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Main Poche: The Last of the Traditional Potawatomi War Chiefs



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In the opening years of the 19th century, Native and European Americans struggled for lands throughout the area that we now refer to as the Midwest part of the United States. Among the leaders of the Indians who resisted European intrusion into their territories were the legendary Tecumseh and his brother Tenskawatawa, the Shawnee Prophet. Much has been written about these two significant figures in American history (Sugden 1985), but other leaders also emerged during this time that have not been as well researched. One of these is the Potawatomi *wabeno* and war chief, Main Poche. This paper briefly describes Main Poche, his role in Potawatomi society, and offers several explanations to account for why he is not as well known as other Indian leaders of this period.

At the time of European contact, the Potawatomi occupied lands in the southern Great Lakes area (Clifton 1998). The Potawatomi subsisted with a mixed economy of hunting and gathering supplementing corn, beans, and squash agriculture. As Europeans moved into areas west of the Appalachians seeking fertile farmland, the Potawatomi and numerous other groups fled and/or attempted to resist the intruders.

Main Poche was born in the mid-1760s in southern Michigan. Early on, he was recognized as being a powerful figure because of his deformity that helped him to gain respect and power amongst his people. "Main Poche," in French, means Withered Hand. This name stems from his deformity—he was born with no fingers or thumb on his left hand. Many Indians believed that Main Poche was not born of a woman, but that the Great Spirit, himself, created him. They believed that he sprung out of the ground and, as a consequence of providing Main Poche with his special powers, the Great Spirit "marked" him with his deformity or clubbed hand (Draper 1814–1827).

Most Indians believed that deformities were a gift from the Great Spirit. Only the most powerful individuals received such deformities. The Great Spirit, in return for granting these special powers, gave deformities to them so that the Great Spirit could recognize them if they ever came into contact. This is one way Main Poche achieved his great influence amongst the tribes of this era (Draper 1814–1827).

Another way Main Poche achieved great prestige was through his father, who was, himself, a great Potawatomi war chief and intensely anti-American. All the Potawatomi villages in Michigan and northern Indiana were anti-American; thus, Main Poche grew up hating white Americans. Main Poche was taught the art of warfare at a very young age, and the fact that his father was a great war chief only increased his odds of becoming a great warrior chief himself. Therefore, Main Poche gained influence through his numerous successful raids against the Osage tribe and the American settlements. The Potawatomi believed these accomplishments showed that the successful warrior leader possessed great spirit powers. Remarkably, the first time Main Poche was injured was in 1810 on a raid against the Osages. By this time, Main Poche was probably in his mid-40's. When the Indians saw that Main Poche was injured, they believed that the musket that wounded him was made from a great Manitou (Draper 1814–1827).

Being a great, eloquent speaker was yet another way Main Poche gained influence amongst the Indians. Main Poche "was an excellent orator with the ability to mesmerize his audience" (Edmunds 1985:261). He persuaded Indians through his eloquent oration to believe everything he said.

Shortly after 1795, Main Poche moved to Illinois to establish his own village at the crossing of Rock Creek and the Kankakee River (Edmunds

1985:260). Because of his anti-American reputation, Main Poche's village soon attracted other anti-American Indians and became a major meeting place for American raiding. During this time, Main Poche married several women. Main Poche "always had three wives, and at one time had six" (Draper 1814–1827). This further demonstrates the power and wealth of Main Poche. One had to be very powerful and wealthy to support a family of this size.

Main Poche was described as a

figure of commanding presence ... A huge, muscular man with long black hair, Main Poche had a 'surly and brooding countenance' highlighted by dark piercing eyes ... a monster who was distinguished by a girdle, sewed full of human scalps, which he wore around his waist, and strings of bear claws and the bills of owls and hawks round his ankles (Edmunds 1985:260–261, 269).

Main Poche used another tactic to gain influence amongst the tribes of his era. Drinking whiskey, Main Poche became an alcoholic at a young age. He told his tribesmen the Great Spirit told him that he must constantly drink this "spirituous liquor" and kill as much as possible in order to keep his great powers. If he did not perform these rites, Main Poche would lose his powers and become inferior to other powerful Indians (Draper 1814–1827).

Main Poche, however, displayed a negative side while drinking. When intoxicated, he raped any woman that crossed his path and fought against his friends and family. This created intra-tribal bloodshed, which rarely happened and was considered to be the worst action within the Potawatomi tribal society. But Main Poche, even sober, possessed a violent temper and tolerated

no rivals. Using his great influence, he publicly destroyed other wabenos. If this was not effective enough, Main Poche used poison, such as arsenic, to kill his rivals (Blair 1911:203). Even in Potawatomi terms, Main Poche was considered to be "a rogue male, a man with an insatiable desire for killing" (Clifton 1998:194).

Main Poche was the most powerful Potawatomi *wabeno* or shaman. A wabeno was skilled in many areas. A wabeno used sleight-of-hand tricks and ventriloquism to increase his influence among his people. A wabeno was also a "fire handler" who possessed magical powers that enabled him

to hold hot coals, place their hands in campfires, and even to exhale flames from their mouth and nostrils ... and could thrust their arms into boiling water or vats of steaming maple syrup without any apparent injuries (Edmunds 1985:259).

This medicine made it possible for wabenos to transform themselves into human fireballs that could attack their enemies.

Being a wabeno, Main Poche was highly respected or feared by everyone that he came into contact with. The Potawatomis also recognized two other types of shamans. The medical specialist, curer, or sucking doctor was skilled in sleight-of-hand tricks that captured the faith of the ill and their family members. This doctor actually sucked out the bad "medicine" or illness that was harassing his patients. He then presented his patients with an object that was blamed for the illness. A *chaskyd* (Diviner) captured the attention and faith of his audience through ventriloquism, sleight-of-hand tricks, foretelling future events, and locating lost objects or loved ones. A *wabeno* (Dawn Man), however, was the most powerful of all shamans.

Besides performing his own unique skills, he could also do anything that a medical specialist and *chaskyd* could do (Clifton 1998:123).

Much of a wabeno's medicine was related to fire. As a result, a wabeno performed most of his rituals in the dark. Wabenos owned special songs, which connected them to the spirit world. With his connections to the spirits, a wabeno predicted events and provided important information. At night, a wabeno was joined in feasts by followers at which point, they chanted and used special drums and rattles. This kind of ritual impressed a wabeno's audience by providing a contrasting effect of dark from the night and light from the flames. In addition to transforming into human fireballs, wabenos were also believed to be shapeshifters. They could "assume the shape of animals and prowl the Potawatomi villages or the surrounding countryside after dark" (Edmunds 1985:259).

A wabeno, such as Main Poche, possessed a medicine bundle that included sacred objects in it that protected him during the rest of his life. This medicine bundle also enabled him to cure diseases. He was believed to be able to change the weather and cast spells on certain people or events. Some of these spells were directed towards increased "success in hunting, while others were particularly effective in winning lovers or obtaining sexual favors" (Edmunds 1985:259–260).

Wabenos were highly respected and feared by the tribesmen. Evil powers from other medicine men were blamed for all misfortunes that happened to a tribal member. The Potawatomi and other tribes, as a result, allied themselves with a powerful wabeno. In this way, individuals hoped that they might obtain some of the wabeno's medicine and the shaman shielded them from any misfortunes that other shamans cast

against them. Tribal members would approach the wabeno and offer their “protector” with gifts of tobacco, liquor, or trade goods. Then, they asked the shaman to cast spells on their enemies (Draper 1814–1827).

Main Poche, like all Potawatomi warriors complied with his tribe’s rules of warfare. There were three main reasons why the Potawatomi went to war. A very important motive for the individual was to obtain prestige and wealth. This was achieved by taking their defeated enemies’ women, horses, or other materials. They also took prisoners from their enemy groups. The second reason was to defend and expand the tribal territory. Specifically, the tribe defended and increased their hunting grounds, fishing sites, garden lands, and village locations. The third reason to go to war, as fashioned by Main Poche, involved the effort to restore the power and energies of the warrior and his clan. When a clan member received an insult, such as death or any other kind of injury, this “insult” was felt as a blow to the entire clan. It was an insult, which they believed, weakened the magical power and energy of the clan. Such an injury did not have to be an actual event. For example, an insult could be received in a dream or vision. To the Potawatomi, this was sufficient enough to wage war against their enemies (Clifton 1998:173).

Once this injury was actually experienced or dreamed of, the Potawatomi warrior painted his face and body black and red. The color black is the traditional symbol of approaching death or catastrophe. Before leaving for war, the warriors shaved their heads, “leaving only a scalp lock and often adding a roach of deer or porcupine hair adorned with an eagle feather” (Edmunds 1978:17). The warrior made his intentions publicly known to the whole tribe, and made a temporary wigwam

with a red wampum belt or strip of red cloth hanging in the center. Wampum was a woven belt used by different tribes to invite another tribe or individual to side with the warrior in war. This belt would be painted red. The warrior would then wait in the wigwam for volunteers to join his war party. This warrior did not have to be experienced in war or recognized as a warrior leader. In fact, the leader of the war party did not have to possess any war experiences at all. This is how Main Poche and every other warrior started out (Clifton 1998:174).

With sufficient support from his clan, the warrior and his volunteers fasted, abstained from sexual intercourse and other sources of “pollution,” dreamed and compared their dreams, stored up their magical powers, and worked up their courage before going to war. By doing this, a Potawatomi war party formed a kind of magical-supernatural pact with one another. They also agreed to eat portions of any enemy they might kill. This symbolized their rage. The Potawatomi believed when they did this, they acquired the personal spirit-power of the fallen enemy warrior, thus increasing the strength of their own spirit-power (Clifton 1998:174).

The war party’s main objective was to kill as many enemies and capture as many prisoners as possible, while at the same time, avoid any losses to themselves. The Potawatomi and other Indians believed that if a warrior killed and ran away, he would receive glory and be available for combat for another day. For this reason, Main Poche and the Potawatomi were masters of the surprise ambush. This military tactic involved using bows-and-arrows or muskets. The Potawatomi tried to surround the enemy group and fire their weapons from a distance (Clifton 1998:174–75).

This long-range tactic would create an initial shock for the enemy group.

This tactic worked exceptionally well against the French, British, and Americans. These groups were trained to line up accordingly and fire on command. But, these surprise attacks created panic and they were unable to follow orders. Once this happened, the Potawatomi followed up immediately with a variety of weapons for close combat. These weapons included shields, ball-headed war clubs, tomahawks, flat war clubs, knives, spears, and lances. In this way, the Potawatomi achieved their goal of losing very few casualties and defeating a larger enemy group (Clifton 1998:174–75).

A victorious Potawatomi war leader such as Main Poche was in charge of all the prisoners. The leader ordered the prisoners to be tortured and killed, which further insulted the enemy group. Or, they adopted them into the tribe. If a clan lost a family member due to death or any other reason, they may have adopted a prisoner or other member of the tribe who then acquired the same name as the lost child. At the time of the adoption, a naming ritual was performed. This ritual was believed to transform the adoptee into the identity of the lost family member and he/she acquired the soul of the lost family member. Thus, after the ritual, the adoptee was believed to be the same person the clan had lost, both in body and spirit. Interestingly, the adoptee believed this too and even went to war against his former tribe or group (Clifton 1998:176).

Successful warriors were rewarded in several ways. Eagle feathers were given to warriors who had killed an enemy. The tribe made songs or legends about the successful warrior. The feats involving man-to-man combat were noted on coup sticks or on a special kind of war-club shaped like the stock of an antique French wheel-lock musket. These were ways in which the warrior obtained prestige among his clan-mates.

However, there was one act that was looked down upon. If a successful warrior brought home any kind of trophy or souvenir from the event, the man was believed to be weakened and polluted by powerful supernatural forces. He would, then, have to go through a naming ritual to acquire a new name, which symbolized a transformation in his identity (Clifton 1998:176).

Because of his successful raids against the Osages and the Americans, Main Poche gained great influence among the Potawatomis, Ojibwas, Ottawas, Kickapoos, Sauks, Fox, and other Indians. For this reason, Main Poche was courted by many groups who were seeking his allegiance. The most important of these powers were the Shawnee brothers (Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet), the British, and the United States.

Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet preached against the white ways. They believed that all Indians should not accept any part of the white American culture and should go back to living the traditional life. They tried to wipe out the Americans by forming a united Indian army. They both knew that Main Poche, because of his great influence, could be the key to their success.

Main Poche met with the Shawnee Prophet late in October 1807 in Greenville, Ohio. He spent almost two months with the Shawnee Prophet and agreed with him that the Americans were the “children of the Great Serpent, or Evil Power, and evidently subscribed to Tenskwatawa’s teachings that the Indians should use no products of American manufacture” (Edmunds 1985:262). However, Main Poche was unwilling to stop his drinking and refused to cease his raids against the Osage tribe. Despite this, Main Poche did agree to spread Tenskwatawa’s new religion. He also invited the Shawnee brothers to move their village to western

Indiana on the Tippecanoe River. Main Poche said that the new site held more plentiful game, and was less vulnerable to American military expeditions. The Shawnee brothers accepted. When they reached their new destination, they were approached by pro-American Miami Indians. Among these was Little Turtle, a Miami chief. The Miamis told the Shawnee Prophet that they were unwelcome. The Shawnee Prophet replied that the “Great Spirit backed his venture... and it was not in the power of mortals to obstruct it. Anyway... Main Poc and other Indians supported him, and he (Main Poche) had invited them to join at his new town” (Sugden 1985:167). Once the Miamis learned that Main Poche endorsed this plan, they retired in defeat. Main Poche was also in contact with Tecumseh. Main Poche traveled into Canada with Tecumseh to recruit more warriors for the Shawnee Prophet’s cause. And on several occasions, Main Poche joined Tecumseh in raids against the Americans.

The British also wanted Main Poche to be their ally. The British went about it the wrong way, however. They were more concerned in using the Indians to fight their own wars for them against the Americans. They encouraged Main Poche and the Potawatomis to continue raiding American settlements. The British told the Indians that war was inevitable with the Americans and promised that they would join them in war against the Americans. The British never really followed through with their promises. Later, they made peace with the Americans after realizing the strength of the United States military (Clifton 1998).

Main Poche hated the Americans, but they, too, tried to win him over. United States Indian agent, William Wells, described Main Poche as being “the greatest warrior in the west... the pivot on which the minds of all the Western Indians turned..., (he) has more influence than any other Indian”

(Edmunds 1985:263). Because Main Poche was considered to be so influential, the United States government invited him to Washington in hopes of impressing him and acquiring his allegiance. In 1808, during the Christmas holidays, Main Poche personally met with President Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson tried to convince Main Poche to stop the raiding and to settle down. Jefferson told Main Poche that the Potawatomi tribe should become farmers and raise domestic animals. Main Poche refused Jefferson’s pleas and decided to go back to his village (Edmunds 1985:264).

Main Poche never completely joined forces with the Americans, British, or the Shawnee brothers. The fact that Main Poche had to drink and go to war with the Osages and the Americans only benefited the British. But the British were not powerful enough to keep their promises. After Tecumseh’s death on October 5, 1813, the chances of a united Indian army faded away. Realizing the war was over, Main Poche retired to his camp called the Manesti, on the Yellow River in Indiana. Here, Main Poche drank heavily and grew deaf. In the spring of 1816, he died while hunting in Michigan. Main Poche’s “death in 1816 is significant in that the incorrigible old warrior was the last of the traditional war chiefs. His way of life had ended. The new leaders among the tribe would be men skilled in diplomacy, not warfare. Some would be full-bloods, and some would be of mixed lineage, but all would be masters of accommodation” (Edmunds 1978:206).

Even though Main Poche often was at the center of Indian-white relations, most historians and scholars overlooked his accomplishments for several reasons. As far as personal influence over Indian tribes, Main Poche was overshadowed by Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet. Tecumseh’s influence was extensive and he was highly respected, but Main Poche

was also respected, though perhaps it was respect derived from fear. As a major Indian religious figure, Main Poche has been overshadowed by the Shawnee Prophet, partly because Tenskwatawa was associated with Tecumseh. The Shawnee Prophet also predicted an eclipse of the sun in June 1806. Again, Main Poche was perceived also to be a powerful *wabeno* with great power derived from a number of spiritual sources and material substances.

Another reason why Main Poche may not be as well known is that he is hard to find in the historic record. His name, "Main Poche," has over a dozen different known spellings. These also have different English translations such as Lame Hand, Crippled Hand, Withered Hand, or Swelled Hand. Besides these names, Main Poche also has at least two other names, such as Winibiset (Crafty One) and Wapakee.

These are spelled differently as well. Because of such confusion regarding his name, some historians and scholars have referred to Main Poche as being two or more different Indians (Edmunds 1985:269).

Main Poche may not be as well known as other prominent Indians of his time because he does not fit the image of the noble savage (Edmunds 1985:269). The image of noble savage was constructed by historians of the 19th century and has been carried forward into contemporary times. This image characterizes Indians as dignified and virtuous in their speech, relationships to each other and to the land. Main Poche was perceived as a ruthless person, possessing few qualities that Americans admired. Compared to Main Poche, Tecumseh was seen by white Indian agents and traders as being a "good Indian," or a savior, and he has been immortalized for it. Main Poche lacked

this image, and for this reason, Indian agents and traders have somewhat ignored Main Poche. As a result, there are few written documents and, presently, there are also no known images of this powerful and influential Potawatomi leader, despite relatively abundant documentation of Tecumseh and indeed many other Indian leaders of this time.

Finally, because so little has been documented about Main Poche, it is possible that accounts of his activities were slanted or biased by writers such as Forsyth and others writing in the early 19th century. A careful and extensive review of literature from this time needs to be undertaken to more fully understand the character and role of Main Poche, one of the last great Potawatomi war chiefs.

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