

Black Hawk



“I am a Sauk...I am a Warrior,” Black hawk proclaimed only a few days before he and his followers were forced to leave their home in the spring of 1831. Though not a chief by birth, he was the recognized leader of a political faction within the Sauk nation that believed in the traditional way of life that existed before Europeans arrived. He fought hard to preserve his ancestral home, but was ultimately unable to avoid the wave of cultural change brought on by invading European-Americans.

Black Sparrow Hawk (Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak) was born at Saukenuk into the Thunder clan around 1767 and was a member of the warrior class. By the time the Sauk and their allies the Meskwaki (or Fox) had moved to the Rock River region around 1750, warfare had come to play an increasingly important role in tribal affairs.

Black Hawk was 15 years old when he wounded his first enemy in battle, which earned him the right to paint his face and wear feathers. After that, he continued to prove his bravery and skill in battle until he became a trusted leader of large war parties.

During the **War of 1812**, Black Hawk fought on the side of the British. He was a trusted lieutenant of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh and fought with his forces at the battle of Detroit in 1813. Black Hawk and his Sauk followers, known as the British Band, were also responsible for local victories at Campbell's Island and Credit Island.

Despite the fact that Black Hawk signed a treaty of peace with the United States government at the end of the war, he refused to relinquish his friendship with the British. Accordingly, he and his British Band followed the Great Sauk Trail from Saukenuk to Fort Malden in Amberstburg, Ontario every year to receive gifts from the British military officials.

Although the Sauk practiced polygamy, Black Hawk had only one wife, Singing Bird (As-she-we-qua). The two had five children (two girls and three boys). Their eldest son and youngest daughter both died within the same year, probably before 1820.

Black Hawk mourned the deaths of his children for two years in Sauk tradition. He built a small house away from the city proper, blackened his face with ashes, and fasted by drinking only water at mid-day and eating a small amount of boiled corn at night.

Black Hawk is probably best known for the war that bears his name. The Black Hawk War of 1832 was the last Indian war fought east of the Mississippi River.

In 1804, five Sauk and Meskwaki chiefs were tricked into signing a treaty with the United States government, selling nearly 51 million acres of tribal lands in Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin. This was in exchange for various goods and a \$1,000 annuity to be paid to the tribes annually. Despite the fact that American officials knew the treaty was clearly illegal by Sauk and Meskwaki custom, the United States Senate ratified the treaty in December 1804. The treaty stipulated that the Indians could remain on the ceded lands as long as that land was not wanted for white settlement.

In 1828, white settlers began to move into **Saukenuk** and the surrounding area, demanding the Indians be removed. In order to avoid bloodshed, the majority of the Sauk and Meskwaki moved to the west side of the Mississippi. However, Black Hawk and his followers refused to go and remained at Saukenuk, living side by side with white settlers. Problems quickly arose and eventually, in June of 1831, the Governor of Illinois dispatched military troops to remove the remaining Sauk and Meskwaki. Realizing he was badly outnumbered, Black Hawk slipped across the river during the night of June 25 and days later agreed to never return to Illinois.

Black Hawk and his followers were unhappy in the Iowa lands and he dreamed of leading an uprising to forcibly retake their lost Illinois home. In April, 1832, Black Hawk and about 1500 followers (500 warriors and 1000 women, children, and old people) crossed the Mississippi river to its eastern bank. They followed the course of the Rock River for 50 miles headed to a Winnebago town, now called Prophetstown. This move threw the frontier into a panic. The ensuing war, named the Black Hawk War, lasted just 15 weeks and ended August 2, 1832, at the Battle of Bad Axe, Wisconsin. By the end of the war, starvation, deprivation, and exhaustion killed off approximately two thirds of Black Hawk's followers.

Though Black Hawk escaped before the **Battle of Bad Axe**, he was captured six weeks later and turned over to American authorities. He and his five closest advisors (including his eldest son) were imprisoned at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri until April, 1833. The group was then taken to Washington DC where Black Hawk met with President Andrew Jackson before being sent to Fortress Monroe, Virginia.

Black Hawk and his party were released on May 30, 1833. Prior to their return to Rock Island, they were taken on a tour of large cities on the East Coast, where they were a media sensation. People turned out in droves to see the famous Black Hawk and his warriors. It was during this time that, due to a lack of understanding of Sauk politics, Black Hawk was incorrectly tagged a "chief." The American public reasoned that anyone powerful enough to wage war against the United States must be a chief. Though a great warrior and military tactician, Black Hawk was never a chief and this misnomer continues to this day.

Black Hawk returned to Rock Island in August, 1833. **Keokuck**, Black Hawk's arch political rival, met the party at Fort Armstrong, where Black Hawk was released into Keokuck's custody and directed to follow his counsel and advice. To Black Hawk's humiliation, this made plain that the United States recognized Keokuck as chief of the Sauk.

Through his attempt to save his peoples' traditions and homeland, Black Hawk had eventually only brought dishonor upon himself. The war had been a disaster and more than 1,000 of his people had died. Additionally, the treaty that ended the war ceded even more land from the Sauk and Meskwaki to the United States as war reparation.

Shortly after his return, Black Hawk dictated his autobiography to **Antoine LeClaire**, a government interpreter living at Fort Armstrong. The *Life of Black Hawk* was published in 1833 and sold extremely well. Though disgraced among his own people, Black Hawk had ironically achieved fame and admiration among his former enemies, European- Americans.

Black Hawk lived along the Iowa River with his wife and children for the next five years. After moving to a new home along the Des Moines River in 1838, he died at age 71 of respiratory illness. Black Hawk was buried sitting upright inside a small mausoleum of logs. Soon after, his grave was robbed and his remains were eventually deposited in a museum in Burlington, Iowa that burned down in 1855.

Black Hawk fought hard to preserve not only the ancestral home of his people but also their time-honored customs and traditions. His defeat spelled the end of 200 years of armed resistance to European-American encroachment on Indian lands.. The fate of Black Hawk and his nation was a tragic outcome of the clash of two divergent cultures.