whites who intensely disliked him. His head was cut off, and "in 1889 his skull was in a collection of Van Buren County Pioneers."

From a purely analytical perspective, looking back into the history of Cass County, Shavehead's life was part of a much larger picture. The United States of the 1800s was aggressively expanding, and making decisions based on what historians have called "manifest destiny." It was the post-Revolutionary War concept that our new nation was destined to include all of the land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This concept included the Great Lakes Region. Original Michigan Territory proponents and pioneers, like in all other regions, were eager to gain statehood and a taxable land mass to support emerging governments. The Native American Indians attempted to stop the unending flood of white men who coveted their land, and were

slowly displacing them. A struggle between two opposing sides resulted, battles were fought, a war was lost, and treaties were forced. Facing unstoppable forces, all Cass County Chiefs capitulated, and decided, for the best interests of their people, to live in peace with the invaders, except one man, Chief Shavehead.

In summary, Shavehead was the victim of complex forces, which were extremely difficult to control. The government's shameful treatment of early Native Americans stands without question. Shavehead's sullen attitude and hostility was universally recognized by historians. Early pioneer's desire to create a better life for themselves is obvious. The concept that the American government had taken one million acres of land from the local Pottawatomie is mind boggling. With inflation, today's value of land beneath "She-gong-gon" (Chicago) alone is hard to comprehend. Chief Shavehead was justified in his bitterness toward the white man, and that should be obvious. The fact that he was part of Cass County's history goes without question. No one, at this moment in history, can change the past, which we had no part in creating. However, there is one thing we can all do, before we condemn Chief Shavehead. We can ask ourselves "what we would do, if we walked a mile in his moccasins?"

Copyright © 2011 by J. M. Watson

RESEARCH

- Chief Shavehead, Hodges Handbook Of American Indians & Missionary Isaac McCoy's Notes
- The Potawatomi Indians by Otho Winger, Chapter 4, pg. 94-95, McCoy's Indian Mission, pg. 286
- The Potawatomi Keepers Of The Fire by David R. Edmonds
- Research of Dennis Jognson
- Access Genealogy, Pottawatomie Indian Chiefs & Leaders, Shavehead, pg.1-2, on-line April 4, 2011
- Coll. Mich. Pion. & Hist. Soc., V, 1884; XIV, 1890
- Indian Tribes of MI, pub. on-line 2011
- Pioneering Michigan by Eric Freedman, 1992
- River County Journal, John S. Barry Historical Society Meeting of 3/15/2011 by AdminBSnook In Business, Community, History, (posted on-line) 3/17/2011
- Four Winds Casino Resort, Pokagon & The Potawatami - New Buffalo, MI on-line
- History of Van Buren Co., MI, 1982, pub. by Van Buren Co. Historical Soc., Hartford, MI
- Indian Names In Michigan by Virgil J. Vogel, Google Books, pg. 57-59pub., on-line 4/16/2011
- Deacon Isaac Mason's Early Recollections of MI, 1882, pg. 401-2
- Shavehead, Wikipedia, pub. on-line 4/14/2011
- Shavehead Lake News, pub. on-line by Mike Bosela, 2011, pg. 5
- Mottville Township Map, St. Joseph Co., MI, 2011 on-line
- Peek, The Potawatamie by Harry Garrett, 1942, Decatur, MI
- A Scrap Book of History of Early Decatur & Vicinity, MI 1829-1976, Vol. II, by Catherine Howland, pg. 899-901, 1203, 13313 & 1404
- Doawgiac Daily Newspaper, "Chief Shavehead Showed Hate For Early Settlers of County," "Camping Ground of Famous Indian Still Marked by Discovery of Many Arrow Heads.," early 1900s article
- Decatur Republican, Letter To The Editor, 4/8/1942, by Roy C. Beardslee, Vandalia, MI
- Decatur Republic, "Shavehead School Request Prompts History Research" by Ruby Cone, 1959
- Guy Wesley Hawks' Local History Notes
- Author's Local History/Family Lore/Legends Of The Past/Genealogy Files