

Ada Deer
August 7, 1935 - August 15, 2023

Ada Deer was born on the Menominee Reservation and lived in a log cabin on the banks of the Wolf River until she was 18. Her mother, Constance Wood Deer, was a nurse from a Philadelphia Quaker family. Her father, Joe Deer, a Menominee, worked in the tribe's lumber mill. In the 1950s, Ada's mother vigilantly fought federal efforts to terminate the Menominee's sovereign status. But despite all efforts, Congress passed legislation to terminate the tribe's sovereignty in 1957.

That same year, Ada earned a bachelor's in social work, the first Menominee to graduate from UW-Madison. Soon after, she went to Columbia University and became the first Native American to earn a master's in social work.

Termination made all common tribal lands private and subject to taxes, resulting in many tribal members losing their homes. A corporation with mostly non-Menominee board members managed the tribe's lumber mill. The mill's priorities shifted from full employment and healthy forest practices to maximum profit. Ada thought that if it took a law to create this problem, it would take a new law to solve it. Deer suggested the new term "restoration" for the concept of reversing termination.

In 1970, a grassroots organization, "DRUMS" (Determination of Rights and Unity for Menominee Shareholders), was formed. Deer led the group's federal lobbying efforts, where she won the support of Wisconsin Senators Gaylord Nelson and William Proxmire. Deer even persuaded Congressman John Conyers Jr. to pledge the support of the Congressional Black Caucus. In 1973, the Menomonee, the first tribe terminated, became the first restored, thus ending the termination era.

Soon after, she became the first woman to chair the Menominee tribe (1974-76). President Clinton appointed Deer the first woman to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1993-97), where she reformed the Bureau and reshaped federal policy for 555 American Indian tribes.