

Wilma Mankiller – Devoted Activist and the First Female Chief of the Cherokee Nation

By Amanda McGrath

Wilma Mankiller was born in the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 1945. The surname "Mankiller," Asgaya-dih (Cherokee syllabary: ??????) in the Cherokee language, refers to a traditional Cherokee military rank, like a captain or major. After a devastating drought affecting her family's lands, Mankiller's family was moved to a housing project in San Francisco in 1957 as part of a federal relocation policy aiming to move Native Americans off subsidized lands and into jobs in urban areas. In her early adult years in California, Mankiller used her training as a social worker to direct a youth organization in Oakland and began working as an activist in Native American civil rights issues. She supported California's Pit River Tribe in its legal battle against Pacific Gas and Electric over the rights to millions of acres of the tribal land. This experience taught Mankiller practical applications for exercising tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.

Mankiller moved back to the Cherokee Nation in 1977 and founded the Community Development Department for the Cherokee Nation. She led the creation of community water systems and rehabilitation of houses during the administration of Principal Chief Ross Swimmer, whom she later joined as the first female Deputy Chief of the Cherokee Nation. After Chief Swimmer's tenure, Mankiller was elected Principal Chief in 1985 – the first woman to hold that position. The Cherokee Nation is the direct, lineal descendant of the sovereign tribal government that presided over much of the southeastern United States before European colonization.

While in office as Principal Chief, Mankiller tripled her tribe's enrollment, doubled employment, and built new housing, health centers, and children's programs in northeast Oklahoma. Under her leadership, infant mortality declined and educational levels rose. Her leadership on social and financial issues made her tribe a national role model. After leaving office in 1995, she remained a strong voice worldwide for social justice, native people, and women.

Mankiller received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998, the highest honor given to civilians in the United States. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993. In 2021, it was announced that The Wilma Mankiller quarter would be the third coin released under a U.S. Mint program celebrating the achievement of diverse prominent women in American history.