



A Brief Biographical Sketch of Black Hawk, the Sauk

Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, known in English as Black Hawk (c. 1767 – October 3, 1838), was a Sauk leader and warrior who lived in what is now NW Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Missouri.

He was a member of the large community of Saukenuk, located at the confluence of the Rock and Mississippi rivers near present-day Rock Island. In the 1820s, this community was the largest population center in the new state of Illinois, with thousands of inhabitants. The Sauk planted seasonal crops in the surrounding fertile soils – enough to feed the tribe of perhaps 20,000 people. Winters saw the tribe migrating to hunting grounds to the south and west of the Mississippi.

As a young man, Black Hawk distinguished himself as a warrior, fighting against neighboring tribes and as a military leader allied with the British in the War of 1812. Black Hawk was also known to be a holy man to his people, following the footsteps of his father who, upon his death, passed to him the Sauk sacred bundle as he assumed this tribal role.

Pled with liquor and empty promises, a dubious 1804 St. Louis treaty between unauthorized members of the Sauk tribe and (future president) William Henry Harrison stipulated the future ceding of their homelands in exchange for meager compensation. Under pressure from the State of Illinois, the U.S. Government enforced the deal in 1829, demanding the tribe leave their homes and fields. A majority of the tribe reluctantly moved across the Mississippi to land in eastern Iowa, but Black Hawk and his band of 1500 followers resisted what they believed to be an invalid treaty.

Black Hawk led this band of both warriors and non-combatants (older men, women and children) in a valiant effort to retain their homelands, livelihood and way of life. From April to August 1832, a number of battles, skirmishes and massacres perpetrated by both native warriors and state and federal troops became known as the Black Hawk War.

Characterized by mis-communication, broken promises, uneasy alliances, cross-purposes and undisciplined militias, the war culminated in defeat for Black Hawk's band at the Mississippi River near what is now Prairie du Chien (WI). The Battle at Bad Axe was a massacre by the U.S. Army and state militias of the depleted and starving band as they tried to retreat across the river. Black Hawk himself, and perhaps only half of his people survived the four-month ordeal.

Black Hawk, and a few other leaders eventually surrendered and were imprisoned. Before their release a year later, they were subjected to "civilizing" activities and tours before crowds of people in the east coast cities of Washington D.C., New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Near the end of his captivity in 1833, Black Hawk dictated his life story to an interpreter resulting in a popular and still-available published autobiography.

He returned to his people, living in what is now southeast Iowa where he passed away on October 3, 1838 at the age of 71. With his wife, As-she-we-qua (Singing Bird), he was father to five children. After three forced relocations in the decades following his passing, Black Hawk's descendants are now members of one of three federally recognized Sac and Fox tribes/nations with headquarters on tribal lands in Oklahoma, Kansas/Nebraska, and Iowa. The nations currently number less than 5,000 people.

Selected Quotes from Black Hawk's Autobiography

Insight into Black Hawk's Perspective

Alcohol and Disease

"Why did the Great Spirit ever send the whites to this land to drive us from our homes and introduce us (to) poisonous liquors, disease, and death? They should have remained in the land the Great Spirit allotted them."

The Great Spirit and Morality

"We can only judge of what is proper and right by our standard of what is right and wrong, which differs widely from the whites, if I have been correctly informed. The whites may do wrong all their lives, and then if they are sorry for it when about to die, all is well; but with us it is different. We must continue to do good throughout our lives. If we have corn and meat, and know of a family that have none, we divide with them. If we have more blankets than we absolutely need, and others have not enough, we must give to those who are in want. "

"We thank the Great Spirit for all the good he has conferred upon us. For myself, I never take a drink of water from a spring without being mindful of His goodness."

Treaties and Land Ownership

"I was the head of the other division and was determined to hold on to my village, although I had been ordered to leave it. But I considered as myself and band had no agency in selling our country, and that, as provisions had been made in the treaty, for us all to remain on it as long as it belonged to the United States, that we could not be forced away. I refused, therefore, to quit my village. It was here that I was born, and here lie the bones of many friends and relations. For this spot I felt a sacred reverence and never could consent to leave it without being forced therefrom....I could not bring my mind to consent to leave this country to the whites for any earthly consideration."

"The prospect before us was a bad one. I fasted and called upon the Great Spirit to direct my steps in the right path...."

"My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence, and so long as they occupy and cultivate it they have the right to the soil, but if they voluntarily leave it then any other people have a right to settle on it. Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away."

The Golden Rule, Forgiveness and Peace

“It has always been our custom to receive all strangers that come to our village or camps in time of peace on terms of friendship, to share with them the best provisions we have, and give them all the assistance in our power. If on a journey or lost, to put them on the right trail, and if in want of moccasins, to supply them. I feel grateful to the whites for the kind manner they treated me and my party whilst traveling among them, and from my heart I assure them that the white man will always be welcome in our village or camps, as a brother. The tomahawk is buried forever! We will forget what has passed, and may the watchword between the Americans and the Sacs and Foxes ever be—“Friendship.””

“I am done now. A few more moons and I must follow my fathers to the shades. May the Great Spirit keep our people and the whites always at peace, is the sincere wish of Black Hawk.”