The Menominee Native American Tribe

A diverse culture with a rich history

Michelle Smith
The Menominee Native American tribe, an Algonkian-speaking tribe, is perhaps the only present-day tribe in Wisconsin who, according to their origin story, has always lived in Wisconsin. Throughout the years the Menominee tribe has accumulated a vast, honorable history, established an enriched culture and conveyed a respectable spiritual life.

**History**

The Menominee has a vast and honorable history in Wisconsin. At the start of the treaty era, in the early 1800’s, the Menominee tribe occupied a land base of an estimated 10 million acres.

It all began in 1817 with the treaty of peace at St. Louis (March 30th, 1817) with the Chippewa tribe. Since then the Menominee tribe has entered into the following treaties with the United States:

**Treaties**

“(1) Treaty of peace at St Louis, Mo., Mar. 30, 1817; (Previously mentioned)

(2) Treaty of Prairie du Chien, Wis., Aug. 19, 1825, with the Menominee and other Indians, fixing boundary lines between the several tribes

(3) Treaty of Butte des Morts, Wis., Aug. 11, 1827, defining boundary lines between the Menominee, Chippewa, and Winnebago

(4) Treaty of Washington, Feb. 8, 1831, defining boundary lines and ceding lands to the United States, a portion of the latter to be for the use of certain New York Indians;
(5) Treaty of Washington, Feb. 17, 1831, modifying the treaty of Feb. 8, 1831, in regard to the lands ceded for the use of the New York Indians

(6) Treaty of Washington, Oct. 27, 1832, in which certain modifications are made in regard to the lands ceded for the use of the New York Indians (Stockbridges and Munsee), and to certain boundary lines

(7) Articles of agreement made at Cedar Point, Wis., Sept. 3, 1836, ceding certain lands to the United States;

(8) Treaty of Lake Pow-aw-hay-kon-nay, Oct. 18, 1848, ceding all their lands in Wisconsin, the United States to give them certain lands which had been ceded by the Chippewa;

(9) Treaty at the Falls of Wolf r., May 12, 1854, by which they, ceded the reserve set apart by treaty of Oct. 18, 1848, and were assigned a reserve on Wolf r., Wis.;

(10) Treaty of Keshena, Wis., Feb. 11, 1856, ceding two townships of their reserve for the use of the Stockbridges and the Munsee.”

(Access Genealogy)

Through a series of seven treaties the Menominee entered into with the U.S. government during the 1800’s the Tribe witnessed its land base erode to nearly 235,000 acres. The boundaries of their land holdings at one point were north to the Escanaba River, south to the Milwaukee River. However, through a series of treaties the Menominee were forced to surrender most of their land. In 1854, the Wolf River Treaty was signed, in this treaty the Menominee were granted 12 townships “for a home, to be
held as Indian lands are held, that tract of Country lying upon the Wolf River,” to be used as a Reservation and home. (mpm.edu)

Government policies

As the reservation era arose it brought to surface many new challenges and disruptions. In the 1860s epidemics of smallpox, dysentery and other diseases introduced from Europe killed hundreds of Menominee. White-owned logging companies, known as the, “Pine Ring” envied the rich reservation timber. The Pine ring requested and received federal permission to harvest dead and downed trees on the reservation. However the Pine Ring illegally cut standing timber as well. By 1872, the Menominee gained federal permission to harvest and sell their own timber for profit. Their efforts became a success, but the Pine ring continues their efforts to purchase tribal timber lands. To protect the Menominee forests in 1890 Congress made a permanent provision for the Menominee to harvest their timber under the government supervision. However, due to waste, inefficiency and fraud the Menominee lost substantial revenue. In 1951, the tribe received $8.5 million from the federal government to compensate for their losses.

In the mid 1950’s the United States introduces a program to end tribal sovereignty called Termination. This policy terminated the United states jurisdiction over the Menominee tribe and ended their tribal sovereignty. The Menominee tribe was the first to undergo termination because the federal government felt the tribe possessed sufficient economic recourses necessary to succeed without governmental supervision.
On April 30, 1961 the reservation ceased to exist and became Menominee County. All tribal property as well as tribal assets were from hence fourth held by the Menominee Enterprises, Incorporated. All federal services that were provided to the reservation ceased as well, based on the assumption that the tribe could service itself. However, the reservation hospital at Keshena closed due to the lack of federal funding.

The Menominee tribe was one of the two tribes (Klamath in Oregon also had had been terminated) that had been terminated by congress, and the problems faced by both tribes convinced others to resist the government’s policy. Termination of the Menominee Tribe led to a large decrease in tribal employment, an increased level of poverty, and devastating reductions in basic serves and health care.

In the midst of the Termination ramifications, a great fear spread throughout the Menominee tribe, without federal protection, their tribal lands would pass into the hands of non-Indians. In 1970, a handful of Menominees joined together and created the Determination of Rights and Unity for Menominee Shareholders (DRUMS) group. DRUMS sought to end termination and restore the Menominee status as a federally recognized tribe. Under the direction of Menominee woman Ada Deer, DRUMS pushed for the restoration of the Menominee federal status.

On December 22, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Menominee Restoration Bill into law.

In April of 1975, the lands of Menominee county reverted back to reservation status.

In 1976, the Menominee approved their new tribal constitution.
In 1979, the new tribal legislature was implemented.

**Geography**

The Menominee Indian Reservation is located in the state of Wisconsin about 45 miles northwest of Green Bay. The Reservation borders three counties; Langlade, Oconto, and Shawano.

There are five main communities on the Reservation; the two main villages of Neopit and Keshena, two smaller villages of Middle Village and Zoar, and a scattered community called South Branch Land.

The Reservation size is 235,523 acres, or approximately 357.96 square miles, and contains roughly 223,500 acres of heavily forested lands. The elevation in Keshena is 829 feet above sea level. There are four rivers flowing through the Reservation, the Evergreen, the Oconto, the Red, and the Wolf.

**Forest**

There are roughly thirty-three different species of trees within the Menominee Forest. The most common are red pine, white pine, jack pine, aspen, scrub oak, hemlock, and northern hardwoods. There are also hard maple, red oak, basswood, yellow birch, cedar, soft maple, white cherry, white spruce, black cherry, hickory, tamarack, balsam fir, black spruce, and butternut. The forest is often used by the Menominee people for such things as berry picking, collecting mushrooms and ginseng.
**Culture**

Throughout their vast history in Wisconsin, the Menominee Native American tribe has established and maintained a unique culture. Algonquin speaking nation Menominee refer to themselves as mameqtaw meaning “the people”. Other Indian tribes call them Menominee, derived from manomin- an algonkian word for wile rice as it is a staple food for the tribe. (mpm.edu) The French called them, “Folle Avoine Nation” which translates to “the nation of wild oats”. This is because, as the story goes, when the Menominee entered an area the Wild Rice followed. However when they left the area the Wild rice passed. (Facts and Figures)

The Menominee tribe lived off the land; they collected their means by hunting, fishing and gathering. Wild rice was a staple food in their tribe’s diet, augmented by corn, beans and squash. In addition, the Menominee women contributed by collecting a wide variety of wild plant foods such as, berries, nuts, roots, wild greens and wild rice among other things. Maple sugar and syrup were commonly used as sweeteners and flavorings for these dishes. Boiling and roasting were the most predominate and common cooking methods. As one may assume, many of these foods were seasonal. This is why some food was dried in the sun to save for the winter.

The Menominee, like many other Algonquin speaking tribes of the Northeast, they built bark- cabin villages in winter and wigwams of reed mats in the summer.
Hide lodges were constructed and served as temporary shelters while the
Menominee hunted or traveled. (Ciment) The Menominee was able to adapt not
only to weather conditions, but also were able to travel as they followed the hunt,
but still live comfortably.

The Menominee was not only adaptive but also very advanced in their society.
Their society functioned through a governing system which was known as the clan
system. The clan system was a staple of the Menominee civilization. The clan system
was derived from the Menominee creation story (see spirituality). The clan system is
described as, “the families [of the Menominee tribe] united into an organized body
for mutual benefit.” (Facts and Figures) Below you can see the responsibilities of
each clan within the clan system.

**Clans**

- Bear clan: speakers and keeper of the law
- Eagle/ Thunder Clan: Freedom and justice
- Moose Clan: community or individual security
- Crane Clan: architecture, construction and art
- Wolf Clan: hunting and gathering

(Facts and figures 2004)

In addition to the clans, each lineage (group of people related via a common
ancestor) had a lineage chief who would represent them by serving on a village council
with other lineage chiefs. Along with the chief of the bear moiety (the head chief) the village council related civil affairs when and where necessary. There were however other leaders who were recognized as “visionaries” because of their dreams or who had gained respect through their reputation in war.

*Spirituality

**Creation**
The Menominee tribe was a very spiritual tribe with many traditions and beliefs. They believe in creation. However, their creation story is not that of the Christian creation belief. According to early records, the Menominee lived in villages at the mouth of the Menominee River, and it was here the tribe had its beginning. “According to the creation story of the Menominee, the Great Bear emerged from the ground and took human form. Being alone, he called an Eagle flying high above to be his brother and descending, it took the form of a human and an Indian. As the two journeyed up the river they met a beaver and made her their sister. The Bear and the Eagle stood on the banks of the river and saw a stranger, the Sturgeon who was adopted by the Bear as a younger brother and a servant. The Elk was also adopted by the Eagle as a younger brother and water carrier. At another time, the Bear was going up the Wisconsin River and became fatigued and sat down to rest near a waterfall. From beneath the waterfall emerged a Wolf. While asking the Bear why he was there, the Crane came by. Bear called to him and said, “Crane, carry me to my people at the head of the river, and I will take you as my younger brother.” As Crane was taking Bear, Wolf called out to Bear
saying, “Bear take me also as a younger brother, for I am alone.” The Eagle decided to visit the Bear village and asked the Bear to join them. They promised to give corn and fire in return for wild rice which was the property of the Bear and the Sturgeon. From this time on, the families united into an organized body for mutual benefit known as the clan system.” (Facts and Figures)

The after life

For the Menominee people, the Earth was an island separating the upper and lower worlds. These upper and lower worlds are similar to the Christian Heaven and Hell as the upper world represented good, and the lower world evil. However, the upper and lower worlds were divided into layers, the furthest being the most powerful. In the upper worlds, the sun was the highest level, followed by the Thunderbirds and the Morning star; the golden eagles (symbols of war); and the other birds led by the bald eagle. In the lower world, the first level below earth was occupied by the Horned Serpent that was believed to live in lakes and streams that threatened to capsize boats and carry humans to the underworld. The next lower level was the home of the White Deer, which was part of the origins of the Medicine Dance. The level below the White deer was the level of the Underwater Panther. The final, lowest level was occupied by the Great White Bear who was said to be the ancestor of the Menominee.

It was also believed that the Earth itself was occupied by a variety of giants and little people as well as other spiritual forces which represented the animals.

The supernatural
For individuals, links with the supernatural revolved around gaining power by means of a relationship with a guardian spirit that could be achieved through dreaming. It was tradition that girls and boys at puberty would fast up to ten days. They would live isolated in a small wigwam built solely for this purpose. Their dreams of spirits in animal form were interpreted by shamans who delineated was responsibilities the young ones owed to the guardian spirit and what powers could be gained and held through obligation to that spirit. Throughout life, this power was to be protected and guarded by the individual and if guarded correctly it would grow. Elders were the seen as the most powerful in terms of spirit.

Shamans, of various types, maintained high levels of personal spiritual power. While some specialized in hunting charms and love medicines, others used the shaking-tent to divine cures for patients suffering from “spiritual illness”. These Shamans typically upheld a high knowledge of herbal medicines and cures. Many individuals belonged to the Medicine Lodge, which had be established and organized to ensure good health and long life. However, not all who help power used it for good; a group of individuals who had links with more malevolent powers were said to function together a witches society.

Current economics

Today, the Menominee are once again on their way to economic progress by means of self-sufficiency. The Tribe is now a multi-million dollar organization which provides employment to its people along with services such as a clinic, police protection,
and a Tribal school. Unique adaptability enabled the Menominee to endure the culture clash and to rebuild, relying on cultural and social greatness. This is being accomplished through language programs, drumming groups and pow wows. (Menominee Demographic Report and Public Relations Department & Menominee Indian Reservation Historical Review).

Comparison to another tribe-
Wisconsin is the proud home of many Native American tribes. Though their location is similar, there are many cultural differences between tribes. The most, in my opinion, would be the Menominee and Oneida. The Menominee was an Algonquin tribe while Oneida was Iroquois. While this dictates language, it also defines the differences in the diverse cultures of these two tribes. Both tribes had different ways of living. While the Menominee lived in Wigwams and bark lodges, the Oneida were housed in long houses. As far as clothing, the Menominee wore very little clothing, with the exception of winter. However the Oneida wore buckskin year round. Though both tribes were hunters, gatherers, planters and traders, only the Menominee were traders. Both tribes had their own unique costumes and celebrations. Another large distinction between the two tribes is the way it was governed. The Menominee tribe is known for pow wows whereas the Oneida formed a Confederacy.