

VOL. 172, NO. 3



SEPTEMBER 1987

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

A famous  
"jade" mask is  
unmasked.  
Remote sensing  
tool comes  
down to  
earth to reveal  
only the ear  
flares are true

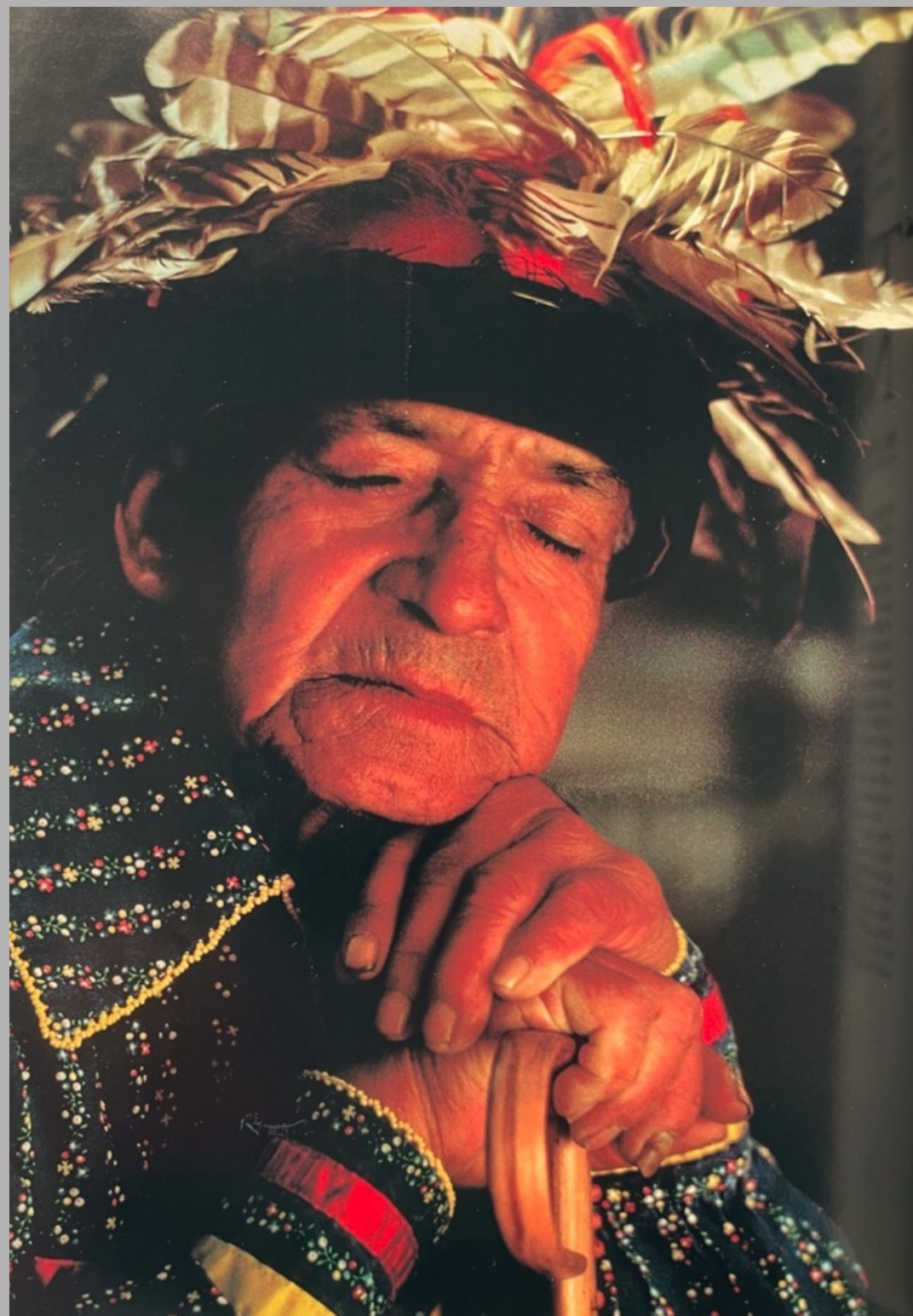
**JADE**  
STONE OF HEAVEN 282

EXPLORING A  
VAST MAYA CITY,  
EL MIRADOR 317

JAMES MADISON,  
ARCHITECT  
OF THE  
CONSTITUTION 340

THE IROQUOIS:  
KEEPERS  
OF THE FIRE 370

CAMEROON'S  
KILLER LAKE 404





*"Think not forever of yourselves, O Chiefs, nor of your own generation. Think of continuing generations of our families, think of our grandchildren and of those yet unborn, whose faces are coming from beneath the ground."*

# "The Fire That Never Dies"

By HARVEY ARDEN  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR WRITER

Photographs by STEVE WALL

FIRST AMONG EQUALS, Onondaga Chief Leon Shenandoah bears the title Tadodaho—a kind of speaker of the house for the Grand Council of today's Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. In his hands he holds his ceremonial staff of office, an eagle-headed cane (right) with inset peg or pictograph for each of the original peace chiefs of the centuries-old confederacy.

As custodian of "the fire that never dies," he bears witness to an unquenchable tradition—summed up in the moving words (top) spoken long ago by the founder of the confederacy, called the Peacemaker.

THE ELDER from Great Turtle Island—some call it North America—stood alone at the center of a rain-swept greensward in England. Around him a crowd of spectators, gathered to watch a world-class lacrosse game between Team England and the Iroquois Nationals, formed a large circle for the pregame ceremony, black umbrellas raised against the bleak, spitting sky.

With hushed disbelief they looked on as the lone figure—Chief Leon Shenandoah of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy—struck a single match in the gusting wind and set it on the pile of dry twigs he'd just put down at his moccasined feet.

Watching from the edge of the crowd, I felt my heart sink. No way the thing would light in that drenching English rain. And yet, as he cupped his hands over it, a tendril of smoke curled out, then a spurt of flame. The fire took hold. Then he sprinkled over it some sacred green Indian tobacco, whose smoke—the Iroquois believe—carries prayers up to the Creator. While the wind and rain tore unsuccessfully at the little fire, he intoned a prayer in his native Onondaga language, asking the Creator's blessing on the players. Only at prayer's end did the fire give out. The Creator, indeed, seemed to be listening.

But who were they anyway, these Iroquois Nationals? Almost exactly a century had passed since an Iroquois lacrosse team had last played on English soil. At that time, in 1886, a visiting Iroquois team had been banned from further international play because of alleged "professionalism"—they had, it seemed, accepted a modest payment to defray expenses of their overseas trip. They had also shown the poor taste of soundly beating the competition in this, their native American sport.

Yet here they were a century later, back again—and

winning again. Hotly battling England's best, they would return to Great Turtle Island from this 1985 exhibition tour with a proud record of three wins, one tie, and one narrow loss. They were also requesting full membership in the International Lacrosse Federation to compete against the likes of Team England, Team Canada, and Team U.S.A. in the 1990 world games. "We want to play them *nation against nation!*" Chief Shenandoah insisted.

What's more, they had come to England this time on their own Iroquois passports, demanding recognition as representatives not of the United States or Canada—within whose boundaries they reside—but

Photographer Steve Wall is a frequent contributor to NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. He lives in North Carolina.

of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy.

There was, as well, an especially poignant symbolism in the lighting of that little ceremonial fire. For among the Six Nations the Onondaga are the Keepers of the Central Fire—"the fire that never dies." Chief Shenandoah, as custodian of that symbolic fire, serves as Tadodaho—a kind of moderator or speaker of the house—for the 50 co-equal peace chiefs, or sachems, of the confederacy's Grand Council.

ONCE, the ancestors of these onlooking British lacrosse fans had allied themselves with that powerful confederacy to wrest control of eastern North America from France (if they hadn't done so, these words might well be written in French).

Based in what is now upstate New York





(map, pages 380-81), the confederacy created a network of alliances with other Indian nations—sometimes called an empire—that stretched from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, from Canada to the Carolinas.

To the French, who encountered them during early explorations of the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes region, they were *les Iroquois*—probably a corruption of some Algonquian epithet. To the British they were the Five Nations—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca—and, later, the Six Nations, after the Tuscarora, driven out of North Carolina by white settlers, joined the confederacy about 1722.

To themselves they were—and are—the Haudenosaunee (pronounced, roughly, hoo-dee-noh-SHAW-nee), or the People of the Longhouse.

After France's withdrawal from the continent in 1763, Iroquois political leverage virtually disappeared. Then the American Revolution all but tore the confederacy apart. Most of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca ultimately joined their old ally, the British, while most Oneida and Tuscarora sided with the rebels.

The 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the war didn't even mention the Iroquois. Despite the subsequent 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix between the Iroquois and the fledgling United States—guaranteeing the Six Nations much of central and western New York State—they were soon dispersed to a scattering of ever dwindling reservations on both sides of the U. S.-Canadian border. They faded not only from the political spotlight but also, seemingly, from history itself. The central fire, it would appear, had gone out.

But not so. As Chief Shenandoah and the Iroquois Nationals were here in England to demonstrate more than two centuries later, the central fire still burns. The Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy *lives*.

TO REACH the capital of that still functioning if vastly transformed confederacy, you drive a few miles south of Syracuse, New York, on Interstate 81. The exit sign reads "Nedrow"; nothing about Onondaga. Only after you swing onto State Highway 11 does a sign show the way to the Onondaga Indian Reservation, down 11A, a two-lane blacktop.

"The United States ends here!" Chief Shenandoah announced to state authorities during a 1971 confrontation over the widening of Interstate 81, which passes right through the reservation. Refusing to give up "one more inch" of Indian land, Onondaga traditionalists, joined by other members of the confederacy, staged a two-month sit-down on the construction site, staring down the same state troopers who would shortly depart to put down the bloody riot at Attica



PAINTING BY CHARLES DEAS, GILCREASE INSTITUTE, TULSA

**NATION AGAINST NATION:** The Iroquois Nationals, with players from each of the Six Nations, take on Team England in a lacrosse exhibition game (facing page), held in Urmston, England. A mid-1800s painting (above) depicts a no-holds-barred game of lacrosse, a native American sport given its name by early French settlers for the shape of the stick, which resembles a bishop's staff, or crosier.





Clan chiefs and faith keepers of the Mohawk Nation Council convene in the longhouse at Akwesasne, or St. Regis — a reservation straddling the U. S.-Canadian border near Massena, New York. Their form of government was laid down centuries ago by the Peacemaker, whose original "instructions" became the oral constitution still adhered to by the Six Nations.



prison. Negotiators finally reached a compromise—the highway was widened, but only slightly—avoiding a showdown.

Another crisis loomed in 1983 when American Indian Movement activist Dennis Banks, an Ojibwa fleeing a federal arrest warrant, took refuge at Onondaga. Once again the line of sovereignty was drawn at the reservation's border. Federal authorities elected not to cross the line.

"But what would happen if the FBI *did* come in?" I asked Chief Oren Lyons at the time, knowing that the confederacy's Grand Council had to reach a unanimous agreement on all major decisions. "Would the Grand Council have time to meet and reach a consensus on what to do?"

"The decision is already made," he said. "If they cross the line, it's out of our hands. The warriors take over."

**N**EAR THE CENTER of the reservation stands the Onondaga longhouse—the central reality of daily life for followers of the Longhouse religion. A handsome new one-story log building, it serves as a combination religious and social hall and legislative chamber. Here, the chiefs of the nations of the confederacy periodically gather for a Grand Council, facing each other across the "fire" (today a cast-iron stove suffices). Theoretically there are 50 such peace chiefs, each representing a lineage within his own nation and bearing the name of one of the confederacy's founders.

You can still walk down to the shore of nearby Onondaga Lake, where, tradition says, the confederacy was established by the man they call the Peacemaker. Most historians put that founding sometime between A.D. 1350 and 1600. Many Iroquois insist it occurred a thousand years or more ago.

A luminous figure, the Peacemaker traveled in a white stone canoe as a sign the Creator had sent him. Born on Lake Ontario's northwest shore, he journeyed among the Iroquois at a time when endless wars and blood feuds had reduced the Five Nations to near anarchy and despair.

Among the Mohawk he met an Onondaga exile named Ayawentha, or Hiawatha (an Iroquois name mistakenly used by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for an Ojibwa hero in his *Song of Hiawatha*). Together







THE CREATOR, according to Iroquois legend, raked his fingers through the landscape to fashion

the Peacemaker and Hiawatha persuaded the warring Five Nations to join in a "Great Peace" based on a "great binding law."

Only one fearsome Onondaga stood in their way: the original Tadodaho—a wizard with snakes in his hair who was ultimately won over by Hiawatha and the Peacemaker. Then, with all 50 chiefs of the first Grand Council assembled on Onondaga Lake's shore, the Peacemaker planted the original Tree of Peace—a magnificent white pine—beneath which the Five Nations buried their weapons of war. Four long roots, called the "white roots of peace," stretched out

from the tree in the four sacred directions.

The Peacemaker proclaimed: "If any man or any nation outside of the Five Nations shall show a desire to obey the laws of the Great Peace . . . they may trace the roots to their source . . . and they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree . . ."

IT'S ONE of the little-remembered footnotes of the Revolutionary War that during the momentous winter of 1776-77, while the Iroquois were being subjected to the most ferocious blandishments of both the British and Americans for their

the long, slender Finger Lakes, center of the Iroquois homeland in upstate New York.

allegiance, an epidemic raged through Onondaga. Some 90 people died, including three confederacy chiefs. Until new chiefs could be raised, or "condoled"—a process often taking months—the confederacy was all but paralyzed.

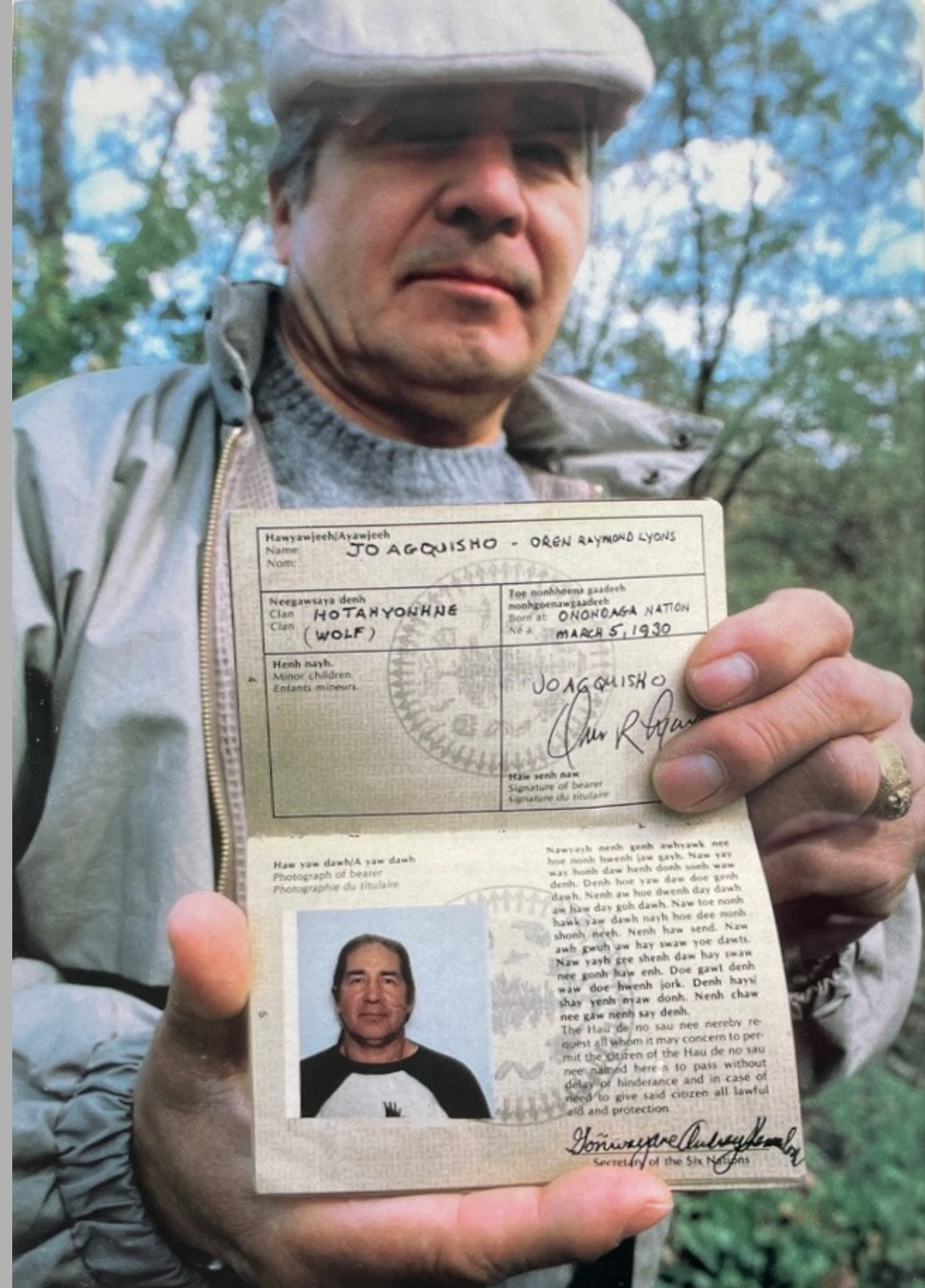
A spectacular cache of Revolutionary-era papers and journals of American Indian agent George Morgan recently came to light. Historian Gregory Schaaf found the documents in an attic trunk belonging to 94-year-old family heir Susannah Morgan. They show how the Iroquois Grand Council was subverted in its desperate efforts to strike a

balance of peace and neutrality between the two contending powers. One letter, written by John Hancock—then President of the Continental Congress—instructed Morgan to take the Iroquois and their allies a great peace belt with 2,500 wampum beads as an inducement to remain neutral—even while other American agents were secretly parleying with individual Indian nations to win their military support.

Torn from within and without, the Grand Council—in truth, an instrument for governing in peace, not war—gave way to the charismatic war chiefs: in particular the

"The Fire That Never Dies"





**SOVEREIGNTY IN ACTION:** Using Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, passports (left), "runners" from the Six Nations traveled in 1985 to Bogotá, Colombia, where they were sped through customs by Colombian officials (bottom right). They came as official observers to a peace parley between Nicaragua's Sandinista government and rebel Miskito Indians. Unallied with the contra guerrillas, the Miskito seek autonomy for their people



on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast—a cause Iroquois traditionalists see as an extension of their own.

Chiefs Oren Lyons and Bernie Parker (top right) propound their political philosophy to a Sandinista official in Colombia's Presidential Palace, where the talks were held.

At a meeting with other Indian delegates from North, South, and Central America, Chief Lyons (above) explains how his Haudenosaunee passport underscores the notion of Native American sovereignty.



"The Fire That Never Dies"



Mohawk Thayendanegea, or Joseph Brant, a protégé of British Superintendent of Indian Affairs Sir William Johnson.

Winning many of the Six Nations warriors to the British side, Brant and other Iroquois war chiefs soon sent shock waves of terror through outlying American settlements. Finally, in devastating response, Gen. George Washington, in 1779, sent an expedition of 4,500 men under Gen. John Sullivan to strike the heartland of the Iroquois.

Although most of the Iroquois melted away at the Army's approach, the destruction of more than forty villages with their orchards, croplands, and granaries—especially those of the Seneca—forever changed the face of Iroquoia.

**T**ODAY that scattered and schismatized world consists not of six but of seventeen separate, distinct, and bewilderingly complex communities flung across New York State, Ontario, Quebec, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma. Hardly any generality applies to all of them.

Some are governed by traditionalists allied to the Grand Council at Onondaga. Others have elected tribal councils not affiliated with the confederacy. The independent "progressive" Seneca nation at Cattaraugus and Allegany, for instance, has one of the country's oldest elected councils, established in 1848. But confederacy adherents—the focus of these pages—are active throughout the Iroquois diaspora. They include mostly Longhouse religion followers, but also some Christians.

There's also the Six Nations Reserve near Hamilton, Ontario, where Joseph Brant and other Iroquois Loyalists settled after the Revolution. A microcosm of the Iroquois world, it has its own Grand Council—separate from, yet ceremonially associated with, the one at Onondaga. The reserve's administrative government, however—by Canadian law—is an elected council.

But, for sheer complexity, consider the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, or St. Regis—one of the most fractionated six square miles on this or any continent.

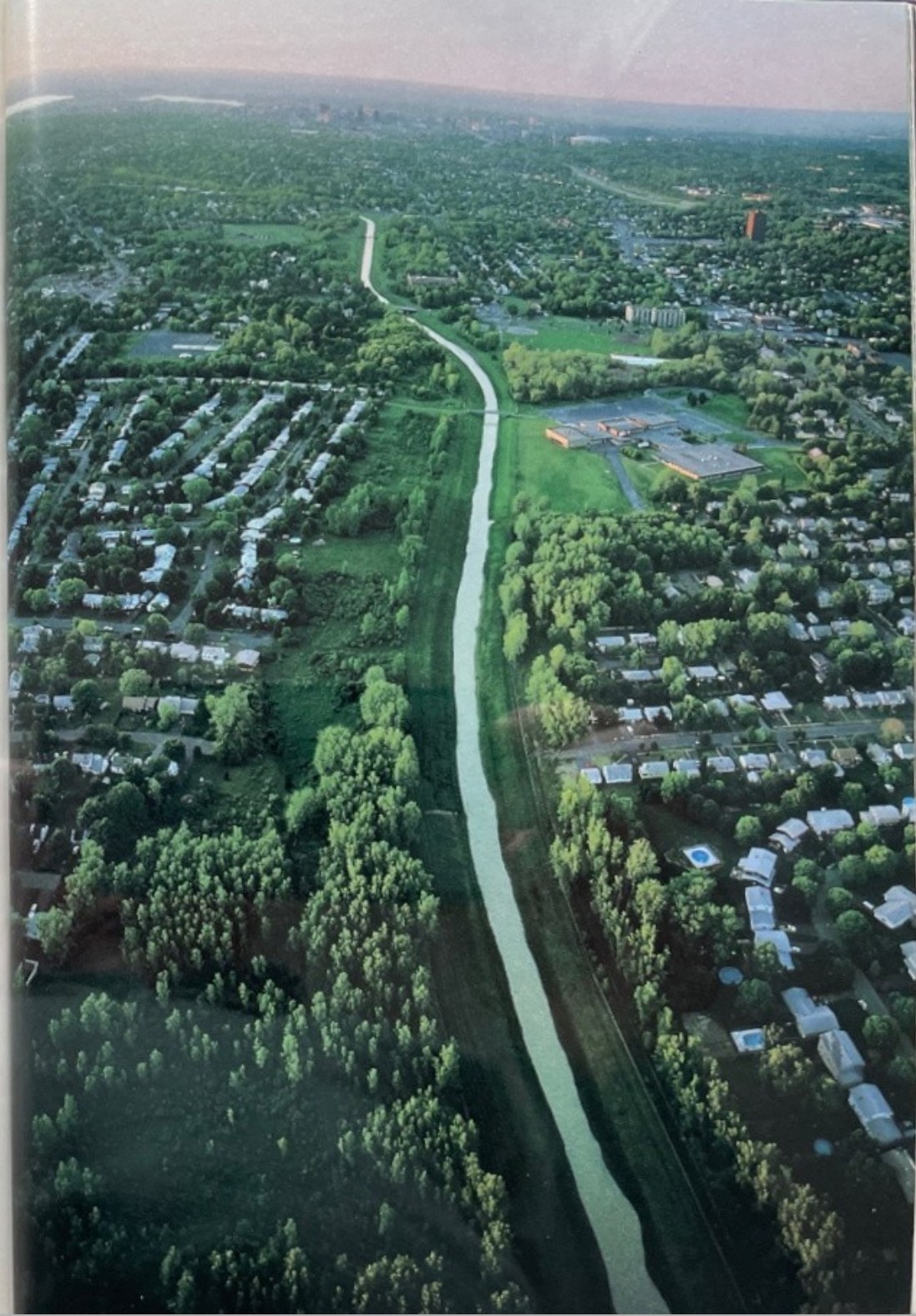
Straddling the U.S.-Canadian border along the St. Lawrence River, Akwesasne must contend with the U.S. and Canadian federal governments, the state government

**SALT OF THE EARTH:** Each year New York State sends nine tons of salt to the Onondaga Reservation—payment, in part, for lands taken around Syracuse, including Onondaga Creek (right) and salt-rich Onondaga Lake. Indians say the treaties that took the land were never confirmed by the federal government—and hence are invalid. State officials dispute the claim.



of New York, and the provincial governments of Ontario and Quebec. What's more, it has three governments of its own: a Canadian-side elected band council, a U.S.-side elected tribal council, and a traditional council of confederacy chiefs. Neither the U.S. nor the Canadian government recognizes the traditional council, nor, for that matter, does the latter recognize the federal, state, or provincial governments' jurisdiction, or that of either of the elected councils, on Akwesasne territory.

"Toss in the fact that we have half a dozen Christian denominations plus the Longhouse religion," traditionalist chief Jake Swamp told me, "and you can see that right here all the elements that create war in the world are present every day."







*ROADSIDE ENTREPRENEURS* hawk refreshments to passersby heading to a Six Nations Grand Council meeting at Onondaga, capital of the Iroquois Confederacy. Substandard housing reflects the fact that reservation residents almost never

obtain commercial home loans; banks cannot repossess property on Indian lands. Though the tarpaper-and-plywood exterior may seem poor, the life lived within is typically rich in love, mutual respect, and traditional values.



War, indeed, almost broke out at Akwesasne in 1979, when a minor incident over a confiscated chain saw escalated into a major confrontation that had armed traditionalists barricading themselves against armed tribal council supporters, with state and federal authorities poised tensely between. For nearly two years the siege went on. At one point, confederacy chiefs at Onondaga and Tuscarora threatened to sever gas and power lines crossing their reservations if police stormed the barricades at Akwesasne. Ultimately indictments were dismissed against the traditionalists and the barricades came down, but the hurts and hatreds still fester.

**E**VEN AS I VISIT, more problems erupt at Akwesasne. Over a period of a few weeks seven deaths have been attributed to drunk driving, and the clan mothers are up in arms. They demand that local speakeasies be closed. A crowd of demonstrators gathers in front of one. As they march, a youth on a motorcycle roars away from the speakeasy, right past the demonstrators, and minutes later dies in a collision up the road. It's too much. That night flames suddenly shoot from the building. The local fire department, not wanting to interfere, stands by as the wooden structure burns to the ground.

The next issue of *Indian Time*, a reservation newspaper, shows the conflagration on its front page. Children are the first to notice: "Look!" they tell their parents. "See the flames—they look like horns! It's the devil—we chased him out of Akwesasne!"

And there are border problems—always border problems. The 1794 Jay's Treaty between the United States and Britain guaranteed Indians the right to unimpeded passage across the U. S.-Canadian border—a right underscored by a peaceful mass border crossing each July at an international bridge near Niagara Falls. But every few months there is a confrontation over the issue

somewhere along the border. Should Akwesasne residents, for example, have to pay customs on merchandise bought on the U. S. side and taken to the Canadian side? And what about smuggling? Can customs officers single out cars of Akwesasne residents to search for contraband or drugs?

And then there's the specter of pollution. The reservation abuts on one of the United States' worst toxic-waste dumps, and the air hangs murky yellow-gray with the emissions from nearby industries crowding the shores of the St. Lawrence River.

I get a call from Chief Tom Porter, whose usually buoyant optimism is temporarily

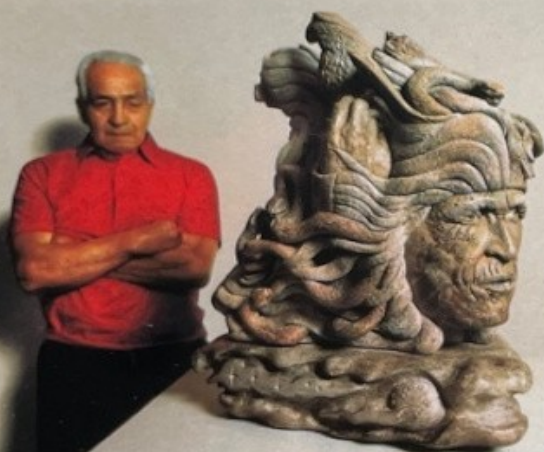


**NICE WORK—IF YOU CAN GET IT.** Commanding wages of \$25 an hour and more, highly skilled Mohawk ironworkers from reservations in upstate New York and Canada spend the workweek in northeastern urban centers. In New York City the subway (above) whisks men between their jobsite and the apartment they share in Brooklyn (facing page).

A Mohawk crew (left) ties reinforcing rods at the Owls Head sewage treatment plant in Brooklyn. Such work supplements the "high iron" steel and girder work for which they have long been famed.



EAGLES EMERGE from moose antlers at the hands of Mohawk carver Stanley Hill (facing page), one of today's outstanding Iroquois artists. Tadodaho Leon Shenandoah (below) poses beside Cayuga Joseph Jacobs's sculpture of the original Tadodaho—a snake-haired wizard who helped found the confederacy centuries ago. A silver turtle by Mohawk Julius Cook (right) features the "three sisters"—corn, beans, and squash—age-old staples of Iroquois diet.



SCULPTURE COURTESY NANCY POOLE GALLERY AND WHETUNG GALLERY, TORONTO (ABOVE)

clouded by Akwesasne's seemingly endless woes. "Sometimes," he says, "I think of getting together all those who really want the old way and leading them off this poor poisoned piece of land."

Back in 1974 a group of Mohawks staged such an exodus—seizing a disused summer camp on state parkland in the central Adirondacks and "repossessing" it from the state of New York. Three years later they agreed to exchange this site for another piece of state land in the northern Adirondacks—and there the community survives to this day, calling itself Ganienkeh (the original Mohawk name for their homeland, meaning "land of flint").

"Here we live according to the original

constitution of the Five Nations," spokesman Tekarontake told me. "That's the only law we recognize. We don't accept any government money, and we don't want any. We ask only to be left alone, to develop according to our own principles."

"We needed fighters to establish Ganienkeh, but now we need builders, teachers, farmers. That's where the challenge is today. And, who knows, if we can succeed—and I believe we can—you may be seeing more Ganienkehs in the future. . . ."

Hammers ring out over the 32-acre Oneida Territory, west of Utica, where a new longhouse is going up in a field behind the large bingo hall and adjacent trailer-home community—remnant of some six million

acres once owned by these People of the Standing Stone.

"It's the first longhouse on original Oneida Territory for more than 150 years," traditionalist spokeswoman Maisie Shenandoah tells me. "This and another piece of land nearby were never sold."

Buses from as far away as New York City crowd the parking lot, chartered by luck seekers hoping for the \$10,000 top bingo prize. "We built the bingo hall in 1985," Maisie says. "Lots of people here were against it, afraid the profits would go to outsiders—as has happened on other reservations. But we've proved we can run a business successfully and keep the profits for the community—more than five million

dollars in the first year. We've gone from 80 percent unemployment down to 5 percent. And we're using the profits to recover other property nearby. We're saying to our fellow Oneidas: 'Come home!'"

She speaks proudly of the Oneida role in the American Revolution. "Our Chief Skendore brought 300 bushels of white Indian corn to George Washington and his troops at Valley Forge. We even sent along a woman to show them how to cook it. After the war Martha Washington gave the woman, Polly Cooper, a black lace shawl. One of her descendants still has it in a vault."

She shows me a large rock standing across the road from the bingo hall.

"That's how we got our name, People of



the Standing Stone," she explains. "In the old days it would give us directions. It would appear wherever we moved. But, when the people went their own ways, the stone stopped helping. They say it won't direct us again until we're reunited."

That, however, remains an elusive ideal for the far-flung Oneida. In addition to the 32-acre territory, there are major Oneida communities—wholly separate administratively—near London, Ontario, and Green Bay, Wisconsin, plus a contingent at Onondaga and a rival group who vigorously contest control of the 32-acre site.

**T**HE CAYUGA, like the Oneida, have major land claims pending. Entirely dispossessed of their original territory in west-central New York, they have communities on the Seneca-Cayuga Reservation in Oklahoma, the Six

Nations Reserve in Canada, and the Cattaraugus Reservation south of Buffalo.

"We live here as guests of the Seneca, as tenants," Chief Frank Patterson tells me at the Cayuga Indian nation's one-room storefront headquarters in Gowanda, New York. "We're desperate for a land base so we can come together as a people again. We've kept up the ceremonies, and we're loyal to the confederacy. But until we get some land back, people will just think of us as curiosities—the 'landless' Cayuga."

Though their current claim against New York State calls for the return of some 64,000 acres they say were wrongfully taken, plus 350 million dollars in damages, the Cayuga, in truth, seek a negotiated settlement like one that was very nearly reached in 1980, giving them some 7,000 acres of state parkland and national forest plus about eight million dollars in trust.

"Look," Chief Patterson says, "we don't want to be bad neighbors, and we don't want to see a single white family evicted. But we can't just be ignored out of existence."

"To survive . . . that's all we ask."

On the outskirts of Montreal, I stroll the weed-grown perimeter of the Kahnawake Mohawk Reserve with spokeswoman Selma Delisle.

"First they took the land," she says. "But that wasn't enough for them. . . ."

"Then they took the river." She waves an arm at the concrete embankment of the St. Lawrence Seaway, which virtually walls off the reserve from the river's main course.

"Then," she continues, "they took away the sky." She points to the bridges, railway trestles, and highways that arch over the reserve—humming with the traffic of more than 50,000 commuters a day.

"And," she goes on, "they proposed taking even the rapids away," referring to the Province of Quebec's plans—shelved for now—to harness the nearby Lachine Rapids, the last major rapids on the St. Lawrence, with a series of dams and a massive hydroelectric power plant.

"Kahnawake means 'at the rapids,'" Selma says. "We get our power from the white water—our spiritual power. They wanted to turn it into electricity so people could have more microwave ovens. . . ."

She recalls: "My mother had a great-great-uncle. He prophesied that one day there would be monsters at Kahnawake. She never understood what he meant until they opened the seaway in 1959. Then she saw the huge ships passing through. They were the monsters."

**I**N WESTERN NEW YORK STATE both the Allegany Seneca Reservation and the Tuscarora Reservation have lost large acreages to public works reservoirs in recent decades.

At Tuscarora, not far from Niagara Falls, I climb a ridge overlooking the reservation with Chief Edison Mt. Pleasant and his wife, Eliza. "That's where I grew up," Eliza says, pointing toward the reservoir and her now submerged childhood home. "We try not to think about it any more. There's still a life to be lived. At least they haven't taken everything."

Edison shows me a site, now a plowed field, where the British burned the main Tuscarora settlement in the War of 1812.

"They were still mad we'd fought with the Americans during the Revolution," he says.

He tells me how the Tuscarora had been driven out of North Carolina in the early 1700s and become the confederacy's sixth member. Later, he goes on, they were mostly Christianized, yet they still retained their affiliation with the Grand Council at Onondaga—as they do to this day.

"They call us Christian chiefs," he says.

Before a thunderstorm douses our stroll, I retrieve a few rusty nails from the ground—corroded remnants of a proud past. Back at his house Edison shows me his collection of old coins, buttons, arrowheads, and other artifacts—a collection he takes to schools and fairs to demonstrate the oft forgotten Tuscarora role in U. S. history.



*WOMEN'S VOICES* ring loud in the world of the Iroquois, where clan mothers select—and sometimes depose—chiefs. Membership in both clan and nation is carried through the female line. Onondaga women (facing page) find time for laughter while practicing for an upcoming sing. Clan mother Dewasenta (above) shuttles between home and her duties at the Onondaga longhouse.







AT HOME IN TWO WORLDS, members of an Akwesasne Mohawk family (above) while away a lantern-lit evening playing an ancient Iroquois game in which wooden pieces are tossed like dice. A similar hours-long game, which must be concluded once begun, is played for religious purposes in the longhouse during the sacred annual midwinter ceremony—part of a cycle of sacred festivals marking the Iroquois calendar.

Equally at home with the latest fads of the modern world, a Mohawk girl at Akwesasne (right) turns the family living room into a stage as she practices her rock-star routine for a look-alike and lip-sync contest to be held at the local elementary school.



When the rain stops, I get up to go. But he looks at me quizzically.

"Harvey," he says gently, "are you sure there isn't something else?"

I look at him. He looks at me. Then I understand. Sheepishly I dig my hand into my pocket and pull out the rusty nails.

"You mean these?"

He smiles, and accepts my apology—along with the nails.

"Everything that was ours is important to us," he says. "Even these."

I drive off—one more message from the Iroquois burned indelibly into this white man's conscience.

And here's another: They want their wampum belts back, and their ceremonial false-faces, and, yes—the bones of their

ancestors. With Seneca faith keeper Hazel Dean-John, a state education official, I descend into a basement vault where the New York State Museum at Albany stores a priceless collection of Iroquois wampum belts in several Plexiglas cases. Though available for viewing on special request, the belts have been removed from public display largely out of respect for the belief of Iroquois traditionalists that they should not be shown as objects of mere curiosity.

This and another collection at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City, argue the traditionalists, are the historic property of their confederacy and should be returned to the appropriate wampum keepers. Recent negotiations, in fact, point to the likelihood that some of the belts

will soon be restored to Iroquois custody—once details can be worked out to assure their safekeeping.

When and if that happens, confederacy spokesmen say, the belts will be restored for use in longhouse ceremonies.

"They're *powerful*," Hazel tells me as we remove the covers from the cases so Steve Wall can photograph the belts—white-and-purple-beaded mnemonic records of great historic events and the quintessential symbols of Iroquois sovereignty.

"Just being in their presence makes me feel alive," Hazel says. "Can you feel the power coming from them?" With palpable reverence she gazes at the Washington Covenant belt, the Hiawatha belt, the Tado-daho belt. "They reach out to me," she says.

"Can you imagine the scenes these belts have witnessed... the hands that have touched them? The voices of my people call to me through them."

What to do? It's a yet-to-be-resolved issue faced by museums, collectors, and dealers who find themselves the uneasy custodians of Indian belts, masks, and other ceremonial regalia. One person's artifact, alas, is another person's sacrament.

The Iroquois also strenuously object to the looting of Indian burial grounds by artifact hunters. "Do we dig up *your* cemeteries?" asks Chief Shenandoah.

Since 1972 a moratorium has existed in New York State under which no professional archaeologist may excavate native burial sites. When Indian remains are unearthed



by accident, Native Americans are generally called in to oversee a proper reburial.

"We have the right to bury our own," Chief Shenandoah asserts.

**L**AUGHTER is the sound of Tonawanda at strawberry time. It wafts like bird-song across the wildflowered meadows, mingling with the woodsmoke from a hundred chimneys. Out in the fields the families gather the strawberries—the year's first-ripening fruit—for use at the upcoming Strawberry Thanksgiving. The children romp and squeal, their lips glistening strawberry red with the sacred juice.

It was at strawberry time in 1799 that the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake revealed the compelling visions that led to a major reformation of Longhouse religious and social practices. His message called for abstinence from hard drink, the abandonment of witchcraft and magic, and the prohibition of abortion—along with other "instructions" that became the basis, along with the Peacemaker's teachings, of today's Longhouse religion.

At Strawberry Thanksgiving in June, I join the congregation in the longhouse for the hours-long recitation of the prophet's words in the native Seneca language. After the speeches the ceremonial dances begin. Lines of dancers circle a central bench on which musicians pound turtle-shell rattles while chanting out crescendoing choruses of "Yo-ha, yo-ha, yo-o-o-o..." The dancers stomp on the floorboards until the whole longhouse thunders.

Then girls ladle out cupfuls of a deliciously sweet strawberry drink—reputedly rich in medicinal powers. An abundant lunch is then topped off with whopping portions of strawberry shortcake piled high with cumulus clouds of whipped cream.

Afterward I talk to Chief Corbett Sundown, keeper of the confederacy's "spiritual fire" at Tonawanda (as distinguished from the "political fire" at Onondaga). A frail but still feisty man in his 70s, he's retired from most duties since three rapid-fire heart attacks in 1984.

He tells me: "We have a saying that when you die, you're going to 'eat strawberries'—because strawberries line the road to heaven. Well, I almost ate 'em. I wouldn't have

mind—'I'm ready to go—but I'm glad to still be here. There's always something more to do for your people."

"You know, you white guys come down here and you don't see anything. Then you write your articles about how poor we are. Well, let me tell you, we're not poor. We're rich people without any money, that's all. You say we ought to set up industries and factories. Well, we just don't want them. How're you going to grow potatoes and sweet corn on concrete? You call that progress? To me 'progress' is a dirty word."

He stares at me hard.

"I've got a warning for you. You can't go on destroying and poisoning everything. Our prophecies say there'll be signs of the end of the world: We won't be able to drink the water, trees will die from the tops down, babies will be killed like dogs. . . . Now it's all happening—only you call it water pollution and acid rain and 'legal' abortion."

"Well, the Creator's mad. He's going to send a great wind—more terrible than any atom bomb. We've had some visions about it recently, and we're burning tobacco so it won't happen. But you guys better come to your senses. Then maybe the Creator won't send that wind. Otherwise—and you write *this* in your article—we'll all be 'eating strawberries' together!"

**I**N PHILADELPHIA I attend a special ceremony at the downtown Friends Meeting House. In 1736 the Iroquois and Pennsylvania signed a treaty of friendship "to be preserved firm and entire, not only between you and us but between your children and our children, to all succeeding generations. . . ."

Now, beneath a brilliant blue March sky 250 years later, I watch a delegation of Haudenosaunee—led by Mohawk chiefs Jake Swamp and Tom Porter—plant an eastern white pine on the meetinghouse grounds as part of an ongoing Tree of Peace Project, whose goal is to make similar symbolic plantings around the world, bringing the Peacemaker's message of human harmony to all nations.

Nearby, appropriately, lie the remains of Benjamin Franklin, who, as an official delegate, attended treaty ceremonies with the Six Nations and in the structure of their



A GRANDMOTHER'S LOVING HAND hovers around her granddaughter on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation. Cherished, respected, and honored, elders play a pervasive role in Iroquois life—preserving old ceremonies, maintaining the language, and cementing the extended family with ever ready affection.

confederacy saw a partial model for his own vision of a federal union of the colonies. Enunciating his ideas in the 1754 Albany Plan of Union, he even suggested that the proposed federal legislature, like that of the Iroquois, be called the Grand Council.

He once wrote: "It would be a very strange Thing if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such a Union and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies. . . ."

(That he should call the Iroquois "ignorant Savages" while incorporating their lofty ideals into his own political philosophy is, it would seem, less a reflection on Iroquois character than on Franklin's own assumption of the prejudices of his time.)

**I**T NEVER OCCURRED TO ME that I might actually witness Iroquois statesmen in action on the international diplomatic stage, as Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, and Washington once did.

But one day Chief Oren Lyons called. "Harvey," he said, "the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua have invited us down to support them in their peace negotiations with the Sandinista government. The talks are being held on neutral ground in Bogotá, at Colombia's Presidential Palace. You want to come along?"

I met the Grand Council's delegation of five "runners" in Miami. Together we flew to Bogotá, and I marveled as their Haudenosaunee passports were honored with great aplomb by Colombian officials. ("We've gone to more than twenty countries on these passports," Chief Lyons told me.)





*Ancient rhythms of the water drum and cow-horn rattle fill the Akwesasne Mohawk longhouse, as members enjoy an evening of social dancing after a long day of formal ceremonies. Permission for photographer Steve Wall to use his camera inside the longhouse required unanimous consent of Longhouse religion followers and took two years to obtain.*



LIFE'S A CHORE—and a pleasant one—for a Mohawk youth on the family farmstead at Akwesasne. By day he pursues thoroughly modern studies at school. By night, when chores are finished, he returns home to imbibe by lantern light the lore and traditions that have sustained his people for centuries.

Not a little overwhelmed, I stood with them a few days later in the chandeliered Presidential Palace as each of us was greeted with a warm handshake by Colombian President Belisario Betancur.

"*Bienvenidos*. Thank you for coming," he said—greeting the Six Nations and other Indian delegations as well as official diplomatic "guarantors" from his own country, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Mexico, and Canada.

Also present was Miskito rebel leader Brooklyn Rivera, whose guerrilla forces, emphatically *unallied* with the contras, had been waging a years-long "war within a war" to win autonomy for their people on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

**A**MID THE DARK-SUITED diplomatic swirl, the Six Nations delegates in their Levi's and their bright silk-ribboned Iroquois shirts moved with the easy grace of seasoned veterans, buttonholing now the Swedish ambassador, now the Colombian defense minister, now a Sandinista official.

I heard Chief Lyons gently expounding to one increasingly wide-eyed Sandinista: "You guys should understand, the Miskito aren't alone in this. However you decide to treat them, remember—you're being watched by all native American peoples, and there are tens of millions of us. We won't forget what you do here."

Seneca journalist John Mohawk, a founder of the Indigenous Press Network, a computerized news service on Indian affairs, spent much of his time collaring other Indian delegates. "What we need is communication among ourselves. We need to know about each other's struggles, what the problems are, what the solutions could be. Then we can speak with a unified voice . . . a united Fourth World of dispossessed indigenous peoples everywhere."



At a strategy meeting of the Indian delegations, Brooklyn Rivera rose to speak: "The Sandinistas say we are just another ethnic minority. Well, I tell them: Ethnic minorities run restaurants. We have a standing army! We will negotiate as nation to nation!"

Next to speak was Russell Means, fiery spokesman for the American Indian Movement, who rose and slammed a fist on the table. "You tell the Sandinistas that we're coming to Nicaragua with an army of our own. We'll have a shovel in one hand and a rifle in the other. It's up to them which one we use!"

Now, amid the rising rhetoric, Chief Lyons rose to speak. The occasion seemed ripe

for more hot words, but, to the surprise of many, he was utterly calm:

"We are the Haudenosaunee," he began, his words slow and measured, as though the angry words of a moment before had never been spoken. "We are made up of Six Nations . . . each of us equal . . . each of us sovereign . . . and we come together in a confederacy."

"Our business is peace, not war. . . ."

Voice unwavering, he told of the confederacy's origins and government. He explained how decisions must be reached by consensus, how no problem was important enough to cause disunity. "We must be of one mind," he said, echoing the Peacemaker's ancient words.

**B**Y THE END OF THE SPEECH his audience was transformed. Anger had been replaced by calm, and turbulent emotion had changed to cool lucidity. And that, I realized, had been his intent from the beginning. I was watching a master tactician, a gifted diplomat in action, who was representing his people as a nation among nations.

Later I told him: "Oren, you'd make a hell of a secretary of state."

He laughed and shook his head. "No way. Couldn't take the job if they offered it. I'm not a U. S. citizen. I'm Haudenosaunee. But if your secretary of state wants to talk to us, nation to nation, hey . . . we've been waiting a long time for that. We're ready." □