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Ray Tehanetorens Fadden: He Saw Between the Trees

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Few people in modern times had more effect on a Native American nation than did Ray Tehanetorens Fadden (1910–2008) on his Mohawk people. It began in the 1930s when he started a youth group called the Akwesasne Mohawk Counselor's Organization to revive indigenous culture and restore pride in the community. Many of the later leaders of the Mohawk Nation were part of his Counselors Organization. It was, quoting Mohawk author Doug George (former editor of the crusading newspaper *Akwesasne Notes*), "the spark that started the longhouse movement" (Personal email communication from Doug George, March 10, 2016).

A visionary teacher in the St. Regis Mohawk School, Ray Fadden refused to allow his students to forget Haudenosaunee history. Then—largely built with his own hands and without support from any institution—he created the Six Nations Iroquois Museum in Onchiota, New York, four miles from the place of his birth. Opened in 1954, it is one of the most informative and unique repositories of Native American history and culture.

Further, the 27 pamphlets he wrote, later compiled into book form are still regarded as seminal contributions to Iroquois folklore and history.¹

Ray's everyday life itself was unique. Numerous Native and non-Native storytellers and writers who met Ray ended up retelling some of his traditional tales (such as his hilarious true account about Needles, a baby porcupine he raised²) or telling stories about him. There are probably as many tales about Ray as stories that he told.

Anyone who visited the Six Nations Museum during the decades Ray ran it, came away with several impressions. First, that the three rooms of that longhouse-shaped museum were mind-bogglingly filled with so much information, that a week's visit there wouldn't be enough to absorb it all.

Second, that Ray's lightning-quick mind was at least as full as those rooms, as he proceeded to tell stories, read the long pictographic beaded belts he created, and relate in minute detail aspects of American and Native American history that few of his visitors—even those who were Iroquois—knew as well as Ray. Third, that the word "outspoken" was nowhere near strong enough to describe Ray Fadden.

My first meeting as an adult with Ray, who I'll always regard as a friend and teacher, took place over 40 years ago. To be honest, it was less than auspicious. I'd known about Ray since my childhood—when I saw him telling stories and demonstrating traditional crafts at a Lake George tourist attraction called the Indian Village. But college, three years in Ghana as a volunteer teacher, and then the job of teaching English at Skidmore College kept me from visiting the Six Nations Museum. It was not until 1972 that I finally took the long drive, past Saranac Lake, to his minuscule town. (Where two signs 50 yards apart read, respectively, "Entering Onchiota" and "Leaving Onchiota.")

I'd brought one of my college students with me. As Ray started to guide us through the museum, I noticed a full-size taxidermied deer placed inside a canoe.

"A lot fairer to the animals," I said, "hunting them with bows and arrows."

Unfortunately, Ray—who'd never really met me before—heard that remark.

"You're a *hunter*?" he said, laying the emphasis on that last word the way you might say "serial killer."

Then, before I could reply that I was actually a lifelong friend and defender of the animal people, he delivered a ten-minute lecture on the evils of hunting that singed my eyebrows. It only ended with the arrival of a group of kids with their teacher. As Ray walked back into the entry room to greet them, my student leaned over to

me and whispered, "He doesn't really know who you are."

"It's okay," I said. And it was. No more than a minute later, in a much softer voice, Ray poked his head into the room and said, "Joe, you and your friend come on in here. I'm going to read a belt to these kids, and you need to hear it."

Then, to a rapt audience that included my student and me, pointer in hand, he told the story of "The Gift of the Great Spirit."³

It was the first of many visits that often ended up at Ray's place across from the museum, with him and his wife Christine Chubb Fadden, or at the nearby house of his son John (who became a friend and artistic partner, illustrating such books of mine as *Keepers of the Earth*) and his daughter-in-law Eva Thompson Fadden, an acclaimed woodcarver. Every visit produced at least one more story about Ray—such as the one I included in an earlier column about Arthur Caswell Parker, who was a dear friend of Ray's.⁴

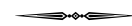
So I'm going to devote the remainder of this column to sharing a few more of those anecdotes that illustrate Ray's uniqueness, iconoclasm, and devotion to nature.

For example, thinking of Arthur Parker, there's the time I walked around behind the museum and found Ray splitting wood—while wearing a tuxedo.

I didn't say anything, but Ray noticed me noticing his attire and lowered his ax.

"Mr. Parker left me this," he said, tugging on the tuxedo's lapel. "It's good thick cloth. I can't think of any better way for me to use it."

Then he went back to his formal wood-splitting.



One of Ray's main concerns was the well-being of the wild creatures on the land he'd purchased and posted. He set up

hundreds of feeding stations, not just for the smaller creatures, but the larger ones as well.

He explained to me that he did so because the acid rain caused by “those devils” (his favorite term for any people, businesses, corporations, or states doing environmental damage) was killing trees and destroying natural food sources for birds and animals in the Adirondacks.

As a result of his caretaking, his many wooded acres teemed with all sorts of animals, so many that local trappers were tempted to trespass.

“This one local man,” Ray told me, “kept doing that. I’d find his traps on my property. I’d take them back to him and warn him not to do it. He’d say it was just a mistake. But then he would come right back and do it again. Finally, after the third time he did that, I had to do something. I took one of his traps and welded a 50-cent piece to the trigger. Then, that night, I set it up in the snow outside his house, buried so just that coin was showing.

The next day, I saw him in the supermarket with his right hand bandaged up.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“Well, somebody set up a trap in my yard and I got caught in it,” he said.

“Good thing it wasn’t a bear trap,” I said, looking him right in the eye.

“Oh my,” he said, looking a little scared, “That’s surely right, Mr. Fadden.”

And he never set his traps on our land again.”



Among the animals Ray fed—giving them meat scraps that he either bought or had donated by local markets—were black bears. At first he fed them in his back yard.

“Animals are very psychic,” he told me. “I just let them know there was food for them by thinking to them. All they had to do was just knock on the back door, and I’d bring it out to them.”

Then Ray laughed. “But that didn’t work so well. One day my wife Christine was just about to take out the laundry. All of a sudden—BAM—the door got knocked

right down in front of her. And there was a big black bear up on his hind legs. It stood there for a moment, looking embarrassed before it turned around and went back into the woods. Christine came to me and said, ‘Ray, you have got to do something different about those bears.’”

What Ray did was to set up a feeding station on a big rock back in the woods. Once again, just using his thoughts, he told the bears to go there for food. “And,” he said, “they never came into our backyard again.”

At one time there were more than 19 bears visiting that big rock. No one went back there but Ray. He didn’t feed them by hand, just put down food and moved off to a respectful distance to watch them. They never caused him any trouble, and he learned to communicate with them.

“When they greet a friend,” Ray said, “they lower their heads and sway back and forth and make this sound, *Ummmm, ummmmm, ummmmm-mmm*. Any time I meet a bear in the woods I do that. I lower my head, sway back and forth and go *Ummmm, ummmmm, ummmmm-mmm*. They do it right back to me, and then we each go our own way.”



The last story I’ll share about Ray has to do with one of his bear that had an injured paw.

“Probably from a trap,” Ray said.

He called it Limpy and put food for it off from the other, bigger bears that bullied it. But Limpy kept looking weaker. Then, one day, he didn’t show up.

Ray was sad about that, figuring Limpy had died. Seven days passed. Then that little bear came walking out of the woods from the west, looking well and not even limping. He came up to Ray, did the headswaying greeting, then turned and walked back west. Ray felt really happy that Limpy was well. But then, later that day, his wife Christine noticed ravens circling over to the west where there was a clearing. Ray went to investigate. And there he found Limpy’s body. The ravens had been working on it. That bear had been dead for days.

“I guess,” Ray told me, “Limpy had to come to me one last time before he set off on his journey to the place spirits go.”

It’s been a while now since Ray himself left us, but the Six Nations Museum (www.sixnationsindianmuseum.com) still remains open as always in the warm months of the year. It’s run now by his grandson David, himself an artist and storyteller. Visit there and as you wonder at everything that place has preserved, you may feel the lasting presence of Tehanetorens, the man who saw between the trees. ▼

NOTES

- 1 Illustrated by his son John Kahionhes Fadden (who enjoys a worldwide reputation as an artist), those volumes from The Book Publishing Company, include *Legends of the Iroquois*, *Sacred Song of the Hermit Thrush*, *Roots of the Iroquois*, and *Wampum Belts of the Iroquois*.
- 2 Ray Fadden’s story of Needles can be found in *New Voices from the Longhouse*, edited by Joseph Bruchac, The Greenfield Review Press, 1989.
- 3 Included in the CD, *The Gift of the Great Spirit: Iroquois Lesson Stories*, by Tehanetorens / Ray Fadden (Mohawk). Good Mind Records, 1988.
- 4 See Bruchac, Joseph. 2015. “Being Iroquois: Arthur C. Parker.” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 41(1–2): 38–39. <http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic41-1-2/nativevoice.html>

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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