

Saunooke, Osley Bird ^[1]

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by Robert O. Conway, 1994

19 July 1906–15 April 1965

See also: [Qualla Boundary](#) ^[2]



"Saunook[e], Chief of the Cherokees," portrait of Osely Bird Saunooke by Hugh Morton, circa 1954. From the Hugh Morton Collection of Photographs and Films, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives. Used by permission from the North Carolina Collection.

^[3]Osley Bird Saunooke, chief of the Eastern Band of [Cherokee Indians](#) ^[4] and world heavyweight wrestling champion, was born near Cherokee, N.C., the son of an Indian father and an English mother. He was descended from a lineage of Indian chiefs for five generations. Saunooke attended Haskell Institute in Kansas, where he played tackle on the football team. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps, drove a taxicab, and worked in the wheat fields and on the railroad in the Midwest.

During the depression he began wrestling professionally and at one time weighed in at 369 pounds. He won the heavyweight title in 1937 from Thor Johnson and held it for fourteen years. After taking part in more than five thousand matches, including seventeen main events in New York City's Madison Square Garden, he retired from the ring in 1951 and returned to Cherokee to enter business.

Saunooke served as tribal chief of the Eastern Cherokee from 1951 to 1955 and from 1959 to 1963. He also was elected vice-president of the [National Congress of American Indians](#) ^[5]. Chief Saunooke is credited with developing a model Indian reservation at Cherokee, and towards this end he spent considerable time in Washington, D.C., where he promoted legislation in Congress to benefit his people. In 1935 he married Bertha Smith, and they became the parents of five children.

References:

Asheville Citizen, 16 Apr. 1965.

Raleigh News and Observer, 29 Aug. 1954, 8 Sept. 1962.

Additional Resources:

Jenkins, Jay. "Chief Osley Saunooke." *New & Observer* (Raleigh, NC), August 29, 1954. From the vertical files of the Government & Heritage Library, State Library of North Carolina.

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