

Recollections of the Senecas

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RECOLLECTIONS OF THE SENECAS.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

Our family lived for several years on a small farm in the woods, two miles below the little lumber hamlet of Coldspring, Cattaraugus county, N. Y. This farm was bounded on the east by the west line of the Seneca Indian reservation, and was a half mile from the Alleghany river.

We used to see many of the Seneca Indians in those days. Then they had not become demoralized by whiskey as they were subsequently. The noted chief Cornplanter or Gi-ent-wau-kie lived some fifteen miles south of us, on a small reservation, which I believe was ceded to him by the state of Pennsylvania, in which it was situated. He was an able man and was reputed to be a half-breed. The Indian "State Papers," published by the general government, contain several letters and other papers attributed to him, which must have been dictated to an interpreter, for I believe he could not speak our language. He had been one of the distinguished Indian chiefs during the border wars of the Revolution. His papers show that he was a man of great native ability. He was famous throughout the region occupied by the Iroquois or Six Nations. During the long reign of peace after the Indian border wars in New York and Pennsylvania had ceased, Cornplanter was highly respected by the white people. My father knew him and attended the old chief's funeral when he died in 1836. Two of his sons with whom I became acquainted survived him. They were respectively named Charles and William O'Bail—a name which had possibly come to them from their father's relationship to the whites. William was a handsome Indian. He had a most kindly face and was genial, fair and agreeable in his intercourse with any white man whom he was sure he could trust. Old Charles O'Bail was reticent and reserved with the whites, and I could not arrive at any friendly understanding with him in later years when I had grown to manhood. William O'Bail had come into possession of the letters and papers left by his father. I was then, as later, an autograph collector, and I naturally coveted the rare treasures which he was under-

stood to possess. I called at his house one day, with a white man named Philip Tome, who could speak the Seneca language like a native redskin. He told William of my desire to see his papers and finally the old Indian climbed a ladder in the corner of the room and soon returned with a single document. This was a long letter on parchment, bearing the seal of the United States, and signed by George Washington. It was also attested by Thomas Jefferson. It was addressed to the Chiefs Cornplanter, Halftown and Great Tree. He also had copies of several treaties with the Indians. These had been written on foolscap paper and pasted upon long strips of coarse linen cloth. The deed, signed by Gov. Thomas Mifflin, for the little reservation of one or two square miles of land, had been duly recorded at the county seat—Warren, Pa.,—so that the title was secure. But could I obtain a single one of those precious documents? By no means, whatever. Philip Tome, who had been my schoolmate and was my friend, used all his skill in an effort to secure the document first named, but could accomplish nothing. We came away with the idea that William feared that the title to their homes depended upon his keeping those papers, and keep them he did.

I remember many other prominent Indians of this tribe who lived within four or five miles of my father's house. There were Gebuck, Little Philip, John Titus, Dan Kilbuck, King Pierce, Governor Blacksnake, Tandy Gimerson, Old Buck Tooth, Jim Buck Tooth, Little Jim Buck Tooth, John Shambo, Peter Crause, Old Johnnie Watts, Old Thief Thompson, and many others. Governor Blacksnake was a splendid looking Indian. At the time I first knew him he must have been over ninety years of age. He wore a long blue overcoat, which came nearly to the ground, which was studded with small smooth brass buttons in the old-fashioned style of that day. I once heard him make an address in the Indian language upon the occasion of a funeral. Old Johnnie Watts had two boys. We called one of them Little Johnnie and the other was known as Chase Watts. Johnnie was amiable and kind, and was about the only playmate my little brother and I had for some years. He finally fell a victim of consumption,

which was rife among the Indians. I used to go down to the wigwam and carry something from mother's table for him to eat, but the end finally came. One day as I approached the shanty, I heard the aged mother weeping bitterly, and talking very loudly. The only door to the building was a blanket which hung across the open space. I pushed this aside, and saw the mother sitting at the head of the bed, plunged in the deepest grief. Johnnie was still alive, but he only breathed a few times after I reached the spot. During the time he was dying the mother talked to him incessantly in their own language. This was the first person I ever saw breathe his last, and it made an impression upon me which I have never forgotten. Just outside the door the old Indian sat on a block of wood, making a bow and arrows. He had reached that stage in the manufacture when he was scraping the bow and arrows with a piece of glass. As I came in he gave me no recognition whatever, but kept scraping away upon the hickory wood.

The funeral occurred two or three days later. From thirty to fifty Indians and whites had gathered at the burial place. This was in the deep wood where the timber was tall and the shade dense. A grave was dug after the manner of white people, and the coffin was brought forward and lowered with ropes. Just at this juncture Old Johnnie Watts stepped forward and dropped the bows and arrows. I had seen him making by the side of the coffin. It was stated that there was not room inside for these implements, and so they were placed by the side of the coffin. Old Governor Blacksnake then stepped forward and stood upon the mound of earth by the side of the grave, from which he addressed the people present in the Indian language. He was a most striking figure, tall and erect, with hair of snowy whiteness, wearing the blue overcoat. He probably spoke half an hour. None of our people could understand a word he said, but others told us afterwards that it was a talk such as a white man might have made upon a similar occasion. He recognized the fact that the dead boy had been a good one, and that he was loved by all. He urged the people to live correct lives, so that they might be fortunate enough to go to the Happy Hunting Grounds after death. At the conclusion of his address the grave was filled up and the

people scattered to their homes. We understood that the family built a fire at the head of the grave every night for perhaps a week, the purpose of which was to light the spirit of the dead boy on the way to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

Old Governor Blacksnake lived until it was the general belief that he had attained the age of 115 or possibly 120 years. He wore a silver medal which he said had been given to him by General Washington. On one side was a representation of a room in a cabin, with a blazing fire on the hearth, a spinning wheel, and a babe in a cradle. On the other side were simply the words "Second Presidency of George Washington." He also had a pass or safe conduct which had been written by the hand of General Dearborn, Washington's Secretary of War. This safe conduct instructed the white people to allow the old man to pass freely on his way homeward, and to render him any assistance which he might need. I saw this pass some years afterwards and the old chief had kept it in a good state of preservation. At the time of his death, along in the later sixties, he was head chief of the Six Nations, quite a distinction for an aged Indian.

Another Indian I remember very well was Ed Purse. I have always thought that he was possibly a half-breed, for he seemed to have acquired a fairly good education. He was a musical genius, playing the guitar and several other instruments. One spring my father took a great raft of lumber from near the line between Pennsylvania and New York on the Alleghany river, down the Alleghany and the Ohio, to Lawrenceburg, Indiana, where he sold it. He employed Ed Purse to pilot the raft on the Ohio river. We landed every night on the Alleghany, but when we reached the Ohio, the old pilot left us, and Ed Purse took his place. We then ran night and day until we reached Cincinnati. After lying there two or three days we then went on to Lawrenceburg. Ed Purse was a man of marvelous strength, something over six feet high, well proportioned and quite handsome. When we went under the suspension bridge at Wheeling, Va., which had been erected only a few months before, there was a bright full moon, which lighted up the shores and the stream so that there was no difficulty in making out the channel. As we passed

under the bridge, Ed Purse was walking backward and forward on the raft with his guitar swung over his shoulder, singing songs and playing various pieces of music. He had composed one piece of music himself, which he called Ed Purse's Quickstep. This had been published with an illuminated cover and was quite an achievement for an Indian. When we arrived in Cincinnati we landed by the side of a clay bank which must have been twenty feet high, sloping gradually to the river. In order to bring the raft to a stop the cable had to be wrapped around one of the trees on this high bank. I remember that Ed took the coil of cable, which must have weighed more than a hundred pounds, and climbed up this steep, slippery bank as nimbly as a squirrel. Quicker than one could tell it, he had the cable around one of the big trees, and the raft stopped. This was his last work as our pilot. My father paid him off, and he departed for the north.

FOR HUMBOLDT COUNTY.—Quite a number of emigrants, on their way to Humboldt County, have passed through town during the past week. No county in the state offers greater inducements to settlers than Humboldt, and we are glad to see that they are beginning to be appreciated.—*Ft. Dodge Republican, May 20, 1863.*

SIoux CITY JOURNAL.—This is the title of a new Administration paper, recently established at Sioux City. It is well edited, and is a model in its mechanical appearance. It gives a creditable attention to home interests which should entitle it to the liberal patronage of our neighbors on the slope. Success to the enterprise.—*Ft. Dodge Republican, July 8, 1863.*

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