



# Wilma Mankiller: Leader

## Part 1

**Teacher Reads** Wilma Mankiller was born in 1945. She was a member of the Cherokee Nation, a Native American tribe in the State of Oklahoma. Her last name was passed down from her ancestors. “Mankiller” was a word given to warriors who guarded tribal villages.

Wilma Mankiller spent much of her childhood on her  
9 grandfather’s farm in eastern Oklahoma. But when she was 11, her  
20 father signed up for a government program that moved the family  
31 to **San Francisco, California**. Wilma was unhappy about this  
40 change. Living in a large city was much different from living on a  
53 farm. But as she got older, Wilma adjusted to urban life.

64 At the time, people in San Francisco were fighting for rights  
75 being denied to different groups. One event changed Mankiller’s  
84 life. A group of Native Americans took over **Alcatraz Island** in  
95 San Francisco Bay to bring attention to the suffering of Native  
106 Americans. This event motivated Mankiller to start working with  
115 Native communities in California. She had long felt that more  
125 needed to be done to help Native Americans, and she was inspired  
137 by seeing others stand up for the same concerns she had.

148 Eventually, her commitment to helping Native Americans led  
156 her to move back to Oklahoma. She took all that she had  
168 learned supporting Native communities in California back to her  
177 own people, the Cherokee Nation.

182 Mankiller’s path to chief started by helping the Cherokee  
191 people in Bell, Oklahoma. They had no running water in their  
202 homes. A Cherokee way of thinking is that people can work  
213 together to reach a goal. So Mankiller felt that her people could  
225 work to solve this problem. Mankiller helped the people build a  
236 waterline to get running water piped into their homes. When that  
247 self-help project went well, people turned to Mankiller as a leader.



## Part 2

**Teacher Reads** There had never been a female chief of the Cherokee Nation. Read on to see how Mankiller made history and learn about the things she did.

259 Mankiller was elected deputy chief in 1983. Some  
267 people did not like that Mankiller was female. But she got  
278 the votes to win.

282 In 1985, the principal chief, the highest leader, left the  
292 job. Mankiller stepped in. Then in 1987, she was elected  
302 principal chief on her own. Mankiller was the first elected  
312 female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. She was  
321 elected principal chief again in 1991.

327 During her time as principal chief, Mankiller did a lot.  
337 She got more funds for the tribe to use. Mankiller used  
348 the funds to set up medical clinics to help sick people.  
359 She set up job training for adults and school programs  
369 for children and adults.

## Part 3

**Teacher Reads** A role model is someone others look to as a good example. Read on to learn how Mankiller's work and her beliefs about traditions and traditional ways of life continue to inspire others.

373 Mankiller worked hard as a leader to get the Cherokee  
383 people what they should have. At the same time, she did not  
395 want her people to forget the traditions and ways of life that  
407 had been passed down for generations. She motivated her  
416 people to keep the Cherokee traditions of their ancestors  
425 to pass on to future generations.

431 All her life, Mankiller showed people how to get  
440 through hardships. She had faith in the self-help approach.  
450 She felt that people should recognize the problems they  
459 had and work together to solve them. By working together,  
469 all people would benefit. Today, she is still a role model for  
481 all people but especially for girls who want to be leaders.  
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