

OUR DEBT TO THE IROQUOIS

By J. F. Page, Ph. D.*

Had it not been for a confederacy of eastern Indians we perhaps would not exist to-day as an English-speaking nation. From that group of tribes, known as the Six Nations, we also derived many of our agricultural patterns, and uses of foods and drugs.

The six Iroquois tribes, known as Mohawks, Onondagos, Senecas, Oneidas, Cayugas, and Tuscaroras,¹ neighbors of the early Americans, occupied the Mohawk Valley, between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. Though, perhaps never numbering over fifteen to eighteen thousand, the influence of this confederacy among Red men was such that its orders were obeyed from Lake Ontario to Chesapeake Bay and from the Delaware River to beyond the Ohio. This Federation of Iroquois tribes was founded upon high ideals of peace and brotherhood, and was designed to embrace ultimately all of humanity. In these respects it may be regarded as a prototype of the League of Nations and of the United Nations.

The league was organized before the arrival of English people to our shores, theoretically about the middle of the sixteenth century. It was then composed of five independent peoples of Iroquois stock;² the sixth tribe, or Tuscaroras,³ joined the Confederacy in 1715. These tribes were cemented into a union with the sanctions of law, custom, and religion. The League was given an Indian name meaning the Great Peace, a sacred term to the Iroquois. The council of fifty peace chiefs who administered it were priests. It met once a year at Onondago, the League capital, and at such other times as emergency might demand, to promote internal peace, or conduct foreign relations. The story of two founding heroes of the Confederacy,—Deganawida, the man of legal mind, and Hiawatha the peace-loving hero, practically constituted the Iroquois Bible. These Indians believed in a Great Spirit who cared for his people and who desired that they care for each other. They treasured his precepts in a way that would put most Christians to shame. With peace among themselves and security

* Dr. J. F. Page is Professor Emeritus, Oklahoma A. and M. College, Stillwater, Oklahoma. He now resides in St. Petersburg, Florida.—Ed.

¹ Some descendants of bands of these Indian tribes belonging to the Iroquoian linguistic stock are among the Indian citizens living in Ottawa County, Oklahoma. The Cherokee, the largest tribe of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma, are of the Iroquoian family, and formed its southern branch that waged war with the Northern Iroquois in very early times. (See Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* [Norman, 1951]).—Ed.

² Frederick Webb Hodge, *A Handbook of the American Indians North of Mexico*, Bur. of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, 2 volumes (Washington, 1911).—Ed.

³ *Ibid.*

from their enemies, and with their confederacy built around the great ideal of human brotherhood, the Iroquois, if left unhampered by the whites, would likely have built a commendable civilization.

In the struggle between England and France, the English colonies of America were fortunate to have the support of the Iroquois tribes. Had it not been for this fact, it is wholly probable that we would to-day be a French-speaking people. Governor Dougan of New York stated, in 1687, that the Five Nations were a bulwark between his people and the French, with their Algonquin allies. George Chalmers called the Five Nations the "impenetrable fence around the northern colonies," and James Logan, Secretary of Pennsylvania, in a letter to William Penn, said, "If we lose the Iroquois, we are gone".

Iroquois sympathy for the English colonists was probably not a matter of personal likeability but came from the fact that they were natural enemies of the powerful Algonquins and their allies. Such enmity grew out of their geographic location, since the Iroquois, living between the American colonies and the Indian tribes of the interior, were always on the alert to secure the traffic in furs between these tribes of the west and Albany, rather than let it be diverted by the French to Montreal. For nearly a century the Iroquois were in almost continuous warfare with the French and their chief allies, the Algonquins. They blocked the path of these foes to the West, by way of the Great Lakes, and hence, their fur trade with Indian tribes of the interior. They also ravaged unceasingly French and Algonquin territory. These powerful champions of the colonies, too, stood in the way of French and Algonquins to prevent their attack on New York, by controlling the only two feasible routes by which such attack could be made, from the Great Lakes by way of the Mohawk River, and from Canada through Lake Champlain and down the Hudson River. Since their own country abounded in beaver, and they were favorably located to control lake routes, the Iroquois were prepared to furnish the Dutch of New York on profitable terms, with pelts, the product that became the mainstay of the colony.

The Iroquois, cultivated extensive fields of maize, and administered the government of their communities in dignified councils. In general, they ordered their lives in a way that was easy for Seventeenth Century Europeans to adopt, and had much more influence on our colonial ancestors than we give them credit for today. Their confederacy served as a model for, and an incentive to the federation of the thirteen colonies later, and subsequently to their transformation into the United States of America. Benjamin Franklin wrote that it would seem strange "that a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interests." Thus, the organization of a group of tribes in the stone-age culture seems

largely responsible for the Articles of Confederation and later the Constitution of the United States of America.

Our early agricultural patterns, many of which are still extant, were borrowed in large part from the Iroquois, who surpassed all their neighbors in agriculture. In clearing the land, these Indians belted the trees, then the next year, after these were dead and dried, they burned and charred them sufficiently deep to make chopping easy.

The practices of planting four or five kernels of corn in hills about three feet apart, of putting bean, squash, or pumpkin seed in maize hills, of testing seed and germinating it in water, hoeing earth up around the growing stalks, and of using husking pins of wood, were employed by the Iroquois before the colonists made use of them. Hanging of ears of corn, to be used for seed, with their pendant husks braided together; building cribs, elevated on posts, to keep the contents dry and protected from rodents; making corn-husk mats; taking the hard outer shell off maize kernels with lye, made from wood ashes,⁴ and having husking bees, were borrowed from these tribes by the colonists. Eastern Indians, notably the Iroquois, contributed to American colonists the use of mixed dishes of beans, maize, and meat; the stirring, and cooking of meal and water into "mush" the delicacies of corn bread, "Johnny cake", popcorn, corn on the cob, sassafras tea, maple syrup, mushrooms, and hominy, the names, hominy and succotash having been derived from them. The Iroquois cultivated tobacco for smoking purposes, and as pipe makers, excelled in the number and quality of their products.

The Iroquois were among the tribes that contributed these medicinally-used herbs; ginseng, sassafras root (as a blood purifier), Indian poke, sweet flag, Indian turnip, white oak bark, slippery elm, wild ginger, goldenseal, cherry bark, winter green, bloodroot, sumac, May apple, and many others.

The Six Nations, who had so faithfully fought with the English against their American foes, unfortunately did not understand why the American colonies should revolt against their English king. The rebellion violated the principles of the Great Peace. Hence, during the American Revolution, they, for the most part, fought with England. It was that conflict which furnished our unhappy memories of them since as true barbarians they were cruel to foes. Under the leadership of the noted Joseph Brant,⁵ they devastated the fields and burned the homes of the colonists, slaughtering and scalping many of them, including women and children. In this connection it is well to remember that the Puritans offered scalp premiums, as

⁴ This method of preparing corn was that employed by other great agricultural tribes among the Woodland Indians living east of the Mississippi River.—Ed.

⁵ W. N. P. Dailey, D. D., "Sir William Johnson, Baronet," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXII, No. 2 (Summer, 1944), pp. 164-75.

early as 1637. Later, in 1755, General Braddock guaranteed his soldiers five pounds for every enemy scalp. Incidentally, Mr. Brant, a Mohawk, who had been educated in the Indian missionary school at Lebanon, Connecticut, and who translated the Gospel of Mark into the Mohawk language, moved in the highest circles of English nobility and gentry.

The Iroquois were so greatly reduced in number and prestige by defeat, when the colonists won the war against England, that they never again became a force in American affairs. Many of them moved to Canada. To-day an Indian village, named Onondago, on the outskirts of Syracuse, commemorates the great Iroquois confederacy that served as teacher, model, and protector to our colonial ancestors.