

The
Shooting Star
and
The Prophet

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A meteor flashed across the sky when he was born. Whether that is true or not, his name, Tecumseh, means “Shooting Star”. The name was appropriate and seems to have been prophetic of his meteoric career and brilliant genius. He was more than a Shawnee chieftan. He was a statesman, an organizer of a confederacy that extended from the Northwest tribes to the Creeks in the South—and, a general in the British Army in the War of 1812. In all the Indian Wars the U.S. Army never faced a more formidable adversary than Tecumseh. He lived, fought and died for the most basic cause—the right to live on his native land.

HOW did this one Indian, this one native American, become the “Shooting Star” that magnetized the tribes of the Great Lakes area and the distant southern tribes? Let us explore the writings of journals of the United States Army, diaries of former soldiers, the verbal histories of the Indians and the soldiers handed down through the years—all blended with the enhancement of time and imagination.

TECUMSEH, one of seven children, was born at the old Indian town of Piqua, Ohio on the Mad River, in 1768. Today, Piqua is a town of 20,000 and located near Interstate Highway 75 a few miles north of Dayton. His mother was thought to have been a Creek or Cherokee, an attractive, intelligent and respectable woman. His father was a Shawnee chief, killed in battle when Tecumseh was six years old. Another version indicates that his father was shot by white hunters when he refused to act as their guide, and the family lodge was burned.

Cheeseekau, Tecumseh’s oldest brother, took the six year into his family and began a devoted relationship of care and training. Cheeseekau taught Tecumseh a love for truth, generosity, manly courage in battle, and a dignified fortitude in suffering.

It was Cheeseekau who drilled into him the art of eloquence and instilled the desire to become a great chieftain and deliver his people from the white man. As boys do today, sham battles and war games became his favorite sports. While his brother, Elkskwatawa engaged in idle and disreputable intrigues, Tecumseh followed the hunters in their chase for food and the war parties on their way to battle. He was sixteen years old when he participated in his first battle, near where the city of Dayton, Ohio, now stands. It is said that he became frightened and fled. If that is true it was probably the only time he gave into such weakness. Shortly after he participated in an attack of a flat boat descending the Ohio River. All the boatmen were killed but one who was reserved for torture. Although torture was not unusual at that time, Tecumseh was horrified and remonstrated against the practice with such eloquence that from that time on no prisoners were tortured by any war party of which he was a member.

At the age of 19, Tecumseh accompanied Cheeseekau on a long journey south to the land of the Creeks and Cherokees. The two brothers and their band of warriors helped their southern friends in battles against the whites. Just before leading the attack on one fort, Cheeseekau predicted that he would be shot in the head and die. When his prophecy became a reality with a bullet between the eyes, the Indians became terrified and fled. Later, they met and chose Tecumseh, though the youngest of the group, as their leader. To prove that he was worthy of the trust, Tecumseh took a party of ten men and attacked the nearest white settlement, killed all the men and took the women and children prisoners. More successful battles and encounters followed and he became renown as a military genius. During this time he visited all the Southern tribes building trust, respect, friendships, and alliances. He returned to his people in the Ohio country in the fall of 1790. The "Shooting Star" had become a great and respected chief by the age of 20.

Upon his return home, Tecumseh took part in several battles against the American Army in the early 1790's. He was present at the furious Battle of Fallen Timbers near Maumee (a city of 16,000 today) on August 20, 1794, where General Anthony Wayne crushed the Indian power of the Ohio Valley—a battle that brought Wayne enduring fame as “Mad Anthony Wayne”. Tecumseh did not attend the ensuing Council of Greenville which concluded with a treaty that ceded large areas of Ohio and Indiana territory to the whites; he remained at home, sullen and angry, but still a man of influence and importance in his nation. Blue Jacket, the principal chief of the Shawnees, visited Tecumseh and explained the terms of the treaty on which peace had been made. While not happy with the treaty, Tecumseh apparently decided to live with it as much as possible. He gathered a band of warriors, became their chief and apparently settled into a peaceful life. They moved several times, finally joining with the Delawares in a settlement on the White River, in Indiana in 1798.

Many incidents enhanced his reputation among the tribes during these years of hunting and fishing along the White River. Tecumseh had earned a reputation as a great hunter, partly for sport and partly because he gave much of the highly prized venison to the sick and poor of his tribe—an early version of United Way. One day some of the younger warriors bet him that each of them could kill as many deer within a three day period as he. Tecumseh accepted the challenge. At the end of three days a curious crowd gathered around the village campfire. The largest number of deerskins brought in by anyone in the boastful group was twelve. Tecumseh brought in thirty deerskins. His reputation grew a little more.

Prophets, wizards, and maybe a little old fashioned conniving and chicanery played a part in organizing many of the tribes along the Ohio-Indiana border territory in 1805. A portion of the Shawnee nation living along the headwaters of the Auglaize River, wanted to reunite their scattered people. They sent a delegation to Tecumseh, then living on the White River, and to other tribes along the Mississiniway River. (The Mississiniway River flows from Greenville, Ohio into Indiana, making it a well traveled area for the Indians of that day). The White River tribes and the Auglaize River Tribes agreed to meet at Greenville, (today, a town of 13,000) and from that meeting decided to join forces. A brother of Tecumseh, Laulewasikaw (Loud Voice) had an important part in bringing the tribes together. About this time a long time and respected Shawnee prophet, Pengashega (Change-of-Feathers) died. Upon hearing of this death, Laulewasikaw (Loud Voice), rolled his eye—he had only one eye—toward heaven and fell on his face in a trance. He lay motionless and apparently without any signs of life for a long time. Preparations were made for his burial with the principal men of the tribe bearing him away to his grave when he suddenly revived and uttered these words: “Be not alarmed—I have seen heaven. Call the tribe together that I may reveal to them the whole of my vision.” The tribe gathered and heard an amazing story, that if true, could have come from the New Testament—or—perhaps an early version of Jim Baker, Robert Tilton, and Jimmy Swaggart. Laulewasikaw said that two beautiful young men had been sent from heaven by the Great Spirit with this message: “The Great Spirit is angry with you and will destroy all red men, unless you abandon drunkenness, lying, and stealing. If you will not do this and turn yourselves to him, you shall never enter the beautiful place which we will now show you.” He was then taken to the gates of heaven and permitted to view its many glories, but was not permitted to enter.

After being tantalized in this manner for several hours Laulewasikaw was returned to earth and ordered to inform his people of what he had seen and to repent their vices. They would visit him again. As a consequence of this visionary experience, Elskwatawa, another brother of Tecumseh, assumed—or claimed—the name and functions of a prophet. He soon acquired celebrity status and following, established headquarters at Greenville and proclaimed himself a Prophet and Reformer replacing the departed Change-of-Feathers. Now, prophetwise, he gave himself a new name, Tenskwatawa, which signifies “The Open Door.” The name designated him as a means of deliverance for his people.

The Prophet, as Tenskwatawa, formerly Elskwatawa, became known, played his new role to the hilt. He gathered a large band of adherents from the Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Pottawatomies, Ottawas, Chippewas and Kickapoos. He proclaimed that the Great Spirit who had made the redmen was not the same who had made the white men; and, that the Indian’s misfortunes were due to the fact that they had forsaken the lifestyle designed for them and had begun imitating the white man. He railed against witchcraft and said that those who continued the practice could not enter heaven. He said that during his journey to heaven, the first place he came to was the house of the Devil. Here, he saw all who had died as drunkards with flames issuing from their mouths. He admitted that he had been a drunkard, but this vision had frightened him and convinced him to drink no more. Many of his followers did stop drinking the “firewater” or “crazywater” as whiskey was called by the Indians. He preached against intermarriage of Indians and whites claiming it to be major cause of unhappiness. He preached what Tecumseh constantly practiced—the duty of the young to support and cherish the aged and infirm. He promised that those who obeyed his preachings, would enjoy all the comfort and happiness enjoyed by their ancestors before the coming of the whites.

Finally he announced that the Great Spirit had given him the power to confuse his enemies, to cure all diseases, and to prevent death, whether from sickness or on the battlefield. It sounded good.

The Prophet deceived himself as well as his people. He believed what he preached. There seems little doubt that Tecumseh was the master author and director of this early American play. The Prophet was not brave and courageous nor truthful. He was cunning, shrewd, and boastful. He equaled Tecumseh in eloquence, and actually surpassed him in graceful manners.

Many of the neighboring chiefs, fearing that their power would be diminished, opposed the innovations of the Prophet but a fanatical persecution, not unlike those of Salem or Nazi Germany, had begun. Superstition was so great that if the Prophet denounced a chief who opposed him, a loss of reputation, even life, ensued. An old woman of the Delaware tribe was one of the first victims. She was denounced as a witch and ordered to give up her charm and medicine bag. As she was put to the stake and burned, she screamed that her grandson, who was hunting, had her charm and medicine bag. He was pursued and arrested. He confessed that he had borrowed the charm and through its magic powers, he had flown through the air over Kentucky to the banks of the grand Mississippi River and back again in the short time between twilight and bedtime. He also insisted that he had returned the charm to his grandmother. He was released. But, the grandmother died.

Persecutions continued for some time, creating a great deal of unrest within the various tribes. Governor Harrison, worried that such unrest would also create serious problems between Indians and whites. He wrote a letter denouncing the Prophet as a fraud. "Ask him to cause the sun to stand still, the moon to alter its

course, the rivers cease to flow, or the dead rise from their graves.” Some Canadian traders learned of the letter and told the Prophet that an eclipse of the sun would take place on June 16, 1806, and that he had only to forecast the event to enhance his power and influence. He called for a gathering of the tribes to witness a miracle of his creation. They came from hundreds of miles. An hour before noon, the Prophet, dressed in dazzling splendor, came out of his wigwam and strode with deliberation to the center of a large circle. He looked towards the sky and probably breathed a sigh of relief. The signs were right. He extended his right arm and face toward the heavens and began an unintelligible incantation. Slowly, a fringe of darkness appeared on the edge of the sun. The Indians looked and gasped. The spot grew larger and darker. In awe, many thought the end of the world was upon them. Only the Prophet remained calm. At the moment of total eclipse he cried in a loud voice, “Behold! Did I not prophesy truly? Darkness has come over the sun as I told you.”

Tecumseh now appeared. Shades of Cecil B. DeMille. He lent the power of his reputation to the Prophet. The Prophet returned the compliment by pointing out Tecumseh as the leader chosen by the Great Spirit to save the Indians from the encroachment of the white man. The two brothers were a great act. The Pottawatomies and Kickapoos were so impressed that they gave the brothers a tract of land at the juncture of the Tippecanoe and Wabash Rivers (just north of Lafayette, Indiana). Here, they established a village known as Prophet’s Town.

For nearly four years Tecumseh traveled north and south gaining support for a mighty confederatation of Indian tribes to drive the white man back beyond the Alleghenies. While he was away on one of his trips, a splinter group of Miamis and Delawares signed a treaty with Governor Harrison, ceding a tract of land about sixty miles along the Wabash River above Vincennes. Although everyone

involved was agreeable to the transaction, it was done without the knowledge of Tecumseh and the Prophet. When Tecumseh returned from his travels he was so furious that he openly threatened to kill the chiefs of the tribes involved. While Tecumseh was working hard to realign his strength and inflame his followers against the Americans, Governor Harrison proceeded with other land-grabbing treaties and creation of the Illinois Territory in 1809. Friction and distrust increased but letters were written and discussions were underway in attempts to prevent or delay any serious confrontations. Finally, Tecumseh accepted an invitation to meet with Governor Harrison at Harrison's home in Vincennes.

Harrison had asked that Tecumseh bring only a few followers to the conference. Four hundred came down the Wabash on August 12, 1810, armed and painted for war. Three days later, on August 15, Tecumseh, accompanied by forty warriors, appeared at the home of Harrison and through an interpreter, indicated he preferred to meet in a nearby grove. Harrison agreed and brought chairs and benches but the Indians, according to their habit, sat on the grass.

Tecumseh opened the council by boldly stating that he would fight against the cession of lands by the Indians unless **all** the tribes were in agreement. He said that the Americans had driven the Indians from the seacoast and would soon drive them into the lakes and beyond. He did not want to make war upon the United States but he asserted emphatically that he would oppose any further intrusion upon the Indian lands. When Tecumseh finished with his speech, Governor Harrison ordered a chair for him; an interpreter said "Your father requests you to be seated." "My father?" said Tecumseh; "the sun is my father and the earth my mother, on her bosom will I repose," and he seated himself among his warriors on the grass.

Governor Harrison, in his reply, declared that the Indians were not one nation, for if that been the will of the Great Spirit he would not have given them different languages, and that Tecumseh could not speak for all of them. That sent Tecumseh into a rage. Harrison called Tecumseh a “bad man”. Angry words ensued and each side was ready to do battle but finally the meeting adjourned without physical violence. The two principals calmed down and continued to meet for the next few days. Neither side wanted war but neither would back down on the land issue. Tecumseh viewed the American encroachment as a flood; that the confederation of tribes was a dam he was building to resist the flood and save the Indian nations from drowning. Tecumseh reiterated that he did not want to wage war with the Seventeen Fires (as the United States was known). He urged Harrison to induce the President to give up the lands that had just been purchased and agree never to make a treaty for land without the consent of **all the tribes**. In return Tecumseh would be America’s faithful ally and assist them in the war which he knew was about to take place with England. Otherwise, in order to save his land and his people from further intrusion, he would be compelled to unite with the British, who were very anxious to enlist his warriors. Harrison said that his views would be made known to the President but there was little hope of agreement. An uneasy peace existed for several months, with both sides preparing for the anticipated war. A final council was held at Vincennes on July 27, 1811, with nothing accomplished. War appeared certain.

Following this council, Governor Harrison wrote a letter to the War Department describing the obedience and respect that Tecumseh’s followers paid to their leader as wonderful. “If it were not for the United States Tecumseh would perhaps be the founder of an empire. No difficulties deter him. You see him today on the Wabash, a short time later on the shores of Lake Erie or Lake Michigan, or on the

banks of the Mississippi. **Wherever he goes he makes an impression favorable to his purpose.** ”

While Tecumseh was away gathering support from the Southern tribes, Governor Harrison seized the opportunity to build and strengthen forts at Terre Haute and at the mouth of the Vermillion River near the Indiana-Illinois border. On September 26, 1811, he proceeded with 1,000 troops from Washington and from Kentucky, moved northward along the Wabash. Battles took place at various sites along the way, and then came the famous Battle of Tippecanoe, just north of present day Lafayette, Indiana.

The Prophet had talked the Indians into making a surprise attack on the Americans just before daylight on November 7, 1811. The Prophet promised that half the American soldiers were dead or wounded and that half were crazy. A surprise dawn attack would result in a great victory. However, an alert sentry detected unexplained movements in the tall grass and sounded an alarm. Led by seasoned Kentucky troops, the Americans fought off the Indians and held their ground. Each side lost 38 men and suffered 150 wounded. Two days later Harrison's troops moved on a short distance north to Prophetstown and destroyed the Indian village.

The Indians were so unhappy with the Prophet's disastrous prediction they threatened him with death. They finally released him, but his influence was gone forever. Tecumseh arrived home from a successful trip of rallying support from other tribes only to find his home territory in a shambles. Supplies of food, ammunition and weapons had been destroyed. He was furious with the Prophet and spared his life only because they were brothers. If only the Prophet and the

other chiefs had listened. Tecumseh, before leaving on his southern trip, had told them not to engage in battle, but to await his return.

Tecumseh, in another effort to prevent war, told Harrison that he wanted to go to Washington to speak to the Great Father. The request was granted but only if he traveled alone. Insulted, Tecumseh refused to go without a retinue and joined with the English army in Canada. Taken aback at this action, the Americans asked for a peace council but it was too late. Tecumseh took an active part in the War of 1812. Nearly all the war chiefs followed him to the British side and he was made a brigadier general in the British Army.

It is not my purpose here to recount the many battles waged by Tecumseh in the next few months. He had allied himself with the British only as a last, desperate attempt to save his people from being subjugated by the Americans. It was not to be. Growing American victories, a weakening British resolve, and, finally the American naval victories on the Great Lakes which prevented British supplies from reaching the frontier, made clear the inevitable.

The British, fleeing into Canada, finally at Tecumseh's demand, stopped to engage the pursuing Americans in Ontario Province, Canada, not far from Detroit. Thus, on October 5, 1813 began the decisive Battle of the Thames. The British soon fled, leaving Tecumseh's tribe to fight alone. Colonel Richard Johnson and his Kentucky cavalry were ordered to charge the Indians and did so with such fury that they finally retreated but not until Tecumseh, already many times wounded, was killed by a bullet to the head. The battle had lasted less than half an hour.

Harrison's losses in the battle were reported as 25 killed and 50 wounded. 601 enemy prisoners were taken. British casualties totaled 35. The victories on Lake Erie, the Thames and Tecumseh's death paved the way for more American victories and control of the area.

There have been many stories about who actually fired the shot that killed Tecumseh. Many wanted to claim the credit and honor. Some say that Colonel Richard Johnson of Kentucky, who suffered many wounds himself, fired the fatal shot. Johnson said he did not know. It is quite possible that no one knew who fired the fatal shot. The American side did not know him from any other Indian for there was nothing about his dress to distinguish him from any of his warriors. The Indians who saw him fall did not see his slayer. There have been many stories about what happened to Tecumseh's body but it is believed that fellow warriors carried the body of Tecumseh with them for it was never found among the thirty-three dead tribesmen left on the battlefield.

I paraphrase the British historian, James, who wrote, "Thus fell the Indian warrior, Tecumseh, in his forty-fourth year. He was of the Shawnee tribe, five feet ten inches high with some stoutness, dignified carriage, agility, a penetrating eye and perseverance. He was a quiet man but when aroused his eloquence supplied him a flow of oratory that influenced history."

The historian, Trumbull, acknowledged Tecumseh's keen understanding early in life, that the Indians were losing their importance as human beings and their land. He became convinced that no single tribe of red men could cope with the power of the United States and therefore set about with his grand plan of uniting all the tribes east of the Mississippi into one Indian nation against the United States.

Tecumseh's greatness was readily acknowledged by those who knew of him, especially by those who had dealt with him whether as friend or foe.

The name Tecumseh has taken many forms over the years. The capital of the new state of Indiana was almost named after him. There are towns named Tecumseh in Michigan, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Ontario (Canada), a lake in Virginia, and even a mountain range, the Tecumseh Mountains in New Hampshire. There is even a gasoline engine, bearing the profile of an Indian, named Tecumseh. There are no towns named Tecumseh in the two states in which he played such an important role—Indiana and Ohio. An Ohio man bestowed the name on his third son who became an American military chief—General William Tecumseh Sherman.

The flight of this comet across the sky, this "Shooting Star" lasted only forty four years. He has been called a savage, a visionary, a leader of men, a king of the woods, one of nature's noblemen. The spirit of Tecumseh lives today in people around the world. He wanted only what all men want—freedom for his people on their own land. It is only natural.

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Tecumseh, Michigan • Southeast corner between Ann Arbor and Adrian • 7,300.

Tecumseh, Ontario • Southern end of Lake St. Clare, east of Detroit.

Tecumseh, Kansas • Suburb of Topeka.

Tecumseh, Missouri • North of Arkansas state line near Norfolk Lake.

Tecumseh, Oklahoma • East of Oklahoma City, south of I-40 • 5,100.

Tecumseh, Nebraska • Southeast corner, south of Lincoln • 1,900.

Tecumseh Mountain • New Hampshire • Near Woodstock, just east of I-93.

Lake Tecumseh, Virginia • South of Virginia Beach on the coast.

Tecumseh Engines • Grafton, Wisconsin • I-94 on shores of Lake Michigan
(north of Milwaukee, southeast of West Bend) • 8,300.

