

## **Chapter Two – Story of Indians in Seneca County**

written by June Callaghan in 1964

*Note: This particular story has so much interesting information that it is included as a separate chapter. It builds upon what has been said about the Iroquois in Chapter One—Original Inhabitants and the Iroquois.*

Although it is the general assumption that the Seneca Indians laid original claim to the territory in and about Seneca County, history claims it is a fact that before recorded history, the Algonkian Indians inhabited this territory at one time and the Iroquois Indians invaded, fought for, and claimed this section for their own.

Before the white man came, the Heart of the Empire State, was held by the Iroquois Indians or, as the settlers came to call them, the Five Nations. The bribes of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk Indians had sometime in the past highly organized themselves into a Confederacy of Nations to help assure mutual benefit, aid and protection for themselves from outlying tribes. When their League of Nations met or, as they called it “The Great Peace,” the Council consisted of 10 Sachems or Chiefs from each tribe. In 1722, the Tuscaroras moved up from the south and joined the Confederacy, making them known as the Six Nations.

The Seneca’s tribal name was Yson-nun-da-wa o no (or “People of the Great Hill”). And of all these six nations, they, the Senecas, were the most numerous, most powerful, most savage, warlike and cruel. But, they had much in their culture that was beautiful.

Religion was a very serious matter and was taken into consideration almost with their every move. Their religion and supernatural beliefs were divided into three categories: spirits, ghosts of the dead, and their Gods. They believed in the Master of Life from whom all good things came, and his brother, the Maker of Evil.

Each tribe had various local Clans. The Senecas were divided into eight of these clans, which were given the names of animals. Namely, the turtle, snipe, hawk, bear, beaver, wolf, deer and heron. All members of a clan were considered near relatives. One might not marry within his own clan.

The Senecas did not live in tee-pees. Their homes were called “longhouses,” and as their name implies were long, made of elm logs and bark, with pitched roofs. One house would shelter many families of one clan and the husbands of the women. Sometimes as many as 20 families to one longhouse. And several longhouses, sometimes as many as 100, constituted a village. These villages were surrounded by tall strong stockades to protect them from the enemy. Many elm trees needed for building were cut down with stone axes and stone-headed clubs. Bark from the trees was stripped, dried and used much as we use shingles on our homes today. Inside the longhouse, fires were built in a row along the length of the longhouse, sometimes as many as 12 fires to one longhouse, for lighting, cooking and heating.

They farmed and hunted and fished. It was the man’s duty to hunt deer trap beaver, kill duck, turkey, pigeons, and to fish. As to the farming, it was done on a large scale, raising 15 varieties of corn, no less than 60 kinds of beans and squashes. In addition, they consumed wild

strawberries, wild greens, herbs and maple sugar. It was the man's duty only to clear the field in preparation for the planting and harvesting.

The women then did all the farming and harvesting, but if you think it was all work and no power for the "little woman," you are all wrong. The Seneca "squaw" owned all the fields and crops, and the longhouse after it was erected by the men. Their women enjoyed a higher position than the white man ever gave their counterpart until modern times. Upon marriage, the man went to live with the wife's clan, and if the marriage broke up, the man "went home to mother." All children followed the mother's clan and stayed with the mother if the family broke up. When a Chief or Sachem died, the matron of his ancestry chose his successor from among the men of the same ancestry. She then announced her choice to the women of her longhouse. After much discussion among the ladies, only then was the choice announced to the clan. If the new Sachem did not do well, it was the Matron's job to warn him four times before she would ask the Council to de-throne him. The Council seldom went against her wishes. Matrons also decided if prisoners were to be kept or tortured to death.

They also used elm for their utensils and canoes. They sewed with bone awls or thorns, making thread from wild fibers. They did their cutting with stone knives. Among their arts was the making of pottery and weaving of sashes. In addition to their Ritual Dances, their entertainment consisted of fun dancing, games, clowning, and they even played a form of charades and lacrosse.

Makeup was not a new innovation with the white man. The Indian squaw always took time for self grooming. The tail of a porcupine served her as a combination comb and brush. She oiled her hair with a tonic from the sunflower seed. She powdered her nose with powder made from pulverizing the dry rotted inner parts of pine trees placed upon her countenance with a puff with built-in handle plucked from the swamp—the cattail. She crushed a large ripe red berry and smoothed it upon her cheeks for rouge. The unmarried girl wore her hair in two braids. After the marriage ceremony, it was all joined into the braid at the nape of the neck. She wore skirts and leggings in warm weather and full dresses of buckskin in cold weather.

The man wore long hair only after the influence of the white man. Previously, the man shaved off all his hair except the scalp lock. He wore leggings, breech-clouts and kilts of buckskin, moccasins and buckskin shirts in winter. In summer, just breech-clouts kilt and moccasins.

Their messages to one another and their documents of tribal legends and history were recorded in wampum. Wampum is small beads made of shells. Being an in-land tribe, the Iroquois apparently gained theirs by trade, by raid or as tribute. These beads were woven into various designs as belts or strips of various lengths and arrangements of colors.

The Vanishing American is an interesting study both local and far-reaching. One suggested all encompassing reference: *A Pictorial History of the American Indian* by Oliver La Farge.

[Note: This has been quoted as written by June Callaghan with minor changes in punctuation and spelling.]