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BEING IROQUOIS: Arthur C. Parker

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

The Six Nations Museum in the tiny Adirondack hamlet of Onchiota is one of the little-known treasures of New York State. Within its log walls, there's more history and culture packed than in institutions many times its size. But this column is not about that longhouse-shaped private museum or the Mohawk family, the Faddens, who have kept its doors open for more than 60 summers. I'll write about them and its late, beloved founder Ray Tehanetorens Fadden at another time.

Instead, this essay is linked to one object in that museum. It's a small leather bag hanging from one of the horns of a buffalo head mounted high above one of those doors.

"See that?" John Kahionhes Fadden said to me one summer when I was visiting, jerking his head up toward the buffalo. "That belonged to Arthur Parker. That was his medicine pouch."

Arthur C. Parker. If you do not know his name, then you probably don't know much about the Iroquois people, those five formerly warring tribes who gathered themselves into a great league of peace about a thousand years ago and who call themselves the Haudenosaunee, the "People of the Longhouse." It was Arthur C. Parker who, through his extensive writing, his professional career as a museologist (his own description of his work), and as an activist, did much to dispel the stereotypes about Indians that characterized his time and make visible to the wider world the history and the contributions of the Haudenosaunee.

His accomplishments were not without struggle. In her 2001 book, *To Be Indian, The Life of Iroquois-Seneca Arthur Caswell Parker*, Joy Porter does a thorough job of exploring the life of a man who was perhaps the most published Native American writer of his time. Yet Parker, born on the Seneca Indian Reservation in western New York, also found himself struggling between the

white and Indian worlds throughout his life. Although he always identified as an Indian and as an Iroquois in particular, he was only one-quarter Seneca. Since that heritage was on his father's side, he did not qualify as a Seneca within the strictly matrilineal line of descent followed by all of the Haudenosaunee Nations, and was not enrolled. Parker expressed his displeasure about the matrilineal system in terms that I doubt endeared him to Iroquois clan mothers, stating: 'Legalists point out that only animals, slaves, and some Indians, among them the Iroquois of New York State, take their descent from the female line' (Porter 2001, 75). (However, when in 1903 formal adoption was offered him by the Seneca Bear clan, he accepted both the adoption and the name of Gawasowaneh, Big Snovsnake.)

The distinguished nature of his Native heritage partially explains why identification as Iroquois was so vitally important to him. Parker claimed that his great-grandmother was a direct descendant of the Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake, and a great niece of the famous orator Red Jacket. His grandfather, Nicholson Parker (1819–1892), a graduate of Albany Normal School was, as Arthur wrote 'clerk of the Seneca nation, United States interpreter, census agent, marshall of the nation, orator, agriculturalist and civil engineer' and a 'pioneer of progress among his people' (Porter 2001, 14–15). He was also the brother of the famous Ely Parker, who was both a sachem and a brevet general in the Civil War and, as I pointed out in an earlier column, a seminal source of information about Iroquois culture for such writers as Lewis Henry Morgan. (Morgan's *League of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois*, in fact, was deeply important to Arthur Parker, and he referred to it often throughout his life. "The influence of Morgan and my great uncle have been with me since childhood" Parker would write, while also pointing out that he himself was born in 1881, the year

of Morgan's death [Porter 2001, 26, 40]). His family home was filled not just with objects of Iroquois material culture, but also with the stories that his grandfather Nic had told around the fire. 'Oh,' Arthur Parker wrote, 'those grandfather tales, of legends of his hunting, of traditions of his boyhood days. Those tales helped to mold the minds of his grandchildren.' (Porter 2001, 18). As a result, Arthur grew up both in love with those Native traditions and convinced of the importance of succeeding within the white man's world—not at all an easy task.

At age 11, Arthur moved with his family from Cattaraugus to New York City, where as a hardworking, diligent student, he graduated from White Plains High School and was a frequent visitor to the Museum of Natural History, a place that became a sort of second home for him. Though he went on to study philosophy and religion at Dickinson Seminary, his love of museums in general would lead eventually to a position as archaeologist for the State Museum in Albany and then to the job of Director of the Rochester Municipal Museum from 1924 to 1946. Museums; Native American rights (as a member of numerous intertribal rights organizations, including the Society of American Indians); and writing about Iroquois history, culture, and stories can easily be seen as the main passions in Parker's professional life.

The selected bibliography in Porter's biography of Parker lists over a hundred titles—from short monographs to weighty tomes on Iroquois culture, history, and folklore: *Iroquois Uses of Maize and Other Food Plants* (1910); *The Code of Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet* (1913); *The Constitution of the Five Nations* (1916); *Life of General Ely. S. Parker* (1919); *Seneca Myths and Folktales* (1923); *Skummy Wundy, Seneca Indian Tales* (1926); and *Red Jacket, Last of the Seneca* (1952). They have informed and influenced

generations of folklorists, historians, and storytellers, myself included.

One of my favorite stories about Arthur Parker has to do with the famous fire of March 29, 1911, that swept through the west end of the Albany State Capitol, engulfing the State Library and its ethnographic collections, including hundreds of items Parker had brought there. Braving the flames, Parker rescued priceless objects from the clouds of smoke and walls that were crashing down around him. He used the tomahawk that had belonged to the famous chief Cornplanter as his 'fire ax and mascot,' (Porter 2001, 76), managing to save the Iroquois wampum belts that were then part of the library collection. Those same belts, important sacred items for the Iroquois Nations, were finally repatriated from the New York State Museum in 1983 to the Iroquois Grand Council at Onondaga. If not for Parker's bravery, they would have been lost forever seven decades earlier.

These paragraphs I've written may explain why, after Parker's death, Ray Fadden would state that Arthur Parker was the greatest man he had ever known, one who desired 'nothing for himself . . .' and was '... ever

ready to do good for everyone, no matter who' (Porter 2001, 241).

His was truly, as Porter put it, "a life of complexity and achievement" (Porter 2001, 241). And his life was, whatever his ancestry, one that was first and foremost deeply Iroquois.

Which brings me back to that medicine bag in the Six Nations Museum and the story Ray's son John told me: One day, John said, things were quiet here at the museum, no visitors, and his dad kept glancing up at that medicine bag.

"You know," Ray said, "Chief Parker gave me that bag before he passed on for us to take care of it."

He looked up at the bag.

"You know," Ray added, "You're not supposed to open someone else's medicine bag. But I heard that bag has a hummingbird in it."

Then he looked up at the bag again and nodded.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to take a look after all these years."

He went and got a ladder, took down the bag, put it on the counter and started to untie the top. But as soon as he did that, in through the open window came a

hummingbird. It circled Ray's head and then hung in midair right in front of him, wings buzzing, looking him in the eye.

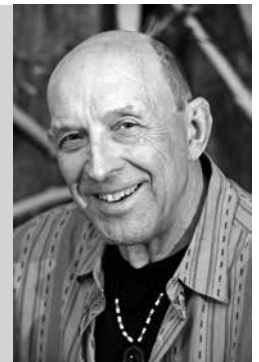
And then, John said, his dad retied the top, climbed the ladder and hung that bag back on that buffalo horn where it remains to this day. ▼

Reference

Porter, Joy. 2001. *To Be Indian: The Life of Iroquois-Seneca Arthur Caswell Parker*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

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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