



## **Remembering Chief Big Foot**

*By Denise Schultz*

***“Chief Big Foot long hugged his shore tree  
and looked his last upon his lake  
to turn not looking back again...  
would Today his wild heart break?”***

This poem by Alice Hackett, local historian and poet, seems to best reflect the legend of Chief Big Foot. Published in the 1976 bicentennial edition of *Heritage Walks of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin*, this short passage tells the tale of the man who walked the shores of Geneva Lake long before the mansions were built or steamboats sailed her waters.

On a recent autumn day, amidst glowing hues of crimson and gold, I stood and gazed at the “One Last Glance” statue of Chief Big Foot (“Maunk-suck”) and understood why the legends speak of the sadness in his heart as he was forced to leave his beloved home. I too, would want to embrace the land and remember the water forever, if I were forced to leave this beautiful lake area we call home.

In the autumn of 1836 Chief Big Foot is said to have lovingly embraced the trunk of a tree (or “council pole”) for a long time, and then silently stare at the sparkling waters of the west shore before turning away toward the awaiting government wagons to be transported to a reservation in Kansas. These had to be the most difficult days in the Chief’s life, after reportedly having lost over half of his village to whooping cough.

Walking on the footpaths, hearing nothing but the rustle of the freshly fallen leaves and the trickle of the nearby streams, it’s easy to imagine how Chief Big Foot and the Potawatomi Indians lived here so many years ago.

Chief Big Foot and his tribe were Potawatomi Indians, often translated as “Keepers of the Fire”. Other translations say it would be more accurate to say “blowers of the council fire”. This band was said to have been of Algonquin stock, originally from Central New York, and then the Green Bay area. They were peaceful by nature, and preferred to settle differences around a council fire rather than through warfare. In fact, it is believed that

the tribe left the New York area to avoid fighting with the large bands of Iroquois Indians in the area.

These Indians did not dwell in the triangular shaped tee pees that many of us picture when speaking of Native American culture in the area. The standard tee pee type dwellings were used by the more Nomadic Indians who traveled often. The Potawatomi Indians were more settled, and built more permanent lodges best described as domed wigwams. They were built by placing woven mats of grass or reed over arched poles, and then creating a roof of whole slabs of tree bark. The floors were covered with furs.

They were very respectful of the white man and collaborated on setting up trading posts. They called the lake “Kishwauketoé” or “clear water”, and created the 20.2-mile long footpath which we now enjoy as the Geneva Lake shore path. They often walked the shoreline to travel between Chief Big Foot’s main village in what is now Fontana, and the other villages now referred to as Williams Bay and downtown Lake Geneva.

Most say the lake was originally called “Mauck Suck” in honor of the Chief, and others say it was possibly named for the resemblance of the shape of a human leg and foot. Many references say the Chief was named Big Foot after dragging a deer off the frozen lake and leaving behind large footprints. Yet others say that as a young brave he danced wildly in the rain until his feet collected so much mud he could no longer move.

Early French settlers referred to the lake as “Lac Gros-Pied” or “Big Foot’s Lake”. The lake was later named “Geneva” by John Brink, a government surveyor who in 1833 said the lake reminded him of a lake near his home in Geneva, New York. He is recorded as saying “I want to look at this lake forever”.

Chief Big Foot and his people had adventured through rustic terrain to settle in our area, at a time when most were traveling along major waterways such as the Great Lakes. In terms of walking on foot, we are quite a distance from the shores of the Great Lakes. This tribe did possess a small number of horses, as there were legends of races along the west shore beach, however most of the band traveled on foot and by canoe.

As we can imagine by the beautiful hills and valleys of the west shore area, this land was thick forest, with plenty of wild game, nuts and fruits which the Indians relied on for food and shelter. Fish were also abundant.

Most local accounts do report that there was a primitive civilization prior to Chief Big Foot and his people, though historians have not been able to unravel the mystique. There were some type of “mound builders” dating back to more ancient times, which left hieroglyphic mounds to be discovered by early settlers. In “*The History of Geneva, Wisconsin*”, James Simmons, a local lawyer and historian (Geneva Lake Herald, 1875) said “these mounds point back to a remote antiquity, far back even of the traditions of the Indian tribes who occupied the country and tell us of the existence of an earlier and more civilized race.”

The mounds, many near what is now Delavan, have been described in shapes of animals, particularly turtles of various sizes, and “one of a bow strung with an arrow ready to be discharged southwardly toward Geneva Lake.” Mr. Simmons was disappointed that “nearly all traces of the mounds had disappeared or been defaced by plow and spade.”

There has been much speculation among historians as to whether these mounds were meaningless expressions of art, or perhaps the indication of great men who were buried beneath them, or even some type of banner of the tribe who constructed them. As Mr. Simmons wrote, “we will probably never know.”

Common names that we see on road signs, subdivisions and local businesses take on new meaning when we learn the Native American history behind them. For example, Chief Big Foot was known as a peaceful man, and in 1827 when uprisings were rampant between other tribes and the white men, two representatives were sent from Chicago to dissuade Chief Big Foot from becoming involved in the battles.

One of them was named Billy Caldwell, but referred to as “The Sauganash” (“Englishman”). He was actually half white and half Potawatomi Chief. The other was a full-blooded Ottawa named “Shabonna”. The meaning of this Indian name has been long argued over and never settled, but nonetheless is a well known road on the west shore today. A drive around the west shore area will reveal many roads, subdivisions and businesses reflecting the names of these Native American legends.

John Kinzie was a government employee traveling by horseback with his wife and several others when they came upon Geneva Lake in 1832. They are known as the first white people to discover Geneva Lake. Mrs. Kinzie wrote “The Chief was a large, raw-boned ugly Indian with a countenance bloated by intemperance and with a sinister, unpleasant expression.” (White people of the time obviously looked upon Indians in a discriminatory manner.)

No one knows for sure when Big Foot and his people arrived in the lakes area. But we do know when they left. The Great Council of 1833 in Chicago resulted in a treaty between the government and the Indians. The Indians would have to vacate 5 million acres in Wisconsin and Illinois in exchange for similar land on a reservation in what is now Lawrence, Kansas. Three years later, in the fall of 1836, Chief Big Foot said his final good bye to the lake and surrounding land.

Readers are apt to gasp when they learn the land around the lake was originally sold to pioneers and farmers at \$1.25 per acre! Matthias Mohr, who purchased most of the land on the west shore, named the village of Fontana, in recognition of the many natural springs in the area. Nearby Williams Bay was named for the township’s first white settler, Mr. Israel Williams.

Although Geneva Lake is now known as a year-round vacation paradise, and the shores are lined with grand mansions, many references remain in honor of the Potawatomi tribe. Big Foot High School and several area businesses carry the name of the Chief himself.

The statue “One Last Glance” is prominently featured on the Fontana lakefront, at the high school and at Big Foot Country Club.

Established in 1924, Big Foot Country Club in Fontana is a private, members-only club whose staff and members honor the memory and traditions of the Chief and his people. Their “seven sacred pools” are said to honor sacred traditional rites, though they admit that like all of this Indian lore, the accuracy of these claims are questionable. They do however, do an outstanding job of revering the Potawatomi people who did definitely walk what are now the fairways. The office of Club Manager Bob Timm features artwork which appears to capture the inner spirit of Chief Big Foot through his eyes. “Ugly” is not a word that enters your mind as you see the noble Chief. A closer look indicates that Bob himself is the talented artist.

We’ve shared information found from a plethora of resources. Some of the facts are disputed, but all show pride in our area and its rich history. Special thanks to the many local historians and the Lakeshore Library System, who continue to be “keepers of the fires”, in the legends, lore and artifacts that help to teach the rest of us to remember those who walked the shore path long before us.

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Ken – In case you want to include a sidebar:

For more information on Chief Big Foot and other local history, the following resources are an excellent start:

**Publications:**

*Annals of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin* – James Simmons, 1897

*Heritage Walks of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin* – Alice Hackett, 1976

*The Book of Lake Geneva* – Paul B. Jenkins, 1922

*Wau-Bun – The Early Day in the Northwest* – Mrs. John Kinzie, 1930

**Places to Visit:**

Geneva Lake Area Museum of History – (262) 248-6060

Lakeshores Library System - A network of 15 local libraries to serve you -  
<http://www.lakeshores.lib.wi.us>

The Walworth County Historical Society – <http://www.geocities.com/walcohistory>  
(262-723-4248)