

# The History of Chief Okemos 1775-1857

Chief O-ge-mah of the Grand Riverbank Chippewa (Ojibwe)



Portrait 1857 by O.A. Jenison Michigan State Archives, Lansing, Michigan

*Written and Edited by Sherrie Paty Barber, Okemos Class of 1966*

*The following article, written in 1911, came from the pen Daniel Stanford Mevis who moved to the Lansing area as a young boy in 1847. Mr. Mevis, born 26 October 1837 in Niagara County, New York, wrote pioneer storied articles for the Lansing State Journal during the early part of the 20th century. Mr. Mevis also was a Civil War veteran and resident of Lansing for over 80 years. His memory and recall were excellent and he was described as, "one of the best known citizens of Lansing for probably half a century."*

Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Saturday 7 January 1911

**"INDIANS" The Romance of the Redman -- an interesting, graphically told tale of the happy days which a white boy spent in the company of Okemos Indians, learning their craft and their language and their pleasures.**

By Uncle Dan

"I am asked occasionally by some of the rising generation, "Were there any Indians here, Uncle Dan, when you came?"

"Oh, yes, there certainly were, but not many, perhaps about one hundred or more, known to the settlers as the Okemos tribe. They resided for some time, we were told, on the Cedar river about seven miles east of Lansing which would account for the name of Okemos given to that locality. For many years they were in the habit of drifting into town in small parties, disposing of various articles of their handiwork, such as baskets, fancy boxes made of bark, usually of the elm, and decorated with partly colored porcupine quills; buckskin moccasins decorated with beads and, in their seasons, whortleberries, cranberries, maple sugar, deer skins, fans and occasionally a few wolf heads, on which they obtained a bounty.

#### **CHIEF JIM RESPECTED**

"Their old warrior, Chief Okemos, on account of his advanced age and feebleness of frame, had long since delegated the chieftainship to his youngest son Jim, who was quite a gentleman. He had been educated in an Indian school and spoke English quite fluently. The eldest son John being a dissolute and all-around bad man, lost his right to the succession. The whites respected Chief Jim highly and his word was of more value than a check on the Macomb County bank. Quiet genial and good looking, he always seemed to have the affairs of the tribe well in hand. His will was their law, from which there was no appeal.

"Though quite a young boy, I became interested in these pre-historic people, and soon became acquainted with the boys with whom I later spent many a summer day ranging through the bush; catching black snakes along the river banks and slinging them into the stream; shooting of birds and squirrels with the bow and arrow, and, maybe, winding up the day's frolic with a swim. I was always a

welcome visitor in the camp for many years. The whole tribe were in the habit of camping on the Cooly farm, nearly opposite Waverly park. They camped there for a supply of venison and cured it on the spot.

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**How Deer Were Caught.**

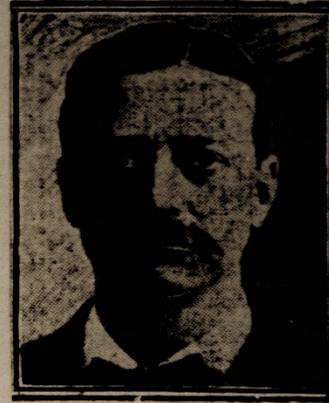
"Their method of capturing the deer was not by shooting. They would wait until dark and then start out, two Indians in a canoe, one sitting in the stern and the other on his knees in the bow, where a burning pine knot served for a 'Jack light.' Armed with a tomahawk and scalping knife, canoe No. 1 would glide noiselessly up the river where the deer would be found standing in the water for protection from the mosquitoes. Mr. deer would gaze intently at the light while the canoe, guided by the man in the stern, who did the paddling, would quietly steal upon him and at the opportune moment, the man on the prow would, with his tomahawk, strike the deer on the head, killing him instantly. This done, the Indian would drop quietly into the water, hip deep probably, and with his knife disembowel the animal and place him in the canoe. This done in less time than it takes to tell it, the Indians would 'about face' in the canoe and return to the landing.

"Canoe No. 2, in the meantime, was passing up and doing the same thing. Then No. 3 and so on, so that the following morning one could count from three to six deer lying on the bank waiting the attention of the squaws, who proceeded to skin, cut up and cure the venison. The manner of curing was this: A fire was started beside an old rotten log. Wet leaves and moss were raked over it to make a dense smoke; sticks were sharpened and thrust into the ground beside the log and the pieces of meat impaled upon the upper ends over the smudge. In this way the Indians' 'stuff of life' was made impervious to the fly-pest or anything else except the ravenous appetite of the aborigine.

**Squaws Prepared Skins.**

"The skins were treated in much the same way. Tall sticks were driven into the ground and the hides, after the hair had been removed, stretched upon these and a smudge maintained under them until they were thoroughly smoked through and through. They were frequently taken off and rubbed through the hands of the two squaws having the work in charge. I often visited this camp, spending nearly the entire day with Miss Okemos and her elder sister, Mrs. John Tornip, who seemed delighted to entertain the 'nechin-wee—Shemoke man'—in their private tepee, where they were sure to be found busily engaged in making fancy articles, such as pretty baskets, and boxes of bark finely decorated with red, white and blue quills of the porcupine; fancy leggings and moccasins, etc. They feasted me on venison and 'qoash-gon', (bread),

## RAPS RAG TIME AND RAH-RAHS



Dr. A. L. Lowell.

President A. Lawrence Lowell, of Harvard University, denounced college cheering and "rag time" before the Music Teachers' National Association at Boston University recently. President Lowell said: "One of the saddest things is to go to a gathering of educated men—say college men, or even alumni—and note the kind of music given at their dinners. It is rag time, and rag time of a very poor quality. "These men seem to care very little for good music. Of all the processes of expressing emotions organized cheering is from every point of view the worst."

and found great sport in teaching me their language.

**Escorted Him in Style.**

"Long before I cared for it, the sun would settle upon the western horizon and Chief Jim would ask me 'if I didn't want to go home now?' Of course I did what was the proper thing to do. He would whistle and was soon surrounded by half a dozen husky lads all ready to do his bidding. Detailing two to take me home, he would bid me 'good bye and come again,' and these young bucks would bring me safely over the rapids."

## COLD WAVE HELPS COAL CONSUMPTION

NO SHORTAGES OF SUPPLY ARE NOTED, HOWEVER, SAYS BRADSTREET.

NEW YORK, Jan. 7.—Bradstreet's today says:

Country-wide cold weather, especially severe west and south, has stimulated demand for heavy winter wearing apparel, and, combined with usual clearance sales, made for a rather better than average final distribution of seasonable goods. In wholesale lines holiday inventories have been completed and salesmen are again on the road. Reports from jobbers are of a quite optimistic feeling as to spring trade, and good sales of goods adapted

## HELPFUL WORDS

From a Lansing Citizen.

Is your back lame and painful?

Does it ache especially after exertion?

Is there a soreness in the kidney region?

These symptoms indicate weak kidneys:

There is danger in delay.

Weak kidneys fast get weaker.

Give your trouble prompt attention.

Doan's Kidney Pills act quickly.

They strengthen weak kidneys.

Read this Lansing testimony.

Mrs. F. Butters, 157 S. Cedar st., Lansing, Mich., says: "The public testimonial given by my husband in October, 1906, in regard to the benefit I received from Doan's Kidney Pills was correct in every particular. I fully confirm that statement now as I have had no need of a kidney remedy since."

For sale by all dealers. Price 50 cents. Foster-Milburn Co., Buffalo, N. Y., sole agents for the United States.

Remember the name—Doan's—and take no other.

## HOW DEER WERE CAUGHT

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*Chief Okemos or O-ge-mah was of the Grand River Bank of the Chippewa (Ojibwe) tribe of Indians. The band he associated with camped and farmed along the Red*

*Cedar River from approximately Portland, Michigan south to Okemos. "Johnny Okemos" was born into Chippewa nations about 1788. His actual date of birth has been questioned as he was known to exaggerate his age. At least two different accounts have been told of why from the age of a young man to death, Johnny carried cruel scars on his back and head. Both stories are dated from around 1812 and in one version, after attacking American soldiers, Johnny found himself fighting for his life. He was severely wounded and left for dead. Another tale claimed he and a fellow band of Chippewa ambushed American troop supply wagons. The second story also claimed of Johnny being a scout for the British and being attacked by American cavalrymen. In both incidences many of the Indians warriors were killed. Johnny was one of the few who survived but with great wounds. Supposedly he never fought again.*

*The title of "Chief" has been questioned. It was after the devastating small pox and cholera epidemics of the 1830's that the small tribe Johnny was attached to began to wander. One author reported on the poor almost borderline famished existence of the small band. Somehow during this era, the moniker of Chief, probably due to his leadership, was attached to Johnny. The group hunted, fished and in summer season, farmed. The living was meager especially the farming aspect as the ground used was extremely poor. The Indians were constantly nomadic and many were in deprived health.*

*Another story of how he became a Chippewa Chief maintains that although he was a common warrior his courage and endurance in battle awarded him the position of Chief. Johnny did marry and three children were known; John, Jim and Mary. Johnny's wife was said to have died of tuberculosis. She succumbed on a trip to Canada when Johnny was seeking, for services rendered during the 1812 era, financial help.*

*Johnny was only 5 feet tall. In later life he was known for excessive drinking and by the 1850's the band of followers became less than a dozen. A tale involved Johnny showing up at a general store and demanding drink. The owner, after listening to demands and threats, finally grabbed Johnny by the throat and*

*thoroughly humiliated him in front of his followers. Johnny never returned to the general store and his followers melted away.*

*Note in the following newspaper article, Johnny's tribe and age are misidentified.*

*The Ottawa Free Trader (Ottawa, Illinois) Saturday 1 January 1859*

The Pottawatomie Chief Okemos, has for a long time lived near Lansing, Mich., died on Sunday last. His precise age was not known, but it is supposed to have been over one hundred years.

*The phrase, "old Tawas Chieftain," is an incorrect reference to Chief Okemos and his birth into the Chippewa tribe. The word Tawas is not derived from the word Ottawa. Okemos was not part of the Saginaw Chippewa tribe that once inhabited the now Tawas Bay, Tawas River region. Also, probably incorrect is the statement, "Okemos was a nephew of Pontiac." This has been refuted by several historians.*

*Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Wednesday 23 July 1913*

#### **INDIANS MAY ATTEND LOCAL HOME-COMING**

#### **COMMITTEE WANTS TO LOCATE DESCENDANTS OF JOHN OKEMOS, OLD TAWAS CHIEFTAIN**

#### **TO BE CITY GUESTS**

Plan Recalls Pioneer History of Central Michigan and Unique Indian Figure of the Old North-West Territory

Efforts of the Lansing home-coming committee to locate the nephew of John Okemos, the old Tawas Chieftain, in order to secure him as a guest of honor on City and State day of home-coming week, recalls the early history of this section and incidentally one of the most unique characters in American history.

#### **HAD SEAT ON CEDAR RIVER**

O-ge-mah, or Okemos, as he called himself, had his principal village on the Cedar river at the present site of the little village of that name. Okemos, who was a nephew of Pontiac, was born on what became later known as Knagg's reservation on the Shiawassee river. He lived early in life as Shim-ni-con, 24 miles from Lansing in Ionia county, but later came to this section.

Okemos was one of the most prominent figures in the pioneer history of the northwest territory. He was in the command of the war party of Ottawa who with others defeated St. Iair on the Miami river in 1791 (Okemos would have been 3 -4 years old) and on August 20, 1894, was himself defeated by "mad Anthony" Wayne on the Maumee river at the present site of Fort Wayne.

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### Defeated Chief Elkhart.

To Okemos was given credit for the winning of the bloodiest Indian battle of Michigan, which occupied four days at the present site of Three Rivers. The Pottawatomies under Pokagon combined with Okemos and Wakazoo of the Tawas to resist Elkhart of the Shawnees, who held northern Indiana. The "hoosier aborigines," who held forth on the site of the present city of Elkhart, attempted to secure hunting ground in the rich Michigan territory and were repulsed in the final decisive Indian battle of this section.

In the war of 1812 Okemos was accompanied by a brother, Standing-up-Devil. It is the latter's son whom the home-coming committee with the aid of the Pioneer and Historical society is endeavoring to locate. Two sons of Okemos, John, Jr., who succeeded his father as chief, and Jim, who located on a farm 25 miles from Stanton in Montcalm or Gratiot county, survived his death in 1858. Descendants of the latter are still residing in Michigan and invitations will be sent them to participate as guests of honor in Lansing's pioneer observance on City and State day, Tuesday, Sept. 2.

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Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Monday 28 July 1913

Newspaper inquiry into the where-a-bouts of John Okemos, son of old Chief Okemos, has resulted in several persons notifying the home-coming committee that the last known of the old man was at an Indian village in Isabella county.

A.M. Robson, a local merchant, and son of John Robson, has frequently seen the son, who is himself an old man. John Okemos during late years has been a community character in the vicinity of the little village of Weidman, where he has entertained the villagers and chance passersby with reminiscences of his father and the old frontier days.

Indian-like, Okemos claims to be more than 100 years old, and older residents say that if he is still living he must be near that age. The original chief used to come to a mill at North Lansing several times a year, and on these occasions, was accompanied by the son who was a grown young man at that time. The old man when last seen by Mr. Robson, entertained a party of traveling men on hotel veranda by playing on a flageolet. The old man required five cents to play the excruciating instrument and 25 cents to stop.

The committee today received a letter from C.G. Eaton of Owosso, who wrote: "If it is old Jonny Okemos you are trying to locate you will find him either in Isabella county or Indian heaven." Mr. Eaton was formerly a neighbor of the old man, who succeeded his father as chief. He says that Okemos has a number of Indian relics and a wealth of

reminiscences and stories of Pontiac. According to Mr. Eaton, Okemos came to this vicinity a few years ago to bury the body of his wife. Okemos, he says, had cared for her for 36 years during which time she was blind.

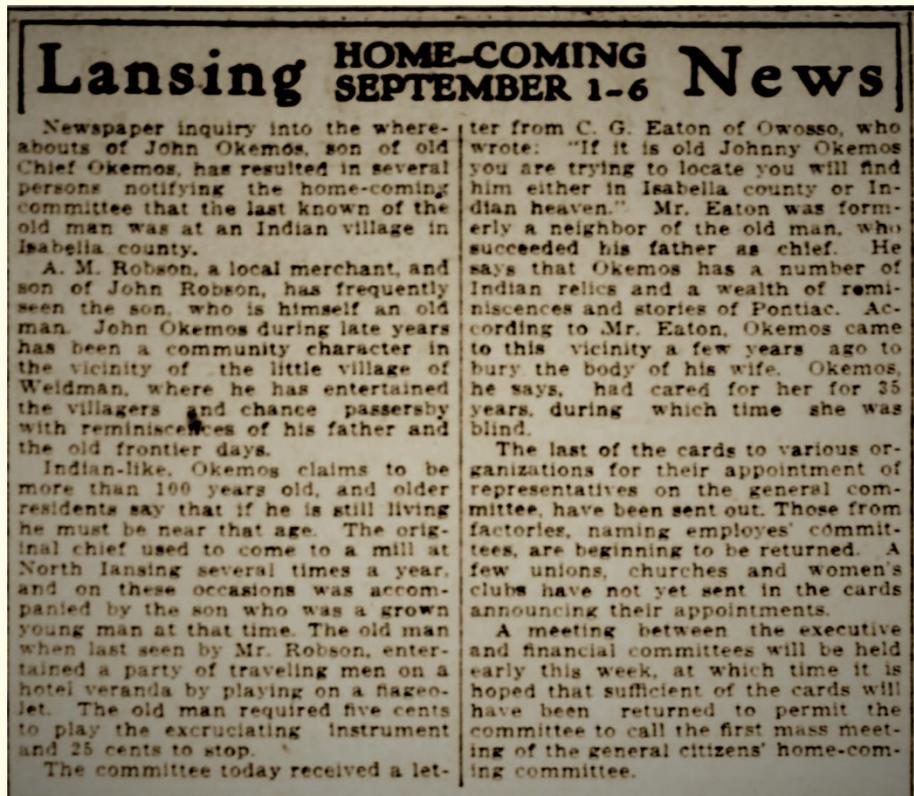
The last of the cards to various organizations for their appointment of representatives on the general committee have been sent out. Those from factories, naming employees committees, are beginning to be returned. A few unions, churches and women's clubs have not yet sent in the cards announcing their appointments.

*Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Wednesday 14 July 1915*

### **INDIANS FOIL WHITE MEN, THEIR BURIAL GROUND HALTS INGHAM ROAD WORK**

Graves of Chief Okemos Followers Upset Plans for Improving Highway Running to Detroit

Owing to a reluctance of County Road Commissioner Thomas Blizzard to disturb an old Indian burial place, improvement on the Detroit road between Okemos and Williamston is only partially completed, work having been abandoned, Tuesday.



It has been the intention of the commissioner to level a small ridge, which obstructs the view at a sharp curve on the road between Okemos and Williamston, just east of what at one time was known to all stage drivers and Ingham county residents as "The Red Bridge," a wooden structure that spanned the Red Cedar river.

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Verging on the edge of the ridge was dirt desired for the improvement mentioned. Blizzard learned, through an old Okemos settler, that a number of Indians had been buried at this spot and the place was left unmolested. It is doubtful, owing to superstition, whether the members of the crew would have disturbed the Indian mounds even though they had been ordered to do so.

### Smallpox Decimates Band.

That the red men now with the "Great Spirit" were members of old Chief Okemos' band, formerly living along the banks of the Red Cedar near the village of Okemos, and that they were a part of a band of 500 almost decimated by smallpox in the early fifties, is the belief of old Ingham county pioneers who knew Chief Okemos, personally, long after his band had been scattered by death and forced migrations by the government.

The outbreak of smallpox is recalled vividly by the pioneers now living. At the time of smallpox epidemic, Okemos had a summer camp near the old burial place, where 500 Indian families were gathered. They were of mixed nations the band being a combination of Tawas, Pottawatomes and Chippewas.

### Okemos a Crafty Chief.

Early Michigan history ranks Chief Okemos as one of the greatest and craftiest fighters in this part of the state. He rose from the ranks, his

leadership having been conferred on him unanimously by central Michigan Indians, after the battle of Sandusky, in which the American cavalry slaughtered his band of 50 braves, killing all but Okemos and his cousin Man-e-to-Corb-way.

Okemos and the other braves had enlisted with the British in 1796 and the fight occurred at Sandusky. Okemos and his cousin were found after the battle by squaws and nursed back to life, although the cousin remained a cripple all his life and Okemos carried a terrible scar on the top of his head, the result of a saber cut.

Chief Okemos is said to have died Dec. 5, 1858, at the age of 100 years. The Americans whom he fought often fed him in his later years, when abandoned by some of his band, shorn of tribal wealth and power, the old man trapped, fished and hunted along the Grand river.

Okemos was born at Knagg's Station on the Shiawassee river, east of Lansing. His tribal name was O-gemah. After he became chief by selection the name was changed to Okemos. The various nations claimed he was a favorite of the Great Spirit after the battle of Sandusky, hence his election to the chieftainship. Okemos was a nephew of the powerful chief Pontiac.

### Drove Elkhart From State.

Among other exploits, Okemos drove Chief Elkhart from Michigan, Elkhart having invaded this state because game was getting scarce in Indiana. In 1837 and 1838, Okemos shifted his camp to the River Raisin. In 1845, he appeared near Okemos with his band of 500 braves and squaws. Soon afterwards, smallpox and the plan of the federal government to transport a number of the Michigan Indians to the southwest, left Okemos a chief without a following.

While hunting and trapping along the Grand river between this city and Delta, where old settlers still point out his camp on the north side of the river above the ruins of the mill dam, death overtook the aged warrior. The few followers with him transported the body by night stages to Shim-lin-con, an Indian settlement near Ionia. Here amid weird tribal ceremonies the body was interred, the ancient chief's gun, traps and fishing equipment with provisions, being buried with the body according to custom. Of the many followers of the once powerful Michigan chief not a one remains. Their bones are scattered over the old Michigan trail where they once hunted, fished and fought.

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*Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan) Sunday 23 July 1922*

#### **TRIBUTE TO OLD CHIEF PLANNED BY INGHAM**

Brave Warrior's Name Recalls Historic Battles in Early Michigan Days

Mason, Mich., July 22 - Ingham county is beginning to fall in line with others of the state and is making plans to mark some of its historic spots and place memorials to commemorate the deeds of its pioneers.

Before the white man's advent into this section it long had been the favorite hunting and camping ground of the Indians, and Okemos, a chief of the Chippewas, was the most noted of any whose history



It was a bleak day in December, 1858, when residents of that village saw approaching from the east a small band of Indians dragging a handsled, which they soon found bore the body of Chief Okemos wrapped in a blanket.

Contrary to the Indian custom, his tribe had decided that Okemos should have a Christian burial and be sent to his long sleep in a coffin. One was hastily constructed and in it placed the body, together with a full pouch of tobacco, a horn of powder and a bag of bullets, with food for his long journey and the utensils needed to prepare it. The coffin was placed on the handsled and the party proceeded to the Indian village of Sim-ni-con, on the Grand river in Ionia county, where the burial took place. This recently was appropriately marked by Stevens T. Mason chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, of Ionia.

### **TOOK WARPATH IN 1791.**

It is said that Okemos took the warpath about 1791, but all historians who tell of his exploits dwell chiefly on the part he had in the battle of Sandusky, in 1803. This Okemos considered the great event of his life, as it resulted in his being made chief of his tribe, and the story condensed is like this:

Okemos and his cousin Man-a-to-corb-way (known also as Korbish), with other braes, enlisted under the British flag, formed a scouting or war party, left the upper Raisin and made their rendezvous at Sandusky.

One morning, while lying in ambush near a road recently cut for the American army and its supply wagons, 20 cavalymen were seen approaching.

The Indians were hiding on a slight ridge with bushes in front of them. They immediately decided to attack the Americans, who outnumbered them, planning to fire and cripple them, then make a dash with their tomahawks. They waited until they could see to count the buttons on the coats of the mounted men before firing, when to their surprise they were repulsed and attacked by the Americans with drawn sabers. In telling of this Okemos said; "The plumes on their hats looked like a flock of a thousand pigeons just preparing to alight."

Okemos and his cousin fought side by side, firing and loading as they slipped from cover to cover. In a few minutes the sound of a bugle was heard, and when they looked up the road and woods were filled with mounted soldiers who soon overwhelmed the Indians and left them on the field for dead. To make sure of their annihilation the cavalymen rode over the prostrate Indians and stabbed each one in the chest with their sabers.

### **CHIEF'S HEAD CLOVEN.**

Okemos and his cousin both had their skulls cloven and were terribly slashed about their bodies. Okemos told that the last he remembered was feeling as though his head had been pierced with a red-hot iron, as he was in the thick of the fight. It was "many moons" after when he found himself being nursed by the squaws of his friends, who had found him and Korbish three days after the battle where

they had been left on the field for dead. It is said that these two and one other were the sole survivors of the 16 Indians who went into the battle.

Owing to his rugged constitution Okemos was restored to partial health, but he never took part in another battle, being convince that "white man was heap powerful."

O. E. Jenison, a pioneer resident of Lansing, who was intimately acquainted with Okemos, tells as follows:

"Shortly after the recovery of Okemos he solicited Colonel Godfrey to intercede for him with General Case, and this resulted in a treaty between Okemos and other chiefs and the United States. It is said that Okemos never violated this oath of fealty.

Not long after Okemos signed the treaty he settled with his tribe on the banks of the Shiawassee river, and his time from then on seems to have been divided between that camp and the one where Okemos village now stands, on the Cedar river a few miles east of Lansing. Here he hunted, fished, traded with the white man and cultivated his productive farm until about 1840.

Each year large number so of Indians were accustomed to visit their old camping ground, near Okemos, to bring food for the dead in their burial ground there, and the last thing before the Michigan Indians were taken to the west they gathered there to say farewell to their dead.

#### **EPIDEMIC OF SMALLPOX.**

About 1840 smallpox broke out among the tribe, which became so depleted by the scourge that when the white settlers came pouring in soon after the Indians became scattered, and Okemos, one so bold and fierce, became peace-loving, depending on the generosity of the pioneers for the greater part of his living. The plaintive, soft notes of the hunter's flute, made from the red aider, and the sound of the tom-tom at council fires were heard no more along the banks of the inland streams. They, like the buried tomahawks, were things of the past.

The story of any other chief would cause but little comment, but the character of this red-man and the part he bore in the pioneer history of Ingham county and the surrounding country, makes him a conspicuous figure.

At his greatest height Okemos never exceeded five feet four inches. He was lithe, wiry, active, intelligent and possessed of great bravery, but was never a ready speaker, although he dearly loved to tell - and boast - of his deeds in war time whenever he could find anyone to whom he could talk in the Indian tongue.

To the time of the breaking up of his tribe he always wore a blanket coat, with belt, steel pipe-hatchet, a tomahawk, and a long hunter-knife stuck in his belt in front, with a large bone handle showing outside the sheath. His cheeks and forehead and over his eyes he painted with vermillion. He wore a shawl wound around his head, turban style, and never discarded his true Indian leggins.

A few years previous to his death he gave over his chieftainship to his son, John, but never forgot that he was Okemos, once the chief of a powerful tribe of Chippewa and the nephew of Pontiac. he had the inherent pride of ancestry that is a trait of the human race.

#### **VILLAGE PERPETUATES NAME.**

Those who claim to know say that his real name was "O-Ge-mah," but he always called himself "Okemos," and the village of Okemos in Ingham county perpetuates his name. The band had a burial ground on the low land near Okemos and used to cache their corn on the knoll where the schoolhouse was build, near the farm cultivated by Okemos and his band.

Chief Okemos had a large family, but mention is made of only two by name - John, who succeeded his father as chief, and Jim, who became a farmer.

One anecdote told of Okemos regarding his home life is exceedingly pathetic in nature. In 1844 when on his way to Sarnia to try and get the annuity granted him by the Canadian government, he, with his wife and children, stopped for the night with a family near Port Huron.

At that time his wife was in the last stages of consumption and he showed for her the same consideration and loving care that white men give their wives. He carried her in his arms to the canoe in which they crossed the St. Clair river.

As he neared the middle of the stream Okemos hoisted the British flag, but he did not receive the annuity for which he went. His wife died on the trip and he brought her body back and took it to Riley for burial, after which he again went to Canada to make another effort to get the payments he claimed were due him.

#### **BEAR WAS OKEMOS'S TOTEM**

How he succeeded is not told but as he had given allegiance to the United States many years before it is thought that only his extreme poverty led him to make the attempt.

Like all Indian tribes the ones of Okemos had its totem, which was the bear.

O.A. Jenison obtained a picture of Okemos a few years before his death, which can be seen in the historical museum at the new State building in Lansing. He declared it was the only picture Okemos ever had taken and says, "Okemos sat for this picture, to my certain knowledge, in 1857," and from that little ambrotype many copies have been made, until the picture of Okemos is familiar to a large number of Michigan people.

It seems fitting that a stature of this chief should stand in the village which bears his name, and on the ground where much of his later life was spent, a visible memorial to the race who blazed the trail for the feet of the white man to tread.

Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Saturday 28 October 1922

## LANSINGITES AID OKEMOS STATUE

### Movement to Place Memorial to Indian Chieftain Receives Support

The campaign to raise funds for a memorial to Chief Okemos to be placed on the school grounds at the Okemos consolidated schools is being carried into the city. The Chief Okemos memorial association has been formed with officers and committees scattered throughout the county.

Officers of the association are: D. A. Benjamin, Okemos, president; Mrs. Marion Allen, Mason, vice president; George H. Bearup, Okemos, secretary; O. A. Jenison, Lansing, treasurer. The sum of \$2,000 is to be raised for the memorial.

In Lansing Friday Mr. Benjamin obtained several hundred dollars from those interested. The project has, it is claimed, a historic sentiment and it is receiving support from those to whom the past history of the county appeals.

Ingham county 70 years ago was a camping center for a number of the Indian tribes, Chief Okemos being the principal redskin leader. His main camp was on the site of the present village of Okemos.

Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Sunday 8 March 1942

Because Chief Okemos, whose life is indelibly written around the history of this part of Michigan, chose a spot six miles east of Lansing on the Red Cedar river, to use as a corn planting plot for many years, the village that appeared there became by the very nature of things, the town of Okemos.

And Okemos, with a history of more than a century as a white settlement, now possesses a population of 1,000 persons. It boasts scores of beautiful homes, in the natural settings provided by the terrain along the river and the low bluffs along the stream. It has a thriving business section, tow churches, a battery factory, and is the site of an excellent park, which is patronized by scores of Lansing picnic groups during the summer season.

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The quality of education received in rural one-room schools varied greatly depending on the resources of the community, and some graduates from eighth grade found entry into an area high school difficult. By 1920, Okemos followed the statewide trend of consolidating area schools into one central location to combine resources. The above photograph is of the Okemos consolidated school at the corner of Okemos and Mount Hope Roads. School buses were introduced to transport students living in far corners of the district.

three grades. An annex to the main building provides room for the manual training departments and the school music department. Six buses bring pupils to Okemos each school day from Alaiedon and Meridian townships. A total of 544 pupils attend the school, which has Leroy Bell as superintendent. Nick Musselman is principal, while Clare

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The recreation park at Okemos is built on a picturesque spot on the Red Cedar, on the south edge of the village. It is known as Ferguson park, in honor of the late John R. Ferguson, a former township supervisor who lost his life by drowning in a boat in which he was riding capsized on Lake Superior some years ago. the park proves to be a popular place in summer. It is equipped with picnic tables and facilities for outdoor cooking. Clear, cold water is available from a flowing pipe. It is maintained by the county highway commission.

The Okemos Men's club, a luncheon group, meets once each month and provides a social outlet, as well as an important organization for carrying on the village community activities. Walter Southworth is president of the club and LeRoy Bell is secretary.

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In December, 1839, J. H. Kilbourne built the first house in what is now the village of Okemos, and settled there with his family. The following year his brother-in-law, Freeman Brag, settled there. Soon afterwards a post office was established with J. H. Kilbourne as the first postmaster. Mail was brought in a bag, carried on horseback from Howell, the route ending at Grand Rapids at that time. Travelers followed an old Indian trail from Howell to Portland, a distance of 50 miles.

Freeman Brag, in 1841, laid out the present village site of Okemos and in 1842, he built the first saw mill on the town site, which was then heavily timbered with hardwood forest. There were many brooks and springs in the neighborhood, early historians recall.

By the year 1865, Okemos, then situated on the Detroit, Howell and Lansing plank road and stage route, was 78 miles from Detroit and the fare from that city to Okemos by stage was established at \$3. The village then had a population of 200 persons. It possessed a Presbyterian and Methodist society, two hotels, a sawmill and a grist mill, a rake manufacturing plant, three stores and several mechanics who maintained shops. Good from Detroit were shipped by way of the Detroit & Milwaukee & Lansing, Amboy & Traverse Bay railroad.

Meridian township, however, was organized in 1841, and George Matthews was the first supervisor.

Besides the history and tradition that has grown up around Chief Okemos, which has become a part of the community's story, there is a story of the Hermit of Okemos, which is mentioned by early historians. These accounts say that in 1874 Sergeant Buchmann of the Detroit police department came for a hunt on the Red Cedar river near Okemos and there he found a hut built of spilt logs, plastered with mud, and shaped like an Indian tepee. He investigated and found it inhabited by an aged man, who sat alone in the center of his shelter and stared fixedly at the doorway. He had no books or pets.

At first the recluse would not talk, but the sergeant threatened to take him away and question him as a "suspicious character" and then the hermit said that his name was Darius Green. That he had come from Ohio many years before and that an unhappy love affair had driven him away from the habitations

of man. He had lost his property and had soured on the world. He moved to his lonely shelter when he was 23 years old, and was 59 when he was discovered in his rags and filth. He said when he became sick he was his own doctor, that he subsisted on corn meal cakes and vegetables and never left the hut until

driven out by hunger. His only recreation consisted of brooding, thinking and sleeping. He was described as a wild appearing individual, with white hair straggling over his shoulders, a long matted beard, his clothing in rags and his feet wrapped in clothe. He remained a mystery man until his death.

Chief Okemos was chief of the Chippewas or Ojibway tribe of Indians, and he was born in Shiawassee county in 1775, a nephew of Chief Pontiac, the powerful Chippewa war chieftain who was head of the three nations. Okemos became a warrior early and he was described as brave and courageous by all who knew him. When the opportunity offered to become a chief, as it did when his kinsman, Tecumseh, formed his great conspiracy by service to the British Army, Okemos renounced his allegiance to the United States and joined his relatives.

It is remarked by those who wrote of his exploits, that the old Indian should not be blamed for his service with the British, because many white soldiers of this country did the same thing, serving under General Wayne.

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By HAROLD G. LEE  
(State Journal Staff Writer)

BECAUSE Chief Okemos, whose life is indelibly written around the history of this part of Michigan, chose a spot six miles east of Lansing, on the Red Cedar river, to use as a corn planting plot for many years, the village that appeared there became by the very nature of things, the town of Okemos.

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He loved to travel by canoe with his relatives and he paddled up the Grand river frequently and out its branches. He paddled frequently over the Red Cedar river and the Huron river in Michigan, the Maumee river in Ohio, and the banks of these streams were his favorite hunting grounds. He had a corn planting at Okemos, which he watched with special care.

One of his favorite trips was a canoe voyage up the Grand to Lansing, up the Red Cedar river to Okemos, and by portaging canoes, to proceed up the west branch of the Red Cedar to Cedar Lake, carrying the canoes to the headquarters of the Huron and into Lake Erie, thence on to Sandusky, his old battleground.

Okemos remained a pagan throughout his lifetime, and when he died he was buried with all his implements of war and the chase beside him.

He died at the age of 83 in 1858. He believed in a Great Spirit, but he would not embrace the Christian religion. His totem was a bear.

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Sherrie Paty Barber, Okemos Class of 1966

May 13, 2017

Lansing State Journal (Lansing, Michigan) Monday 22 October 1923

#### **CHIEF OKEMOS TABLET IS UNVEILED WITH APPROPRIATE SCHOOL EXERCISES**

Okemos, Oct. 22 - Nearly 500 people enjoyed the program, attending the unveiling of the bronze tablet in honor of Chief Okemos, at Meridian Consolidated Agricultural school, number 2, Friday afternoon.

Community singing was led by Rev. George H. Hudson, with Mrs. Mamie Daniels at the piano. The invocation also was given by Reverend Hudson. Mrs. Ethel Leu then played a piano solo, "Indian Dance," a prelude to five scenes from Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," which the school children gave. The pupils were nearly all from the grades and the work was excellent. The scenes were "Hiawatha's Childhood," "Hiawatha's Hunting," "Hiawatha's Wooing," "The Famine," and "The White Man's Foot and Hiawatha's Departure."

#### **CHILDREN PLAY HIAWATHA**

In the first scene, Clare Warren took the part of Little Hiawatha, while Rex Beaumont played the part in the other scenes, where Hiawatha had grown to be a man. The other characters were: Iagoo, the Great Boaster, Ralph Guile; the Arrow Maker, father of Minnehaha, Earnest Jennings; the Priest, a White Man, Eugene Williams; Minnehaha, Fannie Williams; Nakomis, Hiawatha's Grandmother, Ida Strayer; Famine, Ardeth Merrill; Fever, Ruth Huff; Warriors and Women, Dorothy Liverance, Howard McClure, Asa Cudworth, Charles Strayer, Ardeth Merrill, Ruth Huff; group of white people, led by the priest. Miss Fannie Williams was a winsome Minnehaha, and Miss Ida Strayer, as Nakomis, made a splendid Indian

grandmother. Hiawatha was well played by both characters, while Iago, Ralph Guile, lived up to his name or the Great Boaster.

Each scene was very good, but the Famine was especially effective, and more than one in the house felt the tears starting.

The play was directed by Miss Inez Porter, primary teacher, assisted by the grade teachers, and much credit is due to these teachers for the successful production.

A selection "Minnehaha," by the Okemos Ladies' quartet, accompanied by Mrs. Iva Cudworth, followed. They responded to an encore with a short Indian song.

### **MASON MAN MAKES ADDRESS**

Dr. W. B. Hartzog of Mason then gave the address of the afternoon. He told of the three big tribes who formerly owned Michigan, the Pottawatomies, Chippewas and Ottawas, probably 500,000 Indians in all. Present statistics show that there are but 7,631 left in the state. He gave a short history of the struggle of the Red Man to hold his territory, as civilization and savagery can never live together, and the Indian refused to accept civilization. The story of Pontiac's conspiracy was told and Dr. Hartzog named Tecumseh as the greatest American Indian. In 1776, the great council met on the banks of the Huron river. This is the largest council in history; not only the Indians of Michigan met there, but all parts of America were represented.

They decided, if necessary, to beg on their knees, of the white man, to leave them undisturbed in a part of their territory, as it was their belief that the Indians could not live west of the Mississippi river. But civilization moved steadily westward, and in 1813, the American flag was unfurled in Michigan.

### **OKEMOS BORN IN 1775**

Okemos whom some claim to be a nephew of Tecumseh, was born in 1776, near the spot where the Grand Trunk railroad crosses the Shiawassee river. At the age of 21, he was in a fight at Sandusky, Ohio, where every Indian was left for dead; but Okemos and a cousin were nursed back to health by the squaws, although Okemos bore terrible scars to the day of his death. He came back to Michigan and at the age of 35, or possibly younger, was made chief of one of the Chippewa bands, not by heritage, but by virtue of the judgment, bravery and qualities of leadership.

In one of the uprisings, he was captured, and held a prisoner of war, until released by Governor Cass, after which he returned to his old home in this section of the state.

He was well known and respected by pioneers in his community and it is to the old chief that the village of Okemos is indebted for its name.

Chief Okemos died December 5, 1858, in Ionia county, and is buried there, on one of his camping grounds.

### **UNVEIL TABLET**

V. C. Brown, of Mason, had charge of the unveiling of the tablet, which is placed on the front of the school house. Rex Beaumont, who played so well the part of Hiawatha, the young man, drew back the American flag, revealing the bronze tablet, which has a life-size portrait of Chief Okemos at the top, with a fitting inscription below.

#### Special to The State Journal

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Community singing was led by Rev. George H. Hudson, with Mrs. Mamie Daniels at the piano. The invocation also was given by Reverend Hudson. Mrs. Ethel Leu then played a piano solo, "Indian Dance," as a prelude to five scenes from Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," which the school children gave. The pupils were nearly all from the grades and the work was excellent. The scenes were "Hiawatha's Childhood," "Hiawatha's Hunting," "Hiawatha's Wooing," "The Famine," and "The White Man's Foot and Hiawatha's Departure."

#### Children Play Hiawatha

In the first scene, Clare Warren took the part of Little Hiawatha, while Rex Beaumont played the part in the other scenes, where Hiawatha had grown to be a man. The other characters were: Iagoo, the Great Boaster, Ralph Guile; the Arrow Maker, father of Minnehaha, Earnest Jennings; the Priest, a White Man, Eugene Williams; Minnehaha, Fannie Williams; Nakomis, Hiawatha's Grandmother, Ida Strayer; Famine, Ardeth Merrill; Fever, Ruth Huff; Warriors and Women, Dorothy Liverance, Howard McClure, Asa Cudworth, Charlie Strayer, Ardeth Merrill, Ruth Huff; group of white people, led by the priest. Miss Fannie Williams was a wise Minnehaha, and Miss Ida Strayer, as Nakomis, made a splendid Indian grandmother. Hiawatha was well played by both characters, while Iagoo, Ralph Guile, lived up to his name of the Great Boaster.

Each scene was very good, but the Famine was especially effective, and more than one in the house felt the tears starting.

The play was directed by Miss Inez Porter, primary teacher, assisted by the grade teachers, and much credit is due to these teachers for the successful production.

A selection, "Minnehaha," by the Okemos Ladies' quartet, accompanied by Mrs. Iva Cudworth, followed. They responded to an encore with a short Indian song.

#### Mason Man Makes Address

Dr. W. E. Hartzog of Mason then gave the address of the afternoon. He told of the three big tribes who formerly owned Michigan, the Pottawatomies, Chippewas and Ottawas, probably 500,000 Indians in all. Present statistics show that there are but 7,631 left in the state. He gave a short history of the struggle of the Red Man to hold his territory, as civilization and savagery can never live together, and the Indian refused to accept civilization. The story of Pontiac's conspiracy was told and Dr. Hartzog named Tecumseh as the greatest American Indian. In 1776, the great council met on the banks of the Huron river. This is the largest council in history; not only the Indians of Michigan met there, but all parts of America were represented.

They decided, if necessary, to beg on their knees, of the white man, to leave them undisturbed in a part of their territory, as it was their belief that the Indians could not live west of the Mississippi river. But civilization moved steadily westward, and in 1812, the American flag was unfurled in Michigan.

#### Okemos Born in 1775

Okemos, whom some claim to be a nephew of Tecumseh, was born in 1775, near the spot where the Grand Trunk railroad crosses the Shiawassee river. At the age of 21, he was in a fight at Sandusky, Ohio, where every Indian was left for dead; but Okemos and a cousin were nursed back to health by the squaws, although Okemos bore terrible scars to the day of his death. He came back to Michigan and at the age of 35, or possibly younger, was made chief of one of the Chippewa bands, not by heritage, but by virtue of his judgment, bravery and qualities of leadership.

In one of the uprisings, he was captured, and held a prisoner of war, until released by Governor Cass, after which he returned to his old home in this section of the state.

He was well known and respected by pioneers in his community and it is to the old chief that the village of Okemos is indebted for its name.

Chief Okemos died December

5, 1853, in Ionia county, and is buried there, on one of his camping grounds.

#### Unveil Tablet

V. C. Brown, of Mason, had charge of the unveiling of the tablet, which is placed on the front of the school house. Rex Beaumont, who played so well the part of Hiawatha, the young man, drew back the American flag, revealing the bronze tablet, which has a lifesize portrait of Chief Okemos at the top, with a fitting inscription below.



ERECTED TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
CHIEF OKEMOS  
OF THE CHIPPEWAS

WHOSE TRIBE ONCE OCCUPIED THE GROUND  
UPON WHICH THIS SCHOOL NOW STANDS

★ BRAVE IN BATTLE ★ WISE IN COUNCIL ★  
★ HONORABLE IN PEACE ★

AFTER HIS PEOPLE BECAME RAVAGED BY DISEASE  
AND DISPERSED BY THE INCOMING WHITE RACE  
HE STILL REMAINED A CHIEF, PROUD THAT HE WAS  
ONCE A LEADER OF BRAVE MEN.

HE DIED DECEMBER 5, 1858; AND HIS BODY RESTS  
AT SHIMNI-COON, ON GRAND RIVER, IN IONIA COUNTY  
MICHIGAN.

Notes:

My hubby, Stephen, and I had quite a discussion over how I should approach, with dignity, a bio on Chief Okemos. As a kid I talked with several old timers in my church who had been around Okemos for eons....and their recollections of Indians and pioneers. From what I can meagerly remember, Okemos was labeled a drunkard, a liar and a beggar. In sorting through fact and fiction, after hours of reading, I've come to the sad conclusion that much of what Okemos turned into was driven by the invasion of the ugly white man. What had been a worthy life was reduced to shreds and little pickens. Chippewa Indians were not farmers. They had little understanding of crop rotation, fertilization or proper grazing of animals. One bio I read vividly described the dirt poor conditions of the Chippewa and how poor not only their stock was but crops harvested were barely edible. Okemos and his band lived subsistent lives, barely above holocaust. What dignity we can bestow on what was is now a challenge. I don't want to paint a nice picture but do want to honor a man that lived and at one time loved the land.

Have to add a note that my Dad hired numerous Chippewa Indians at Paty's Auto Parts. Dad tried hard to accommodate their, at times, unusual thinking patterns and requests. He found that alcohol was a major factor in many of the men. I know he fired a few a long the way. Can't have a drunk mechanic! We also for years had a Chippewa lady for our housekeeper. Margaret Martell was a delight...hardworking, clean, neat and above all, very honest. She worked for my Mom for a long, long time.

SPB

On June 7, 2018, William "Bill" Breckenfeld points out the somewhat obscured "Chief Okemos Tablet". Bill is an Okemos Alumnus of the Class of 1965 and Okemos resident.

