

A close-up portrait of a Native American woman with long, dark hair, smiling gently. She is wearing a dark, textured blazer over a black top, a vibrant turquoise beaded necklace, and matching turquoise earrings. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf. The overall lighting is warm and professional.

Stuart A. Kallen

**Native American
WOMEN OF ACHIEVEMENT**



About the Author

Stuart A. Kallen is the author of more than 350 nonfiction books for children and young adults. He has written on topics ranging from the theory of relativity to the art of electronic dance music. Kallen won a Green Earth Book Award from the Nature Generation environmental organization for his book *Trashing the Planet: Examining the Global Garbage Glut*. In his spare time he is a singer, songwriter, and guitarist in San Diego.

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For more information, contact:

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Wilma Mankiller, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation

It was a historic day in December 1985 when a forty-year-old Cherokee woman placed her hand on a Bible and said, “I, Wilma P. Mankiller, do solemnly swear . . . that I will faithfully execute the duties of Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. And . . . do everything within my power to promote the culture, heritage, and tradition of the Cherokee Nation.”¹³

By taking that oath, Mankiller became the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. It was a crowning achievement for a woman who had to face down poverty, sexism, racism, and government-sponsored discrimination to rise to the position of a respected leader of the Cherokee people.

Living in the Cherokee Nation

Wilma Pearl Mankiller was born on November 8, 1945, in Tahlequah, a small town in northeastern Oklahoma that is the capital of the Cherokee Nation. Mankiller’s father was a full-blooded Cherokee. Her mother, Clara Irene, was White. Mankiller was the youngest of six children.

Mankiller spent her early years on Mankiller Flatts, a 160-acre (65 ha) parcel of land first obtained by her paternal grandfather. The Mankiller family was very poor. They survived by hunting, fishing, maintaining a vegetable garden, and growing

peanuts and strawberries to sell. Like most people on the reservation, Mankiller spoke both Cherokee and English.

Mankiller's childhood home was small and very crowded. Eight people lived in four rooms with bare plank walls covered with a tin roof. The house lacked modern conveniences like indoor plumbing and electricity. Mankiller and her mother had to haul water for washing, cleaning, and cooking from a spring a quarter mile (0.4 km) from their house. Most of the clothing worn by the children, including their underwear, was made by Mankiller's mother out of rough burlap flour sacks.

Moving to the Big City

When Mankiller was almost eleven, her family moved to San Francisco to take part in a government program called the Indian Relocation Act. The law passed by Congress in 1956 was meant to encourage Native Americans to leave reservations and move to cities, where they would be assimilated into American culture. The Indian Relocation Act promised a better life for Native Americans, but Mankiller did not view it that way: "We had to say farewell to the land that had been our family's home for generations, and move far away to a strange place. It was then that I came to know in some small way what it was like for our ancestors when the government troops made them give up their homes and property. It was a time for me to be sad."¹⁴

Although the BIA had promised the Mankillers an apartment, it was not available when they arrived. The family was forced to move into a dirty hotel in the city's Tenderloin district, which was notorious for its seedy clubs, prostitutes, and homeless alcoholics. Mankiller was terrified the first time she heard a siren; she thought it was the sound of a screaming animal.

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—Wilma Mankiller

Backers of the Indian Relocation Act promised Native Americans that they would find prosperity if they left their reservations. But most, including the Mankillers, received little government help. They were left on their own to struggle in a strange city. Mankiller's father and brother both got factory jobs that paid forty-eight dollars a week. This was not enough to support the large family.

The Mankillers moved to a housing project in Hunters Point, where drugs, crime, and street gangs dominated daily life. Mankiller had a very difficult time in school. She was the only Native American, and she was constantly teased for her last name and her accent. She was able to find relief at the San Francisco Indian Center, where she befriended other Native Americans, including many Cherokee people from back home. In a 1993



In December 1985, Wilma Mankiller became the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.

speech, Mankiller fondly remembered the Indian Center: “Many other families like ours, sort of refugees, I guess you could say in the city, gathered at the San Francisco Indian Center and shared our experiences and kind of tried to build a community there.”¹⁵

Making Their Voices Heard

Mankiller married and started a family shortly after graduating from high school in 1963. Her husband, Hector Hugo Olay, was a native of Ecuador. Mankiller’s daughter Felicia was born nine months later. A second daughter, Gina, was born in 1966. During this time Mankiller was a working mother, performing secretarial duties at a finance company.

The United States was changing rapidly in the 1960s. Marginalized groups—including Black Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and women—were demanding equal rights. People of all backgrounds were taking to the streets to protest the war in Vietnam.

Like others, Mankiller was inspired by the activism: “Everything that was happening in the world—Vietnam, peace demonstrations, the civil-rights movement, and the seeds of the native rights movement, had a lasting influence on me.”¹⁶

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—Wilma Mankiller

Occupying Alcatraz

The native rights movement referred to by Mankiller was led by the American Indian Movement (AIM), which was founded in 1968. The ranks of AIM expanded rapidly as the group formed chapters in cities and on reservations across the country. Members demonstrated and staged sit-ins to protest the loss of tribal lands and resources. In 1969, AIM members in San Francisco organized a protest that made international headlines. A group of Native Americans took over the abandoned Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary, located on a 12-acre (4.9 ha) island in San Francisco Bay.

Shown is one of the cellblocks at the former federal penitentiary known as Alcatraz. Mankiller has said that her participation in the occupation of Alcatraz by Native American protesters changed how she perceived herself.



The prison on Alcatraz Island had been shut down in 1963. The occupation of the island was based on a clause written in a long-forgotten treaty that said any unused federal lands must revert back to Native Americans. The Native Americans on the island represented over twenty Indian nations, and as word of the protest spread, the Alcatraz population swelled to over one thousand people. Mankiller took part in the occupation, ignoring the objections of her husband, who did not support her activism.

Demonstrators held Alcatraz Island for nineteen months. As the protest continued, the population of the island dwindled. In 1971 federal marshals evicted the last protesters living on Alcatraz. Mankiller left the island before the protest ended, but she says the experience changed how she perceived herself:

From that point on, I became very, very interested and I acquired skills because I wanted to help my own people. So I figured out how to organize things. I figured out how to do paralegal work. I was encouraged to go to college.

Nobody in my family went to college—nobody I knew went to college. . . . It was conceptually out of our space. And this one woman [I met on the island] who always thought I had leadership potential and didn't just see a ghetto kid, talked me into going to college.¹⁷

Mankiller's decisions led her to attend a community college, where she studied sociology.

Mankiller returned to her family home in Oklahoma when her father died in 1971. While saddened by her father's death, Mankiller took comfort in returning to Mankiller Flatts. The visit planted a seed in her mind to someday live once again in the Cherokee Nation.

After her father's funeral Mankiller returned to California to continue the fight for Native American rights. She became director of the Native American Youth Center in Oakland, where she counseled young people troubled by city life.

A Sacred Name

Wilma Mankiller's surname, *Asgaya-dihi* in Cherokee, was used by the Mankiller family for four generations. As an old Cherokee name, Mankiller was originally a title similar to an American military rank such as major or captain. The Mankiller name could only be earned by a person who watched over and protected their community—and by someone who had killed a man. The name was a source of sacred strength for Mankiller, as she writes in her 1993 autobiography, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*:

Native Americans regard their names not as mere labels, but as essential parts of their personalities. A native person's name is as vital to his or her identity as the eyes or teeth. There is a common belief that when a person is injured, her name is maligned, just as she might be bruised in an accident. . . . If prayers and medicine fail to heal a seriously ill person, the spiritual leader . . . bestows a new name on the sick person. The healer then begins anew, repeating sacred formulas with the patient's new name. In the hope that these measures will bring about restoration and recovery.

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