

In the Past -- Life among the Iroquois Nations

Long ago, five Native American tribes -- the Mohawks, the Senecas, the Onondagas, the Oneidas, and the Cayugas -- were enemies who fought with each other all the time. One day, two wise men named Deganawidah and Hyantwatha decided the fighting had to stop. Deganawidah said, "To war against each other is foolish and evil. Hunters are afraid to go into the forest. Fishermen are afraid to follow the streams. Women are afraid to work in the fields. Because of war, people are starving and suffering. War must end, and Peace must be established for all peoples."

The warriors of the Five Nations listened to Deganawidah. What he said made sense. So, they threw down their weapons. The Great Peace forged by Deganawidah and Hyantwatha produced an unwritten but clearly defined framework for the Iroquois Confederacy. Three principles, each with dual meanings, formed the foundation of the League government. The Good Word signified righteousness in action as well as in thought and speech; it also required justice through the balancing of rights and obligations. The principle of Health referred to maintaining a sound mind in a sound body; it also involved peace among individuals and between groups. Thirdly, Power meant physical, military, or civil authority; it also denoted spiritual power. The founders envisioned the resulting peace spreading beyond the original League members, so that eventually all people would live in cooperation.

Under the structure of the Confederacy, the 50 clan chiefs from all the tribes came together to address questions of common concern at council meetings. If no consensus could be achieved, each tribe was free to follow an independent course on that matter.

There were six different languages spoken by the Iroquois nations: Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Tuscarora. These languages are all related to each other, just as the European languages Spanish, French, and Italian are all related to each other. Some Iroquois people could speak more than one of these languages. In particular, important Iroquois men usually learned Mohawk, because Mohawk was the language they usually used at the council meetings and at Iroquois religious festivals.

The Iroquois people lived in villages of longhouses, which were large wood-frame buildings covered with sheets of elm bark. Iroquois longhouses were up to a hundred feet long, and each one housed an entire clan (as many as 60 people). The Iroquois planted gardens around their homes. They planted foods like corn, beans, and squash. They also hunted game and birds, they fished, and they gathered wild plants, berries, seeds, and nuts.

Traditionally, a man and woman wishing to marry would tell their parents, who would arrange a joint meeting of relatives to discuss the suitability of the two people for marriage to each other. If no objections arose during the discussion, a day was chosen for the marriage feast. On the appointed day the woman's relatives would bring her to the groom's home for the festivities. Following the meal, elders from the groom's family spoke to the bride about wifely duties, and elders from the bride's family told the groom about husbandly responsibilities. Then the two began their new life together.

Children were valued among the Iroquois; because of the matrilineal society, daughters were somewhat more prized than sons. Until he was able to walk, an Iroquois baby spent his days secured to a cradleboard, which his mother would hang from a tree branch while she worked in the fields. Babies were named at birth; when the child reached puberty, an adult name was given.

Mothers had primary responsibility for raising their children and teaching them good behavior. In keeping with the easy-going nature of the Iroquois society, children learned informally from their family and clan elders. Children were not spanked, but they might be punished by splashing water in their faces. Difficult children might be frightened into better behavior by a visit from someone wearing the mask of Longnose, the cannibal clown.

From ancient times the Iroquois believed that a powerful spirit called Orenda permeated the universe. He created everything that is good and useful. The Evil Spirit made things that are poisonous, but the Great Spirit gained control of the world.

Compiled from:

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