

Sagoyewatha'

Red Jacket 1756 – 1830

Biographical sketch of Red Jacket – Index of Indian Records from Quaker Missionaries to Seneca Indians 1668-1838 Vol. I pp. 182-311

As extracted from the 1st volume of the book entitled "Indian Tribes of North America." Edited by Thomas L. McKinney late of the Indian Department at Washington, and Vance Hall of Cincinnati:

From the best information we can obtain, it appears that this celebrated Chief was born A.D. 1756, at the place formerly called "Old Castle" now embraced in the town of Seneca Ontario Co. in the state of New York, and three miles of the present beautiful village Geneva. His Indian name was *Sagoyewatha'* [Keeper awake] which with the usual appropriateness of the native nomenclature indicates the vigilance of his character. He acquired the more familiar name of Red Jacket, which he bore through life among white men in the following manner.

He engaged in the war of the Revolution (though he had scarcely reached the years of manhood) and was much distinguished by his activity and intelligence and attracted the attention of the British officers. One of them presented him with a richly embroidered scarlet jacket which he took great pride in wearing.

When this was worn out he was presented with another, and he continued to wear this peculiar dress until it became a mark of distinction and gave him the name by which he was afterwards best known.

When but seventeen years old the abilities of Red Jacket, especially his activity in the chase, and his remarkably tenacious memory, attracted the esteem and admiration of his tribes; and he was frequently employed, during the war of the Revolution, as runner to carry dispatches. He took little or no part in the war as a warrior, yet it seems that Red Jacket was not destitute of bravery. The true cause of his great influences in his tribe was his transcendent talents and the circumstances under which he lived. Red Jacket came upon the scene of active life when the power of his tribe had declined and its extinction was threatened.

The white man was advancing on them with gigantic strides; it was then that Red Jacket stood forward as a patriot, defending the Nation with fearless eloquence. He became their counselor, their negotiator and their orator. Whatever may have been his conduct in the field, he now evinced a moral courage as cool and sagacious, as it was undaunted; and which showed a mind of too high an order to be influenced by the sentiments of fear.

An intelligent gentleman who knew this Chief for more than thirty years speaks of him in the following terms: Red Jacket was a *perfect Indian* in every respect: in costume; in his contempt of the dress of the white man, in his hatred and opposition to the missionaries, and in his attachment to end veneration for the ancient customs and traditions of his tribe. He had contempt for the English language, and distained to use any other than his own. He was the finest specimen of the Indian character I ever knew, and sustained it with more dignity than any other tribe.

He was the second in authority in his tribe. As an orator he was unequalled by any Indian I ever saw; his language was beautiful and figurative. His gesticulation was easy, graceful and natural. His voice was distinct and clear and he always spoke with great animation. His memory was very strong. I have acted as interpreter to most of his speeches, to which no translation could do adequate justice.

Another gentleman, who had much official and personal intercourse with the Seneca orators, writes thus: You have no doubt been well informed as to the strenuous opposition of Red Jacket to all improvements in the arts of civilized life and more especially to all innovations upon the religion of the Indians, or as they generally term it, the religion of their fathers.

In a private interview with Red Jacket and others in 1824, I asked him why he was so much opposed to the establishment of missionaries among his people. He replied with a sarcastic smile and emphasis peculiar to himself: Because they do us no good. If they are not useful to the white people, why do they send them among the Indians? If they are useful, to the white people and do them good, why do they not keep them at home. They are surely bad enough to need the labor of every one who can make them better. These men know we do not understand their religion. We cannot read book they tell us different stories about what it contains and we believe they make the book talk to suit themselves.

Perhaps it would be well here to intimate to the public that different religious societies put different constructions on some parts of the bible.

The following incident is illustrative of the retentive memory of Red Jacket in a council which was held with the Seneca's by Governor Tompkins of New York, a contest arose between that gentleman and Red Jacket relative to a fact connected with a treaty of many years standing. The American agent stated one thing; the Indian Chief corrected him, and insisted that the reverse of his assertion was true. But, it was rejoined: You have forgotten, we have it written here on paper.

"The paper then tells a lie!" was the confident answer. "I have it written here," continued the Chief, placing his hand with great dignity upon his brow. "You Yankees are born with a feather between your fingers; but the paper does not speak the truth. The Indian keeps his knowledge here; this is the book the Great Spirit gave us, it does not lie!"

A reference was immediately made to the treaty in question, when to the astonishment of all present, and to the triumph of the starchy statesman; the document confirmed every word he had uttered.

It happened during the Revolutionary war that a treaty was held with the Indians at which Lafayette was present. The object was to unite the various tribes in unity with America. The majority of the Chiefs were friendly, but there was much opposition made to it more especially by a young man who declared that when an alliance was entered into with America, he should conclude the sun of his country and set forever.

In Lafayette's travels through the Indian country when last in America, it happened at a large assembly of chiefs that he referred to Red Jacket: "Pray tell me, if you can, what has become of that daring youth, who so decidedly opposed all our propositions for peace and unity? Does he still live and what is his condition?"

"I, myself, am that man," replied Red Jacket, "The dreaded enemy of the Americans, so long as the hope of opposing them successfully remained, but now their true and faithful friend until death."

Red Jacket hated the missionary of the cross because he feared some secret design upon the lands, the peace or the independence of the Seneca's. He was a keen observer of human nature and saw that among whites and red men, sordid interest was equally the spring of action. He therefore naturally enough suspected every stranger who came to his tribe, of some design on their little and dearly prized domains. It was evident he did not favor the Christian missionaries. He saw too that the same influence which tended to reduce his wandering tribe to civilized habits must necessarily change his whole system of policy.

He wished to preserve the integrity of his tribe by keeping the Indians and the white apart, while the direct tendency of the missionary system was to blend them in one society and to bring them under a common religion and government.

Whatever was the policy of Red Jacket or the reasons on which it was founded, he was steady, skillful and potent foe of missions in his tribe, which became divided into two factions, one of which was called the Christians and the other, the Pagan Party.

The Christian Party in 1827 outnumbered the Pagan Party and Red Jacket was formally and by a vote of the Council displaced from the office of chief of the Seneca's, which he had held since his triumph over Cornplanter (about 1784). He was greatly affected by this decision and made a journey to Washington to lay his grief before his great father.

He called upon Colonel Mckinney who was in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who had been informed through his agent of all that had passed between or among the Seneca's, and of the division of the Council and the cause of it displacing Red Jacket.

He sought to convince Red Jacket that a spirit of forbearance on his part, and a yielding to the Christian Party the right, which he claimed for himself, to believe as he pleased on the subject of religion, would have prevented the mortifying result of his expulsion from office and power.

At the conclusion of this talk, during which Red jacket never took his keen and searching eyes off the speaker, he turned to the interpreter saying, with finger pointing in the direction of his people and of his home, "Our father has a long eye."

He then proceeded to vindicate himself and to berate the black coats. It was finally arranged that he was to go home and there in a Council that was directed to be convened for the purpose express his willingness to bury the hatchet and leave it to those who might choose to be Christians to adopt the ceremonies of that religion, whilst for himself, and those who thought like him, he claimed the privilege to follow the faith of his fathers. Whereupon, as had been promised him at Washington; the Council unanimously placed him in the office of Chief; which he held until his death.

It is due to him to state that a cause which has retarded the progress of Christianity in all lands lying adjacent to Christian nations; naturally influenced his mind. He saw many individuals in Christendom who were worse than Pagans.

He did not know that the few of these professed to be Christians and that a still smaller number practiced the precepts of our religion, but judging them in the mass he saw little that was desirable in the moral character of the whites and nothing inviting in their faith. It was these views that Red Jacket, in Council, in reply to a proposal to establish a missionary among his people, said with inimical severity and shrewdness, "your talk is fair and good, but I propose this: go try your hand in the town of Buffalo for one year, they need missionaries. If you can do what you say, if in that time you shall have done them any good, and made them better, then we will let you come among our people."

A gentleman who saw red Jacket in 1820 describes him as being then apparently sixty years old. He was dressed with much taste in the Indian custom throughout but had not a savage look. His form was erect and not large and his brow noble. He wore a blue dress, the upper garment cut after the fashion of a hunting shirt, with blue leggings, very nice moccasins, a red jacket and a girdle of red about his waist. His eye was fine, his forehead lofty and spacious, and his bearing calm and dignified.

The whole life of the Seneca Chief was spent in vain endeavors to preserve the independence of his tribe, and in active opposition as well to the plans of civilization proposed by the benevolent, as to the attempts at encroachment on the part of the mercenary. His views remained unchanged and his mental powers unimpaired to the last.

The circumstances attending his disease were striking and we shall relate them in the language of one witnessed the facts which he stated:

For some months previous to his death, time had made such ravages on his constitution as to render him fully sensible of his approaching dissolution. To that event he often averted and always in the language of philosophical calmness.

He visited successively all his most intimate friends at their cabins and conversed with them on the condition of the Nation in the most impressive and affecting manner. He told them that he was passing away and his counsel would soon be heard no more.

He ran over the history of his people from the most remote period to which his knowledge extended, and pointed out, as few could, the wrongs, the privations and the loss of character which almost of themselves constituted that history.

“I am about to leave you,” said he, “and when I am gone, and my warnings shall be no longer heard or regarded, the craft and avarice of the white man will prevail.

“Many winters have I breasted the storm, but I am an aged tree and can stand no longer. My leaves are fallen, my branches are withered and I am shaken by every breeze. Soon my aged trunk will be prostrated and the foot of the exultant foe of the Indian may be placed upon it in safety, for I leave none who will be able to avenge such an indignity.

“Think not that I mourn for myself, I go to join the spirits of my fathers, where age cannot come: but my heart fails when I think of my people who are soon to be scattered and forgotten.”

These several interviews were all concluded with the detailed instructions respecting his domestic affairs and his funeral.

The medal which he always wore around his neck was a personal present to him from George Washington in 1792. He had studied and comprehended the character of George Washington and placed upon the gift a value corresponding with his excellent opinion of the donor.

In his dying injunction to those around him he repeated his wishes respecting his internment. “Bury me,” said he, “by the side of my former wife and let my funeral be according to the customs of our Nation. Let me be dressed and equipped as my fathers were, that their spirits may rejoice in my coming. Be sure that my grave be not made by a white man, let them not pursue me there.”

He died on the 20th of January 1830 at his residence near Buffalo, New York. His people gazed upon his fallen form and mused upon his prophetic warnings, until their hearts grew heavy with grief.

The neighboring missionary with a disregard for the feelings of the dead, for which it is difficult to account, assembled his party, took possession of the body and conveyed it to the meeting house. The immediate friends of Red Jacket, amazed at the transaction, abandoned the preparations they were making for the funeral rites, and followed the body in silence to the place

of worship, where a service was preformed, which considering the opinions of the deceased, was an idle, as it was indecorous. They were then told from the desk, that if they had anything to say they now had an opportunity.

Incredulity and scorn were pictured on the face of the Indians, and no reply was made except by a Chief called, Green Blanket who briefly remarked: "This house was built for the white man; the friends of Red Jacket cannot be heard in it."

Not withstanding this touching appeal, and the dying injunction of the Seneca Chief, his remains were taken to the grave prepared by the whites and interred. Some of the Indians followed the corpse but the more immediate friends of Red Jacket took a last of their lifeless Chief to the sanctuary of that religion which he had always opposed, and hastened from a scene which overwhelmed them with humiliation and sorrow. Thus early did the fast of the white man trample on the dust of the great chief in accordance with his own prophetic declaration. *Da:neho'*

BUFFALO, June 25, 1884

Letter to Gen. Ely S. Parker:

In 1852, Red Jacket's remains reposed in the old Mission Cemetery at East Buffalo, surrounded by those of Young King, Capt. Pollard, Destroy Town, little Billy, Mary Jemison and others, renowned in the later history of the Seneca's. His grave was marked by a marble slab, reected by the eminent comedian, Henry placid, but which had been chipped away to half of its original proportions by relic hunters and other vandals...

There were a few Seneca's still living on the Buffalo Creek Reservation, among them Moses Stevenson, Thomas Jemison, Daniel Two Guns and others. They discovered that the old Chief's grave had been violated almost simultaneously with its accomplishment. Stevenson, Two Guns and a party of excited sympathizers among the whites, hastily gathered together and repaired to Hotchkiss' residence, where they demanded that the remains should be given up to them. The request was complied with and the bones were taken to Cattaraugus and placed in the custody of Ruth Stevenson, the favorite step-daughter of Red Jacket... Ruth preserved the remains in her cabin for some years and finally buried them, but resolutely concealed from every living person any knowledge of the place of sepulture... As she became advanced in years it grew to be a source of anxiety to her what disposition should finally be made of these sacred relics. She consulted the Rev. Asher Wright and his wife on the subject, and concluded at length to deliver them over to the Buffalo Historical Society, which, with the approval of the Seneca Council, had undertaken to provide a permanent resting place for the bones of the old Chief and his compatriots.

Author: William C. Bryant

NOTE: Red Jacket's grave is in the Buffalo, New York Forest Lawn Cemetery, located near the Delaware Street entrance.

Ed Curry, Quaker Bridge, Allegany Territory, June 29, 1957:

“And so, I'm going to tell about things. It's not a story; it's the way it really happened in the past. I'm going to tell about him, the one who used to be called, Sagoyewatha' [Red Jacket]. He used to be a Chief of the Seneca Nation, he lived at Buffalo. This is how it happened: he spread the news where the Indians lived. He said, 'They're going to drive us away and that's it; I guess we should just go.' That's what his message was, where they lived. This is what happened, they were together, the important ones; it means, they were Chiefs at that time, in those days. They were gathered together; they would go to his longhouse in Buffalo. He set a date, when people would gather. He said, 'We will hold a Council.' And so the time came, the day he had set. They were arriving at the longhouse at buffalo. People gathered at that time, in those days. When the crowd settled down, then he told about it; the deal for the Buffalo land. 'They should just sell it.' They held a Council. And so this is what happened, when they finished the Council. He said, 'This is what will happen first. First of all, we will go there, where they are staying, the white men. First I will sing *Adoweh* [individual blessing song]. You will give me the proper accompaniment.' And so he stood up there. He went ahead with singing *Adoweh*. And so in the song, this is the way the song was that he used. You will hear the song: 'Aedwade:ni:no' nyoh [We should sell it] nyo ha'a ha ha [song syllables]. That's the way he sang *Adoweh*. He went to the middle of the building; he went the length of the building, and he walked back. Then he broke off the song; then he said, 'Now. Now, we will go. We will go where the white people have assembled, then we will make a deal.' Then eventually they went, they went there, where our brothers the white men were staying. They arrived, then they held another Council about it. This is how it would happen. A deal would be made on the Buffalo land. And so up to the time, when it finished. He said, 'We will assemble again. When it is over, and we will gather again at our building, the longhouse, where the whole community gets together.' And so they carried it out; then they made a deal. They went back there where their longhouse was. They eventually got back there, then they told about it again. And so when it was over again, then the Chief said, 'What will happen, I will sing *Adoweh* again. I will sing *Adoweh* once more, before we are free and scatter again.' And so again he asked them to accompany him in the *Adoweh*, to do it the right way. And so he stood up; he sang the *Adoweh* again. And again the song, you will notice how the words were this time: 'Aedwade:ni:no' nyoh [we should sell it] ha gi hi gi hih [song syllables]. Again he was singing *Adoweh*. He went the length of the building. At the time when he came back again, then he broke off the song. And all by itself it forced it, what he was saying this time while he was walking. In the song, it was apparent he did wrong then. It was the 'ha gi hi gi hih' he said this time while he was walking. And so he did wrong then. All by itself, it brought it to light; he did it himself I guess, the way it happened. And so it was brought to light, the big thing he did wrong then. What it was, he destroyed where they lived, where they were living together, the Buffalo land. And the way he did it, he was called Sagoyewatha, he was a

Chief at Buffalo. And so that's how it was, I thought, maybe there are some, the way it was, you don't know about it. And there are a lot of people who don't know about it. But, the old people, they said it, the way this story was and the way the song was. They used to tell about it, how they used to tell it, the old people. And so this is how it was. I thought I would tell about it, and that's it. And a few words I forgot about. And I guess it would be good to include it too. So, then, when they left where they were, where they had gathered, the white men's council house, that's where they went. Where they gathered, the longhouse, the whole community. And this is what happened, They were coming in, and it was the case, that with some of them then their minds were changed. It's called, 'their minds were changed.' When some of them had been drinking. And each had different things with them. One was an axe. He had a new one. One was clothes, he was wearing a new suit. And one was a gun, they had with them. All kinds of things were given to them. Then they had made a deal. And so that was the story. I put in what was left out from what I said a while ago. I came to the end there. And so I put in what was left out, *da:nehoh*.

Note: The preceding was translated from our original Seneca language; to our Seneca Elders it makes perfect sense and is not redundant. A CD is available at the Faithkeeper School.

Transcription from: Seneca Stories, Histories, and Personal Accounts. Recorded by Wallace Chafe, 1010 Mission Canyon Road, Santa Barbara, California 93105