

BUFFALO (Ke Che Waish Ke, also Bezhike) (1759 ?-7 September 1855), traditional Chief of the Lake Superior Bands of Chippewa, was born along the southern shore of Lake Superior to Chippewa parents, whose names did not come down to us. Reared in the traditional ways of the Anishinabe or Chippewa or Ojibway, he lived a rigorous healthy life, while acquiring a thorough knowledge of the history of the tribe and traditions of his culture. Early in life his marked ability to use the expressive Chippewa language distinguished him in councils. He rose to become the principal chief of the several bands of Chippewa inhabiting nineteen million acres of the forests and lakes from the upper peninsula of Michigan across the northern third of Wisconsin into the eastern portion of Minnesota, a region of beauty as well as great wealth in timber and natural resources.

A peace chief he kept his lodge at Madeleine Island (La Pointe), near present day Bayfield, Wisconsin, a communication and trade center of the north country, a region primarily dependent on water routes. He consistently worked with tribal warriors and leaders to soften the harshness of the Chippewa wars with the Sioux. Around 1500 the Chippewa had drifted into the Lake Superior basin and established themselves at Madeleine Island. For 250 years they had slowly pushed inland against the Sioux eventually to shove them into southern Minnesota.

In the treaties of 1837 and 1842 the Chippewa bands of Lake Superior ceded their lands in Michigan and Wisconsin to the United States, reserving the right to remain if they were peaceful, a condition they carefully fulfilled. Almost immediately white traders and speculators began to press the government to remove them. In 1849 President Zachary Taylor issued an order to remove them from Wisconsin. The Chippewa and their white friends, missionaries, teachers, traders, and Wisconsin citizens tried to have the order negated. To facilitate their

major officials in the Indian bureaucracy connived to lure them to Sandy Lake in central Minnesota to receive their annuity payments that they used to purchase necessary supplies. They then deliberately withheld payment until early November when the snows began, hoping the fierce winter would lock them in there. With rivers frozen, canoes crushed, and disease rife the Chippewa attempted to carry their provisions to their Wisconsin homes to feed their destitute families. Perhaps 500 hundred Chippewa, mostly young men, perished from disease and the weather in the government's diabolical trap, an estimate of twelve percent of the tribe.

Having exhausted local remedies and having the federal bureaucracy callously thwart their pleasings, the ninety-two year old Chief Buffalo resorted to the only move he felt was left to save the tribe. He decided to journey to Washington to make a personal appeal to President Millard Fillmore. The bureaucracy refused to release travel money from the Chippewa's own funds. Whereupon with his small group of assistants and interpreter Benjamin Armstrong, Buffalo canoed to the nearest steamboat town. There they danced and performed on the streets to earn sufficient money to take them to the next town and by this means traveled to the national capitol. Upon reaching Washington the government supported them. By persistence Buffalo finally saw Fillmore and convinced him of the justness of the Chippewa request. Fillmore canceled the removal order and ordered a new treaty to define homes for them in Wisconsin. In the treaty of 1854 the Chippewa bands of Lake Superior Chippewa of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota each obtained a reservation.

Revered by ~~today's~~ Chippewa bands of Lake Superior, Buffalo rightly is regarded as their exemplary leader whose courage in the face of overwhelming odds coupled with the wisdom to penetrate the white man's governmental structure saved them from expulsion and a grim fate. He enabled the Chippewa to keep

their homes around the southern end of the great lake. He accomplished this by adhering to the principles of the traditional Chippewa and utilizing the peace path, a testament to the strength of a culture and to the abilities of an aged honorable man.

When he died in his lodge on Madeleine Island he left a widow, his fifth wife, none of whose names ^{are} was recorded. Neither is anything known of his immediately family who were numerous. Two busts of Chief Buffalo are in the national capitol. In 1855 a marble bust by Francis Vincenti was placed in the Senate Gallery; and, in 1858 Joseph Lassalle made a bronze replica for the House of Representative's staircase.

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Bibliography. Buffalo left no papers, he was illiterate. A few of his translated speeches delivered during negotiations with whites appear in various federal records are discussed in Ronald N. Satz, *Chippewa Treaty Rights* (1991) His pipe carried to Washington, complete with the historical ideographs he scratched on it depicting his journey, meeting with the President, and relating success he gave to his honest interpreter Benjamin Armstrong. It survives in the private possession of the great-great grandson in Stevens Point.

The primary source for the journey to Washington is in the memoirs of Benjamin Armstrong, *Early Life Among the Indians: Reminiscences of Benj. G. Armstrong* (1892). Richard F. Morse, "The Chippewa of Lake Superior," *State Historical Society of Wisconsin Collections* 3 (1904), pp. 365-369, contains an obituary. William Warren, *History of the Ojibways* (1885), p. 464, mentions him, while Hamilton Nelson Ross, *La Pointe: Village Outpost* (1960) contains scattered references. His badly damaged tombstone still stands in the Madeleine Island cemetery (La Pointe). A description and discussion of the Buffalo bust in the federal capitol is in John O. Holtzhueter, "Chief Buffalo and other Wisconsin

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Related Art in the National Capitol," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 56 (1973-74): 284-288.

James A. Clifton, "Wisconsin Death March: Explaining the Extremes in Old Northwest Indian Removal," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 75 (1987): 1-39, provides a picture of the forced removal of the Chippewa that contains numerous weaknesses, some of them corrected in Satz, *Chippewa Treaty Rights*. Satz's discussion of the period is excellent.