

## WILLIAM SKENANDORE

William Skenandore, a full blooded Oneida, was born on the Oneida Indian Reservation in 1884. He was one of eight children born to the late John and Charlotte Skenandore. He died April 21, 1959 at the age of 75. William Skenandore was also known as "Willie Fat". This writer is unsure whether it was a nickname he liked or disliked, but in any event he is today, more popularly remembered as "Willie Fat".

William Skenandore was a controversial person during his time. He was described as being a short, chubby, self-educated man who waged an energetic campaign to win recognition for the Oneidas, their land claims in New York state and treaty rights in his role as a self-styled attorney. He frequently in his correspondence, brought the land claims issue and other Oneida concerns to the attention of influential Congressmen and Indian Bureau personnel. He constantly monitored any and all Oneida complaints about federal operations including payment of treaty annuities away from the Oneida Indian reservation, because he believed the Indian Bureau was attempting to get the Oneidas to cancel their annuities by accepting a cash settlement. He also advocated elimination of the Indian Bureau because it didn't help the Indian, but in his opinion only misrepresented Indians. It can be said that his actions were not altogether without benefit, especially in keeping the land claims and treaty issues alive.

William Skenandore also contended that the allotment of the Oneida Indian Reservation in 1892 was illegal and void. That it led to illegal conveyance of titles to Oneida land and unlawful

confiscation of Oneida land by mortgage foreclosures and tax sales. He constantly requested the United States bring suit to prevent the taxation of Oneida allotments for which fee patents were issued.

In addition to his preoccupation with research and study of law books, writing legal memorandas and advocating of treaties rights, William Skenandore was also active politically within the Oneida Tribe. During the 1920's and 1930's four separate political factions each with a large following, vied for power on the Oneida Indian reservation. The factions developed because of the failure of the United States government to deal effectively with any and all problems on the Oneida Indian Reservation. The Oneidas could point to a long line of government ineptness and corruption in their dealings with the non-Indian world: the emigration to Wisconsin, the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, corrupt Indian agents who failed to protect the Oneidas from land swindles and timber strippers, the nonrecognition of Oneida land claims, racial discrimination and many other examples of overall incompetence. The federal government failure to carry out the trust relationship provoked the Oneidas ire and allowed for Oneida Indian politicians to arise and advocate their own solutions to the many problems on the Oneida Indian Reservation. Conditions at Oneida during this time were abysmal. Oneidas were poor, had no money, were losing their homes and destitute on account of taxation. By 1930, 77 percent of the Oneidas were on public assistance.

One of the political factions during this period was headed

by William Skenandore, a second faction was headed by Laura Cornelius "Minnie" Kellogg, a third faction was headed by Oscar Smith and a fourth faction headed by Morris Wheelock.

The Skenandore, Kellogg and Smith factions central focus was the pursuit of Oneida land claims in New York state and treaty rights guarantees. The Wheelock group had sharp differences with the Skenandore, Kellogg and Smith groups. Wheelock insisted that major problems could be resolved by working with the Indian Bureau, not by pushing land claims. Their difference spilled over into debate over the the Wheeler-Howard Bill of 1934, otherwise known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA).

Skenandore opposed adoption of the IRA on the grounds that it would affect treaty guarantees, take from the Oneidas the last bit of land they were still holding and leave the Oneidas worse off than ever. He further argued that the IRA was vicious, detrimental and injurious to the Oneidas and gave the Indian Bureau absolute and arbitrary power over the Oneidas. The Kellogg and Smith group also opposed the IRA in order to reaffirm Oneida sovereignty and the sanctity of treaties. The Wheelock group supported the IRA because of its tribal rehabilitative features, restoring of a tribal landbase, community betterment and self-sufficiency.

Skenandore was on record originally as a supporter of the IRA calling for "passage of the bill of Indian rights". He had also praised Indian Commissioner Collier, who supported adoption and passage of the IRA, for his past efforts as a reformer and for including the Oneidas in emergency relief and civil works

program.

The debate over the IRA continued through 1934. Ironically, it was this very piece of legislation which Skenandore at first supported that would be his political undoing. In addition, Skenandore spent the majority of his time in 1934 in Milwaukee doing legal research. He underestimated the strength of the Wheelock faction as it gained strength throughout 1934 by its alliance with Oscar Archiquette who had become a strong advocate of the IRA. He also failed to see that the IRA provided a mechanism for tribal political revolution at Oneida. On December 15, 1934, the Oneidas voted to accept the IRA by a vote of 681 to approve and 126 against. The Kellogg and Smith group boycotted the vote.

William Skenandore political fortunes, after his faction's defeat on the IRA, had fallen to the point of no recovery by the end of 1934. He attempted to recoup his losses throughout the mid- and late 1930's by becoming increasingly more vocal in his criticism of the IRA. As late as 1939 he still persisted in his legal and political crusade that the IRA wasn't necessary for the Oneidas, but that the Government should recognize the Oneidas rights, take the land and give it back to the Oneidas. Thus, in the 1940's setting aside politics, he returned to his legal research and study on the Oneidas.

In 1946, Congress passed an Act called the Indian Claims Commission Act. The Act gave Indians the right to sue the Government for a cash settlement for lands it had taken from them without just compensation. In 1950, the Oneidas filed a claim

with the Indian Claims Commission. William Skenandore, who at the time was living in Chicago, Illinois, believed that the Act was of the utmost importance to the Oneidas. Thus, he decided to investigate and study the petition on file with the Indian Claims Commission in order to give the Oneidas a better understanding of the petition.

On July 10, 1954, William Skenandore submitted to the Oneida Indian Council his final brief concerning the Oneida Indian petition before the Indian Claims Commission. He concluded from his own investigation and study that it was perfectly clear, the main and only object of the original petition on file with the Indian Claims Commission, as prepared by the law firm of Aaron, Aaron, Schimberg and Hess of Chicago, was to underhandedly by a cash settlement, wipe out completely and forever valuable and inalienable property rights of the Oneidas to their reservation in Wisconsin. He further concluded that under no circumstances should the lawyers be permitted to continue with the claim before the Indian Claims Commission as they would betray the Oneidas the first chance they got. To support his argument against the lawyers, he cited the meeting of September 27, 1952 at Epworth Hall on the Oneida Reservation wherein Attorney Marvin Chapman insisted the Wisconsin Oneidas accept a \$60,000 lump sum cash settlement to cancel out annuities promised in treaties. He felt it was just and proper, to retain another lawyer or lawyers to bring the law firm of Aaron, Aaron, Schimberg and Hess into the Federal Court to cancel out their contract with the Oneidas, for what he called the dissipation of their trust.

William Skenandore was not opposed to the Indian Claims Commission. Instead he saw the Commission as procedural mechanism by which valuable Oneida claims against the Government could be brought out in the open for the first time. His objection was only to the lawyers who included the Oneida Reservation in their original petition, although the petition was amended at a later date. It was his opinion that the Oneidas, even for all the money in the world, should never relinquish their precious heritage to their Reservation and should regard it as priceless and sacred.

William Skenandore in his efforts to win recognition for the Oneidas, their land claims and treaty rights spent the majority of his time at libraries in Milwaukee and Chicago carrying out his studies and research. He was staunch in his belief that all the Oneidas needed was for the Federal Government to recognize their treaty rights, to take the land and give it back to the Oneidas. His many years of research and study from approximately 1920 to 1951 resulted in what he considered his finest piece of work, a 108 page report titled "The Forgotten Indians". The report emanated from his frustration in being unable to have his research and work unfolded in the courts or to reach the public for a disposition of his findings about the Oneidas, their land claims and treaty rights. It is an exhaustive thorough history of the Oneidas starting from the time of first contact with the whiteman in 1535 near what is now the city of Montreal on the St. Lawrence River and coming step by step up to 1951. He finished the report July 5, 1951 after many years of hard work,

but in 1954 indicated there was plenty of room for improvement of the work and had his mind made up to rewrite the entire report once more. Apparently, he never rewrote the report prior to his death in 1959.

In conclusion, as mentioned earlier, it can be said that William Skenandore's actions were not altogether without benefit, especially in keeping the land claims and treaty issues alive. To his dying day, he believed land claims assertions and treaty rights guarantees were of the utmost importance and the only way to remedy the damage perpetrated upon the Oneidas. He was a man ahead of his time and time has since proved him correct on treaty rights and land claims assertions. His own words would probably describe him best and I quote from his report "The Forgotten Indians" his own feelings and emotions toward his people, the Oneidas:

"Ever since the writer undertook the work of giving his people the benefit of his findings and after one has read this report will realize. On account of the valuable properties concerned in this information. Every effort has been made underhandedly and openly to defeat his aims in exporting the actuaries of our case and the going could not have been made any tougher for him. Yet, he has kept the same calm composure at all times, forging ahead gradually against great odds, even when he was under a great pressure to name his price to forget his efforts in behalf of his people. And as badly as he needed the money or a good job, he always had the same answer, no, nothing doing, preferring to come up with his case, the hard, honest and lasting way, rather than to set the remnants of his people afloat down the river and never to be heard from again, thinking all the while, that the day will come, when he will be able to bring all these things to the attention of the public as interesting information. That will show,

that he was no flash in the pan and was never blowing any bubbles about his people and their valuable heritage at any time."





"Willie Fat" Skenandore, Oneida, Wisconsin, 1939. Photograph by Robert Ritzen-  
thaler; courtesy of the Robert Ritzenhaler Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum.