



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Jesse Cornplanter: Telling Stories With Pictures And Words

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

On the wall of our Ndaikina Education Center hangs a striking, beautifully detailed print. An Iroquois woman sits with her baby beside the fire inside her elm-bark longhouse. Above, looking down through the smoke-hole in the roof, a flying head—one of the most fearsome of traditional monsters—is poised to swoop down and devour her. It's done in the style called "Iroquois Realism," that dates back to Tuscarora artist and writer David Cusick (1780–1831). It is, to me, the quintessential rendering of one of the most classic stories of the Haudenosaunee—that of the brave woman and the flying head.

The artist who did that drawing was "Jesse J. Cornplanter of the Senecas," as his name appears on the title page of *Legends of the Longhouse*.¹ Published in 1938, it's a compilation of letters written to "Sah-nee-weh, the White Sister," Mrs. Walter A. Hendericks. These were not ordinary letters, for each contained a well told traditional story, the epistolary form serving as a device for Cornplanter to relate everything from the Haudenosaunee Creation Story to the tale of the vampire skeleton. With the author's own illustrations bringing each story further to life, it's still a delight to read 80 years after it first appeared in print.

Who was Jesse Cornplanter? In a brief introduction to *Legends of the Longhouse*, Carl Carmer described him as "six foot two of solid Seneca, soldier, craftsman, musician, actor, tale teller. . . a fitting descendant of that ancestor of his, the Corn Planter, who was a friend to General Washington."² All that and more was true, but it needs further explanation.

The original Cornplanter, whose European name was John Abeel, III, was indeed a friend of this nation's first president. His Seneca name was Gaiänt'wakê, "the planter." As a war chief and diplomat, he fought as an ally of the British in the French and Indian War and

the American Revolution. One of the most famous Native Americans of his time, he led the negotiations of the Iroquois nations with the new United States and maintained Iroquois neutrality and friendship with the Americans from then on. In 1796, the United States government granted "him and his heirs forever" title to 1,500 acres of former Seneca lands in northern Pennsylvania.

Cornplanter was also the half-brother of the Iroquois prophet, Handsome Lake, whose visionary experience near the start of the 19th century led to the creation of the Gai-wiio, the "Good Message"—the Longhouse Religion. It preached a code of family unity, abstinence from alcohol, and a return to traditional ways at a time when the Iroquois nations had been greatly weakened.

The code of Handsome Lake's played an important role in Jesse Cornplanter's life. His father, Edward Cornplanter (1856–1918), the original Cornplanter's great-great-grandson, was one of a half dozen men of his generation who were authorized as faithkeepers or "holders of the Gai'wiio."

Until 1903, the Gai-wiio was entirely an oral tradition. Literacy in English, however, was long established among the Senecas, as a result of the various reservation schools that began to appear in the 18th century—founded by one Christian denomination or another. Fearing the Gai'wiio would be lost, Edward Cornplanter wrote it down in English in a manuscript he gave to the New York State Museum. Edited by none other than Arthur C. Parker, it was published as *The Code of Handsome Lake* (New York State Bulletin 163: 5–148) in 1912. And this brings us back to Jesse.

Born on the Cattaraugus Reservation in 1889, Jesse became fascinated with art at an early age. He received no formal training, but by the age of 14 had enough

of a reputation as an artist to be sought out for illustration projects. Frederick Starr, the American anthropologist, commissioned him to illustrate *Iroquois Indian Games and Dances* in 1903, while Arthur Parker began a decade-long collaboration with him that included providing illustrations for *The Code of Handsome Lake*. In both books, he was credited as "Jesse Cornplanter, Seneca Indian Boy." To this day, an archive of 45 of his illustrations, annotated by Parker, is in the New York State Library.

Jesse Cornplanter's career as an artist and representative of his culture did not end in his teenage years. Close by his father's side, including on a trip to Europe when he was a child, he absorbed everything traditional, becoming an accomplished craftsman, storyteller, and singer. Following another longstanding Seneca tradition—defending the homeland—he enlisted in the United States Army in 1917, and was sent to France where he was wounded and received the Purple Heart. His father Edward died in the 1918 flu pandemic, which also took the lives of his mother, one of his sisters, and several nieces and nephews. Jesse adopted and raised his sister's orphaned children while going on, over the next four decades of his life, to become a chief in the Long House of New Town and a head singer for ceremonies.

His life story would make a fascinating movie—no less so for the fact that he played the leading role in the 1913 film *Hianatha*, based on the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was the first feature film with an all-Native American cast. A review in *Moving Picture News*³ (Jan–June 1913, 16) described Jesse as "one of the handsomest men ever shown in moving pictures."

An ironic historical footnote is that the death in 1957 of Jesse Cornplanter—that ardent protector of his people's traditions—played a part in one of the

A Native Voice (continued)

most unjust events to befall the Iroquois people in the 20th century. Because Jesse left no children and was the last descendant of the original Cornplanter, the federal government claimed the 1,500-acre Cornplanter Tract that had been granted to “him and his heirs forever.” The Kinzua Dam built there flooded most of the lands of that tract, forcing the relocation of many Seneca families and taking most of their fertile land, and also resulting in the moving of Cornplanter’s grave and the 1866 monument honoring his friendship with the new nation.

Notes

Cornplanter, Jesse J. 1938. *Legends of the Longhouse*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press.

Carmer, Carl. 1938 “Introduction.” In *Legends of the Longhouse*, p. 9.

Archive available online: <https://archive.org/details/movingpicturewor15newy>

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.



Send Your Story to Voices!

Did you know that *Voices* publishes creative writing, including creative fiction (such as short stories), creative nonfiction (such as memoirs and life/work stories), and poetry? If you are one of New York’s traditional artists or working in a traditional occupation, please consider sharing with our readers. For more information, see our Submissions Guidelines or contact the Acquisitions Editor at degarmo@crandalllibrary.org

Submission Guidelines for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*

Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society (www.nyfolklore.org).

The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through *Voices* the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

Voices is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

Editorial Policy

Feature articles. Articles published in *Voices* represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although *Voices* emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles in the ethnography of folklore. In addition, *Voices* provides a home for “orphan” tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor’s discretion.

Reviews and review essays. Books, recordings, films, videos, exhibitions, concerts, and the like are selected for review in *Voices* for their relevance to folklore studies or the folklore of New York State and their potential interest to a wide audience. Persons wishing to review recently published material should contact the editor. Unsolicited reviews and proposals for reviews will be evaluated by the editor and by outside referees where appropriate. Follow the bibliographic style in a current issue of *Voices*.

Reviews should not exceed 750 words.

Correspondence and commentary. Short but substantive reactions to or elaborations upon material appearing in *Voices* within the previous year are welcomed. The editor may invite the author of the materials being addressed to respond; both pieces may be published together. Any subject will be addressed or rebutted once by any correspondent. The principal criteria for publication are whether, in the opinion of the editor or the editorial board, the comment constitutes a substantive contribution to folklore studies, and whether it will interest our general readers.

Letters should not exceed 500 words.

Style

The journal follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Consult *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* for questions of spelling, meaning, and usage, and avoid gender-specific terminology.

Footnotes. Endnotes and footnotes should be avoided; incorporate such information into the text. Ancillary information may be submitted as a sidebar.

Bibliographic citations. For citations of text from outside sources, use the author-date style described in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Language. All material must be submitted in English. Foreign-language terms (transliterated, where appropriate, into the Roman alphabet) should be italicized and followed by a concise parenthetical English gloss; the author bears responsibility for the correct spelling and orthographics of non-English words. British spellings should be Americanized.

Publication Process

Unless indicated, the New York Folklore Society holds copyright to all material published in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*. With the submission of material to the editor, the author acknowledges that he or she gives *Voices* sole rights to its publication, and that permission to publish it elsewhere must be secured in writing from the editor.

For the initial submission, send an e-mail attachment or CD (preferably prepared in Microsoft Word and saved as Rich Text Format).

Copy must be double spaced, with all pages numbered consecutively. To facilitate anonymous review of feature articles, the author’s name and biography should appear only on a separate title page.

Tables, charts, maps, illustrations, photographs, captions, and credits should follow the main text and be numbered consecutively. All illustrations should be clean, sharp, and camera-ready. Photographs should be prints or duplicate slides (not originals) or scanned at high resolution (300+ dpi) and e-mailed to the editor as jpeg or tiff files. Captions and credits must be included. Written permission to publish each image must be obtained by authors from the copyright holders prior to submission of manuscripts, and the written permissions must accompany the manuscript (authors should keep copies).

Materials are acknowledged upon receipt. The editor and two anonymous readers review manuscripts submitted as articles. The review process takes several weeks.

Authors receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which their contribution appears and may purchase additional copies at a discount. Authors of feature articles may purchase offprints; price information is available upon publication.

Submission Deadlines

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| Spring–Summer issue | November 1 |
| Fall–Winter issue | May 1 |

Send submissions as Word files to
Todd DeGarmo, *Voices* Editor
(e-mail preferred): degarmo@crandalllibrary.org
or
New York Folklore Society
129 Jay Street
Scheneectady, NY 12305

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| \$ 50.00 | Basic Membership |
| \$100.00 | Harold W. Thompson Circle |
| \$150.00 | Edith Cutting Folklore in Education |

Organizations/Institutions

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| \$ 75.00 | Subscriber |
| \$100.00 | Partner |
| \$150.00 | Edith Cutting Folklore in Education |

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.