

Where is Red Bird Buried?



In 1827 a series of incidents occurred, which were to be described later as "The Winnebago War". The Winnebago (now known as the Ho-Chunk), already angered by the encroachment of miner's into Southwest Wisconsin, heard a rumor that two of their tribe had been taken prisoner at Fort Snelling, charged with theft, and forced to run the gauntlet resulting in their death. This and other incidents caused the tribe to call on their leaders for revenge. White settlers similarly distrusted the Winnebago because in the spring of 1826 some of their tribe had attacked and murdered the Francis Methode family (both parents and seven children) while they were camped on the Yellow River collecting maple syrup. The spot is about 12 miles north of Prairie Du Chien on the Iowa side of the Mississippi (in what is now Effigy Mounds National Monument).

Chief Red Bird, who was known and generally trusted in the area of Prairie Du Chien, decided to exact revenge according to the tribal custom. This required an equal or greater shedding of the blood from those who had wronged the tribe. On June 26, 1828 Red Bird, a warrior called We-kaw and several other Winnebago went to a log cabin 2 miles from Prairie Du Chien (Frenchtown) owned by Registre Gagnier, a farmer. Gagnier invited them to share the meal then boiling in the pot. They entered the cabin, and sat to eat. On a predetermined signal Gagnier was shot in the chest. A visitor, Paschal Menior was shot at but jumped through a window and escaped unharmed. Another visitor, Solomon Lipcap was chased from the cabin by We-Kaw, murdered and scalped. In the meantime Mrs. Theresa Gagnier ran from the house with her son Francis. She could not find her infant daughter Marie Louisa in the smoke which filled the cabin. Marie Louisa was hiding under the bed. A Winnebago named "Little Sun" returned to the cabin and found her crawling on the floor. He later said, "that he first gave the child a kick on the left hip, and then with his gun barrel in his hands, struck her with the breech of the gun on the right shoulder, and with his knife struck her across the back of the neck, intending to behead her, and carry the head away with him", but the others called for him to join them in making their escape, so he scalped the child

and left her for dead. Amazingly, the infant survived and lived to an old age, becoming the mother of 13 children. She died on February 9, 1893.



On June 30, 1827 about 150 Winnebago's attacked two keelboats on the Mississippi, near the mouth of the Bad Axe River. Two boatmen were killed and four were wounded in the skirmish. About seven Winnebago died in the attack or afterward from wounds. Following these atrocities about 500 troops were raised to pursue the Winnebago's. Red Bird, fearing horrible retribution on his people decided to surrender himself and We-Kaw to save his people. On September 3, 1827 they rode into Portage and surrendered to Major William Whistler.



Red Bird arrived dressed in a fine clean elk skin outfit, holding a white flag, and chanting his death-song. "I am ready," said Red Bird. "Let me be free. I have given my life-it is gone." He then bent down, picked up a pinch of dust between his finger and thumb, and blew it away saying, "I would not take it back. It is gone." His quiet dignity and courage impressed the soldiers who refused the demand of his tribesman that he be killed rather than suffer the indignity of imprisonment. He was taken to Fort Crawford at Prairie

Du Chien and held prisoner with others. He was treated well, but died of disease in 1828.

This is not the end of his story. In 1923 in an article in the Wisconsin State Journal, it was asserted that after his death his fellow tribesmen retrieved his body and took it to "Red Bird Knoll" between Platteville and Dickeyville Wisconsin. The origin of this story is unknown. It may have come from Ho-Chunk oral legend. In October 1939 the Madison Capital Times reported that archeologists had excavated what was believed to be the body of Red Bird buried on the Villa Louis Grounds outside what was the north gate of Fort Crawford. In the November 17th 1959 issue of the Dubuque Telegraph Herald an article appeared titled "Wisconsin Asked to Mark Indian Chief's Burial Site". It repeated the story of Red Bird's burial on red Bird Knoll near Highway 151 between Platteville and Dickeyville, and stated: "The Grant County Historical Society has applied to the state for a historical marker to designate the knoll". I have been unable to determine what happened to the skeleton excavated. I find no record of the state's reply to the Historical Societies request. So the question remains; where is Red Bird's body?



Statue of Red Bird at High Cliff State Park, Sherwood Wisconsin