

The Incident At The Big Bend



Sauk-Fox warriors

From the uplands that are now southern Missouri's Ozarks, the Meramec River winds northeastward for over two hundred miles on its journey to the Mississippi. At a point some twenty miles upstream from that junction, the river, flowing eastward, encounters a line of hills and turns abruptly to the south. This sharp turn, an obvious landmark, is known as the "Big Bend."

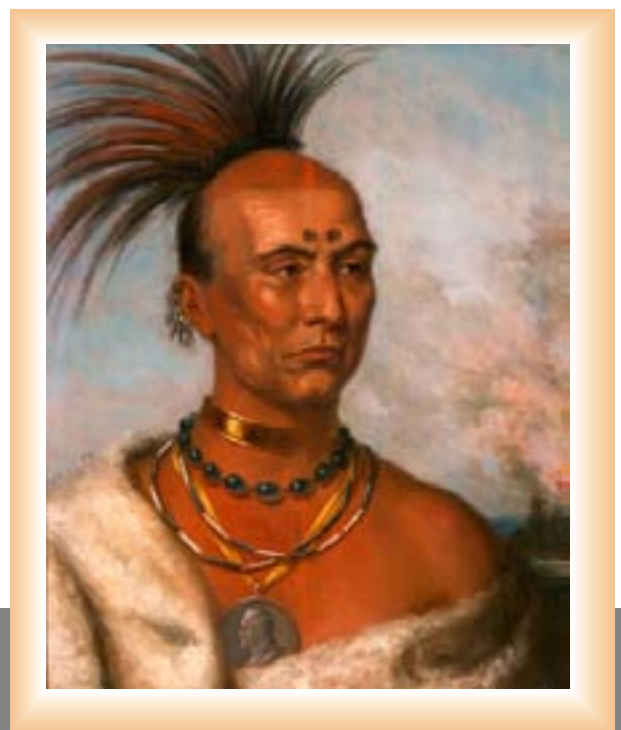
It was here in the late eighteenth century that a bloody confrontation occurred between members of two tribes of Native Americans, the Sauk-Fox and the Cherokee. Such fights were not uncommon, especially among arch enemies, and no doubt dozens of such incidents occurred within this region during these times. While most such battles have been lost in the mist of time, this was recorded and comes down to us because one of the participants was a young man named Black Hawk.

Of interest here are the combatants in this event, for at this time the Meramec River and remainder of the Ozarks were claimed by the powerful Osage people as their hunting ground.

Black Hawk was a Sauk Indian born in 1767 in the village of Saukenuk on the Rock River in what is now Illinois. This was a summer village, where his people raised corn and other foods and buried their dead. During the winter tribal members went on extensive hunts securing essential food and clothing and fur trapping for trade with the whites. Black Hawk was not a civil chief of the Sauk, as this was a hereditary honor. As was the custom of his people, he would become a "brave" by killing or injuring an enemy. In his autobiography, he claims this was achieved at the age of fifteen against the Osage, and by the age of nineteen he had distinguished himself in additional conflicts so that he was permitted to wear feathers and take part in the scalp dance.

The ancestral home of the Sauk people was along the St. Lawrence River. Pressure from European settlers and the Iroquois, plus white man diseases, forced their migration westward. The Sauk combined with the Fox tribe and settled in the Rock River area. Here the extensive lands needed for hunting put them in conflict with other tribes already living in this part of the world, primarily the Sioux in the north and the Osage in Missouri.

Meanwhile, in their ancestral home in the southern Appalachians of what is now Georgia and Tennessee, the Cherokee were already experiencing pressure from the westward migration of whites by the end of the eighteenth century. While this struggle would go on until their final removal with the Trail of Tears in 1838, some of these people went west quite early. In 1785 they established a village on the upper St. Francis River that, being in the Ozarks, put them in direct conflict with both the Osage and Sauk-Fox.



Black Hawk



Hence by the mid 1790's three Native American tribes, the Osage, Cherokee and Sauk-Fox were competing for the hunting grounds of the Ozarks. The increased hunting pressure depleted the wildlife resource, thus threatening the well being of these native people, and warfare among them flourished.

The incident at the Big Bend was apparently revenge for a recent act of aggression by the Cherokee against Sauk-Fox women and children. The Sauk-Fox war party located a large group of Cherokee encamped at the Big Bend. They descended from a hilltop in what is now Kirkwood, Missouri, a site locally referred to as the Meramec Highlands. It was most likely a surprise attack.

In his autobiography Black Hawk indicates it was a fierce fight, with the Cherokee losing twenty-eight men killed and the Sauk-Fox seven. Among the Sauk-Fox casualties was Pyesa, father of Black Hawk, and the keeper of the tribe medicine bag. Pyesa was wounded in the thigh, and died shortly after the battle. Black Hawk grieved the loss of his father and was in mourning for several years. Despite being outnumbered, the Sauk-Fox won the battle as the Cherokee withdrew. Black Hawk buried the dead at the site.

As the years passed Black Hawk came to realize that the true enemies to his people were the Americans and their relentless western movement. Native Americans were pressured for treaties in which tribal lands were ceded to the United States in return for money and needed supplies. To help their negotiations alcohol was readily available. In 1804 a treaty made in St. Louis involving some minor Sauk-Fox chiefs resulted in the loss of 15 million acres of tribal lands in Illinois and Missouri for \$2,274.50. Black Hawk and other tribal members argued it was not valid, but the United States considered it binding.

In the War of 1812 Black Hawk and his people sided with the British, who promised to help them reclaim their lands. Black Hawk assisted the Shawnee leader Tecumseh.

Sauk - Fox Warriors



Finally, in 1824, Black Hawk, by then a respected war chief, led an offensive against the Americans intended to recapture the lands he believed were taken by illegal treaties. In what is now known as the Black Hawk War the Sauk-Fox were finally defeated, with Black Hawk himself taken prisoner and confined for a time at Jefferson Barracks.

Revisiting this conflict along the banks of the Meramec River gives us a glimpse of this time and region as the Native Americans were gradually replaced by Americans of European origin. Hardly twenty miles from the battle site was the village of St. Louis, with a population then of less than one thousand, and flying the Spanish flag. Yet within a decade, it would fly the American flag, the Corps of Discovery would be westbound, and the rush of immigrants was increasing. In the Ozarks and Meramec Valley, the flood of Native Americans from the east would also increase, with the arrival of peoples of the Delaware, Shawnee, Miami, Illinois and Chickasaw, to name a few.

There is, of course, now no trace of the site of that battle between the Cherokee and Sauk-Fox peoples, but the Big Bend itself is still there, likely very similar in appearance to how it was two centuries ago. The area of this conflict may be visited at Kirkwood's Greentree Park on the north bank of the Meramec, and St. Louis County's Unger Park on the south bank.



Meramec Bend area as it appears today.