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# A Name to Remember

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

## Ha-sa-no-an-da. “Leading Name.”

That is how the Seneca name of the boy, born in 1828 on a small, threatened Indian reservation in western New York, is most often rendered in English. “Open Book” and “The Reader” have also been proposed as alternative translations and are just as appropriate.

His family, the Parkers (a last name taken by Ha-sa-no-an-da’s father from a British officer who had been adopted by the Senecas)—though he would later describe them in his never-completed autobiography as “poor but honest Indians”—was a respected one and well-off by Native standards. His father owned a sawmill, and his mother was the equivalent of royalty. She was the great-granddaughter of Handsome Lake, the prophet, and a grandniece of Red Jacket, the famous orator. She was also an important figure in the Wolf Clan to which her son belonged, since clan is inherited through the mother’s side.

Ha-sa-no-an-da, like most Native people of his generation, never knew the exact date of his birth. So, he said, comparing himself to the character of Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who also “never had a birthday,” he was, therefore, “never related or depressed on any special day of the year.”

I’ve always loved it that he used that literary reference. Like that first name he was given, it’s an indication of how linked his life was to literature and storytelling. Writing became a central part of his life in more ways than one. Though the great fame he eventually gained was not as an author, it is hard to think of any Native American of the 19th century who did more to influence and assist the literary pursuits of others.

Ha-sa-no-an-da, that first name he was given, was not the only name he was called. Around the time that he was sent at an early age to the Baptist mission school on the Tonawanda Reservation, he became known as Ely, named after the Baptist minister, Reverend Ely Stone. “Ely,” he would say,

“pronounced to rhyme with freely.” Ely S. Parker.

At the time of Ha-sa-no-an-da’s, or Ely’s youth, his Seneca people were under siege. Land companies attempted, through bribery, fraud, and physical coercion, to force the Native people of western New York from the few acres they still had left in several small reservations. (What was formerly the Buffalo Creek Seneca Reservation, for example, ended up as the city of Buffalo through a land sale document that was a total forgery.) The major reason for sending bright young men, such as Ely S. Parker, to white school was to gain the kind of education that would prepare them to fight for their people—not on the battlefield, but through letters, petitions, and direct negotiations with the politicians in Albany and Washington.

The story of Ely S. Parker’s education is a complex and interesting one. I’m actually writing a novel for young adults about it, that I’ve titled *The Rising Rainbow*, a reference to a dream Ely’s mother, Ga-ont-gwut-twus, had four months before his birth. In that dream, she was on the Buffalo Creek Reservation. It was winter, and snow was falling. Suddenly, the sky opened, and a rainbow appeared that arced from the reservation to the nearby farm of the former white Indian agent. Marked along its length with signs like those on the white shops in Buffalo, that rainbow was broken in the middle. When Ga-ont-gwut-twus went to the council house at Tonawanda to ask the dream interpreter the meaning of that dream, she was told that the child she was carrying would be famous as both a white man and an Indian, as a peacemaker and a great warrior. His sun would rise on Indian land and set on white man’s land, but “the ancient land of his ancestors will fold him in death.” However, it seems, the dream interpreter did not explain why that rainbow was broken.

Suffice it to say that Ely succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. He didn’t just gain fluency in English. He became known as

the most powerful orator at Yates Academy, the secondary institution he attended after leaving the small Baptist mission school. His writing and his penmanship were second to none. While still at Yates, he was delegated by his people to take that struggle to save their land onto his young shoulders, first by writing their letters to the powers-that-be, then by accompanying Seneca delegations to Albany and Washington, and finally, by becoming their primary spokesperson and tribal ambassador—all while still in his teens.

He would end up not just meeting with, but being warmly welcomed and frequently invited to the White House, by every president of his time. Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—Ha-sa-no-an-da knew them all. And in his adult years, he would not just be close friends with Lincoln and Grant, but would serve in Grant’s administration. By then he would be carrying another name, as well as titles earned in a white man’s war.

First, let’s step back to his earlier years and those literary contacts. The first of them came when he was 16 and in Albany accompanying three Seneca chiefs meeting with the governor. During a free afternoon, while browsing through the shelves in an Albany bookstore, Ha-sa-no-an-da was approached by a white man who asked if he was an Indian. The man was Lewis Henry Morgan, a lawyer who was fascinated with the Iroquois. When Ha-sa-no-an-da replied in the affirmative, it began a long friendship during which the young Seneca and his entire family would serve as Morgan’s primary informants for his ground-breaking book *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois*, published in 1851. It’s a work that was aptly described by Major John Wesley Powell as the “first scientific account of an Indian tribe.” It was the start of a career that would establish Morgan as the most important American social scientist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And it could not have been written without Ely S. Parker.

The book's dedication clearly indicates Ely's central role. It reads:

To HA.SA.NO.AN'.DA. (Ely S. Parker,) A Seneca Indian, This Work, The Materials of which are the fruit of our joint researches, is Inscribed: In Acknowledgement of the Obligations, and in testimony of the friendship of The Author.

From that first meeting with Morgan and continuing throughout the remainder of his life, Parker was the primary conduit to the white world for information about the Iroquois. In addition to his work as an indigenous diplomat—work that did culminate in preserving Tonawanda as a reservation—he was constantly researching the traditions of his Seneca people for his white friends and relaying his findings in hundreds of extremely well written letters. Among those who benefited from his diligence was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who was supplied by Ely with extensive information about every aspect of Seneca life. In fact, Ely wrote so extensively and so well that, had it been a later century when Native ethnologists began to publish their own work without the aid of white scholars as intermediaries, he would likely have been an author in his own right. The few pages that he did write of an unfinished autobiography bear witness to his ability as a writer and to his wry humor.

It would take a large book to adequately chronicle all of Ely S. Parker's non-literary achievements. To date, two volumes have been written about his life. The first, *The Life of General Ely S. Parker, Last Grand Sachem of the Iroquois and General Grant's Military Secretary* (Buffalo Historical Society, 1919), was written by his admiring grandnephew Arthur C. Parker. The second, William H. Armstrong's *Warrior in Two Camps: Ely S. Parker, Union General and Seneca Chief* (Syracuse University Press, 1978), draws heavily on Arthur Parker's book and supercedes the earlier volume to some degree. Both books are interesting, and I highly recommend them. However, neither Arthur Parker nor Armstrong fully explore Ely S. Parker's truly amazing life.

His was an amazing odyssey. It includes his promising start as a lawyer's clerk, which ended when he was told that as an Indian he was not a citizen and thus could never be a lawyer. It goes on to his being raised by his Seneca people to the position of a sachem—which gave him the new name of Do-ne-ho-ga-wa, the Keeper of the Western Door. It encompasses his work as a civil engineer in Galena, Illinois, where he met and formed a deep friendship with Ulysses S. Grant. That bond would result in his becoming Grant's personal secretary and a Brevet General during the American Civil War. Ely S. Parker was the highest-ranking American Indian in the Union Army. He was not only present at the surrender at Appomattox, but was the one who wrote out the terms of surrender. His postwar life—which included his marriage (scandalous at the time) to Minnie Sackett, who was a much younger and quite beautiful white debutante; his service as Commissioner of Indian Affairs in President Grant's administration, until being brought down unjustly by a scandal; his making a fortune on Wall Street and then losing it all—is a deeply dramatic story. The rainbow of Ely S. Parker's life truly rose—and was broken—more than once.

His final years were marked by yet another literary relationship with the poet Harriet Maxwell Converse (whose husband, Frank Converse, was a musician and known at the time as "The father of the banjo"). Not long after meeting the General (as Parker was often called following the Civil War), she accompanied Parker in 1881 to Tonawanda and other Iroquois communities, beginning a connection between Converse and the Iroquois people and a friendship between her and Parker that would last throughout the rest of their lives. The letters that they wrote each other are indicative of both her interest in the Haudenosaunee and in Parker's own intelligence and self-deprecating charm, as this one brief example from one of his letters to her shows:

On reading your last note I was greatly amused—and why? Because what I have written heretofore has been taken *verbatim et literatim* and a character given

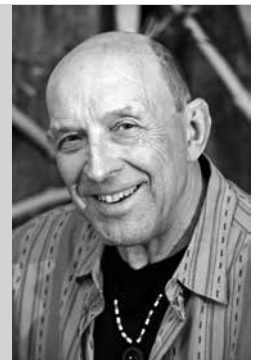
me to which I am no more entitled than the man in the moon; I am credited with being "great," "powerful," and finally crowned as "good." Oh, my guardian genius, why should I be burdened with what I am not now and never expect to be....

One of the final fruits of Ely S. Parker's role as a guide to the literary works of others was published in 1908, five years after Converse's death. Edited by the same Arthur Parker who would write his granduncle's biography and published by the New York State Museum, it was a substantial collection of traditional stories entitled *Myths and Legends of the New York Iroquois*.

As to that man of many names and many roles—Ha-sa-no-an-da, Ely S. Parker, Don-ne-ho-ga-wa, the General—he had reached his own rainbow's end on August 30, 1895, while working as a clerk in the New York City police department under Frederick Grant, the late president's oldest son.

He was interred first in Oak Lawn Cemetery in Fairfield, Connecticut, close to the home he shared with his wife Minnie and their daughter; but in 1897, he was reburied in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, on land that had been part of the Buffalo Creek Reservation, directly under the statue of Red Jacket who is buried nearby. The ancient land of his ancestors truly folded him in death. ▼

Joseph Bruchac is a writer, musician, and traditional Native storyteller whose work often reflects his American Indian (Abenaki) ancestry and the Adirondack Region of northern New York where he lives in the house he was raised in by his grandparents.



He is the author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume *OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling*. Photo by Eric Jenks.

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