The Beaver

WINTER 1965

Eskimo trapper with Arctic Fox skins.

THIS IS THE ARCTIC– Canada's newest frontier served now, as in the past, by the men of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Hudson's Bay Company

INCORPORATED 2ND MAY 1670

The Beaver

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The young Eskimo mother treated her little son with such fond tendernss.

Photo by Michael Marton

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Iroquois warrior (story page 4) drawn in 1787 by J. Grasset de St Sauveur.

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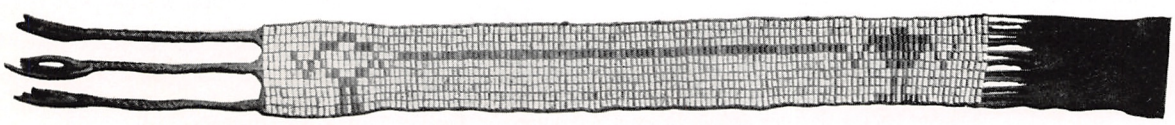
THE CAUGHNAWAGAS

BY FRED BRUEMMER



THE IROQUOIS INDIANS of Caughnawaga, a reservation across the St Lawrence River from Montreal, have been guided in most of their endeavours during the last 300 years by a penchant for adventure.

Under the French regime they were feared and famous warriors. In the last century they crossed the continent as canoe-men of the North West and the Hudson's Bay Companies. They guided huge rafts down the turbulent Ottawa River. They took part in the Red River expedition to crush the Riel rebellion and they braved the cataracts of the Nile to try and save General Gordon, besieged by the Mahdi in Khartoum. And they adapted to the modern era by becoming North America's most skilled and daring high-steel workers.

In a roundabout way their history begins in 1647, five years after Montreal was founded, when the Jesuits were granted land at Laprairie on the south shore of the St Lawrence.

The Jesuits were then embarking on the risky attempt to convert the warlike Iroquois, a confederation of five powerful tribes, the Mohawks, Onondagas, Oneidas, Cayugas and Senecas, all sworn enemies of the French. Their success was sporadic and, since they had little control over the converts, often of short duration. In 1667, five Oneidas, led by a Christian convert, Tonsohoten, arrived at the Laprairie mission and said they would like to settle there. They were baptized the following year at Quebec by Bishop Laval.

This gave the Jesuits an inspiration. If they could collect all their converts in one mission village, they could ensure that the Indians' new-found faith would not falter. Directives went out to the missionaries in the field and gradually Christian Iroquois left their longhouse villages to settle at Laprairie.

In the next years the St Francois-Xavier mission moved four times (mainly to escape the too wordly influence of white settlers), always a few miles upriver, to settle finally at its present location in 1716. The French named it Sault St Louis (the old name for the Lachine Rapids), but it was more commonly called Caughnawaga, from the Mohawk *Ga-hna-wa-ge* (or *Ka-na-wa-ke*) meaning "at the rapids." By 1672, more than 400 Indians had settled at Caughnawaga and the *Jesuit Relations* say twenty-two tribes were represented, with Mohawks, Onondagas and Hurons numerically in the lead.

The Jesuits were delighted with their success and so, for different reasons, were the temporal authorities of New France. In the protracted wars of the 17th and 18th centuries the Iroquois sided, as a rule, with the English. All, that is, except the Caughnawagas. They became staunch allies of the French, taking part in nearly every battle. They knew every mile of territory to the south and through their spy system were usually well aware of what the English were planning. In a long angry letter to the Lords of Trade in London, Livinius van Schaick, an Albany alderman, wrote in 1696: ". . . without them [the Caughnawagas] it would have been impossible for the French to preserve Canada." And in 1724, Cadwallader Colden, surveyor-general (and later governor) of New York wrote: "In time of war they gave the French intelligence of all designs here against them . . . and from them we might expect the greatest mischief . . ., seeing that any part of our province is as well known to them as to any of the inhabitants."

In time of peace, though, it was the French who did the complaining, because the Caughnawagas proved a pretty independent lot. Instead of bringing their furs to Montreal, as the French felt they should, they sold them at Albany because the English paid better. "Sault St Louis has become a sort of republic and it is here alone that foreign trade is carried on at present," Governor Beauharnois complained in a letter to the French minister, Count de Maurepas.

The nearly incessant raids and wars seriously decimated the Caughnawagas, and they replenished their forces by adopting prisoners, a common Iroquois practice. Quite a few of these prisoners were English and Dutch. One was James Smith, who was captured by Caughnawagas in 1755 at the ill-fated attack on the French Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh), led by General Braddock and George Washington.

The 18-year-old Smith was formally adopted by the Caughnawagas, a painful procedure but still preferable to the fate of his fellow prisoners, who were tortured to death. After running the gauntlet, his hair was pulled out, "like plucking a turkey," except for a small spot on the crown. He was elaborately painted and then repeatedly ducked in a nearby river by a few squaws.

Then the Indians gave him weapons, tobacco and pipe, and their chief said: "My son, you are now flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. By the ceremony performed this day, every drop of white blood was washed out of your veins. You are taken into the Caughnawaga nation.

Opposite page: A modern mask by Caughnawaga carver Harold Deer. In early times the False Face secret medicine society used grotesque masks. Below: an old wampum belt in the National Museum; the pattern of the shell beads served as a mnemonic record of special events.

. . . You are one of us by an old strong law and custom." From that day forward the Indians never made any distinction "between me and themselves".

They spent most of their time in extensive hunting expeditions in the Lake Erie region. Gradually Smith came to like and even admire his captors. They lived "in love, peace and friendship together, without dispute. In this respect they shame those who profess Christianity." Their physical endurance amazed him. In winter a blanket, worn over breechclout and leggings was their only protection against the cold. They left their possessions anywhere. Indians, they explained, do not steal from one another. "They say they never did until the white people came among them and taught some of them to lie, cheat, steal, and swear."

In 1759 his group of Indians returned to Caughnawaga, "a very ancient Indian town about nine miles above Montreal". Smith escaped, was imprisoned at Montreal and later exchanged for a French prisoner.

Earlier Caughnawaga became the hub of one of New France's most unusual commercial activities. In 1716 a learned Jesuit, Father Joseph Francois Lafitau, discovered, near the mission building "la précieuse plante de Ginseng de Tartarie". The Chinese considered ginseng a panacea and particularly prized it as a reputed restorer of vanishing virility. Its dried roots were worth three times their weight in silver. So the Caughnawagas temporarily buried the tomahawk to dig up ginseng, roaming as far as Massachusetts in search of the precious plant. By 1752, some 500,000 francs worth of ginseng was exported annually, but within another decade the plant had been nearly exterminated.

When New France's hour of destiny approached, the Caughnawagas apparently had a shrewd idea for whom the bell tolled. Montcalm only hoped for their neutrality and to ensure this he sent Antoine de Bougainville (who later became an admiral, a senator, and the first Frenchman to sail around the world) to Caughnawaga because "he has more money than he knows what to do with". Bougainville became a good friend of the Indians, lavishing such presents as 150 pounds of tobacco and 10 pounds of vermilion paint upon his hosts when he visited them. They stayed neutral, but that did not save Montcalm.

The English, so long the arch-enemies of the "Praying Mohawks" as they used to call them, treated the Caughnawagas at first with benevolent suspicion. They reduced the seigniory of Sault St Louis to 12,000 acres (roughly the size of the present reserve) and later transferred it from the Jesuits to the Indians.

In the war of 1812 the Caughnawagas distinguished themselves at the Battle of Beaver Dam of Laura Secord fame. Their commander, Lieutenant Fitzgibbon wrote in his report: ". . . not a shot was fired on our side by any but the Indians. They beat the American detachment into a state of terror and the only share I claim is taking advantage of a favourable moment to offer [the Americans] protection from tomahawk and scalping knife."

On the whole, though, the Caughnawagas were quite ready to leave the warpath for more peaceful pursuits. They enrolled in increasing numbers as canoe-men in the fur brigades of the North West Company and, after the merger of this company in 1821 with the Hudson's Bay Company transferred their allegiance to the latter. They crossed the Rocky Mountains before 1820. Some mingled

Part of Caughnawaga village on the St Lawrence Seaway. In the background is the railway bridge where the Caughnawagas started their career as high-steel workers 79 years ago.

Caughnawaga is a stronghold of lacrosse, a traditional Iroquois game in which villages often contended.

Crawling inside a great steel girder on a construction job, Lloyd Leclaire checks riveting.

with the Salish, others travelled down to the Oregon territory and north to Athabasca. They were usually referred to as the Iroquois.

Daniel Williams Harmon, wintering partner of the North West Company in New Caledonia, noted in his journal on 13 October 1818: "For several years past, Iroquois from Canada have been in the habit of coming into different parts of the North West country, to hunt the beaver, &c. The Natives of the country, consider them as intruders." Further he mentions that two Carrier Indians of Stuart Lake killed an Iroquois, his wife and two children while they were sleeping.

About a dozen Iroquois accompanied Alexander Ross of the Hudson's Bay Company on the Snake Country Expedition in 1824, but apparently they proved to be a thorough nuisance. "Unruly, ill-tongued villains," he calls them in his journal.

Governor George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company was nearly always accompanied by Caughnawaga Indians on his famous trips to the far-flung posts of his empire. His departure from Lachine in 1833 is described by Samuel Thompson in his *Reminiscences of a Canadian Pioneer*: "With him [Simpson] were some half dozen officers, civil and military, and the party was escorted by six or eight Nor'West canoes, each thirty to forty feet long, manned by some twenty-four Indians, in the full glory of war paint, feathers, and most dazzling costume."

In 1860 the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) was in Montreal to open Victoria Bridge. On 29 August he was the guest of Governor Simpson at the country home of the 'Little Emperor' on Isle Dorval. To make the visit memorable, Governor Simpson, a master at pomp and circumstance when the occasion required, marshalled his Indian forces. When the prince's boat approached he saw "a flotilla of nine large birchbark canoes in a line to the head of the island . . . their crews composed of 100 Iroquois Indians from Caughnawaga, . . . being costumed *en sauvage*, gay with feathers, scarlet cloth and paint." The Indians escorted the prince and his party to the island where they were received by Sir George Simpson. During the elaborate luncheon the birch-bark fleet "in full song" paddled around the island. Later Sir George and his guests embarked in the canoes and were paddled to Lachine, headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Powerfully built high-steel man Andrew Horn at work in New York.

With nimble fingers Mrs Mary Jacobs deftly picks up tiny beads with her needle to make a belt, successor to the wampum made of cut, drilled and polished pieces of shell.

Howard Deer, one of Caughnawaga's elected chiefs, carves traditional style masks. In ceremonies of the False Face Society of old the masks were wooden representations of bodiless mythical beings.

Three days after this gay event, Governor Simpson was stricken by apoplexy. He died on 7 September at the age of about 73 after forty years service in Rupert's Land, all but the first as a governor. The Indians who had accompanied him on so many journeys came to chant their lament. "The Caughnawaga Indians escorted the melancholy cortege from the House [Hudson's Bay House] to the landing where the train was waiting; and as the coffin was placed in the car . . . the red men and their squaws sang a wild and doleful but solemn dirge in commemoration of the departure to 'The Great Chief' above the sky of one of their best friends," reported the *Evening Pilot.*

When the need for canoe-men dwindled, the Caughnawagas found another trade that suited their adventurous and roving temperament. They steered the great lumber rafts, mainly white pine for the British navy, down the Ottawa River. These rafts, several hundred annually by 1820, were assembled on the upper Ottawa and divided into smaller units for shooting the rapids, a dangerous specialty at which the daring Iroquois excelled.

It was their ability to conquer rapids that led a select group of Caughnawagas to Egypt. In 1884 the forces of

the Mahdi had encircled Britain's famous General Gordon at Khartoum in the Sudan. The relief expedition under Lord Garnet Wolseley was making painfully slow progress, hampered by the rapids of the Nile. In this emergency Wolseley remembered the legendary skill of the Caughnawaga canoe-men. He had served in Canada and in 1870, accompanied by Caughnawagas, had led a small expedition of British regulars and Canadian militia overland to suppress Riel's Red River uprising.

Lord Wolseley sent an urgent appeal to Canada and fifty Caughnawaga volunteers, led by Chief Louis Jackson, embarked for Egypt. Jackson later wrote a delightful but now unfortunately very rare booklet about their adventures—and misadventures.

The Caughnawagas spoke enough English "for boating purposes, but no more". On the Nile they had to command boats manned mainly by Dongolese, who spoke no English at all. It was not exactly an ideal combination to conquer the cascading cataracts of the Nile. "These Dongolese generally understood just the contrary of what they were ordered to do . . . and we were continually patching boats on account of these fellows. Scolding was no good, they neither understood nor cared." At least, Chief Jackson remarks philosophically, "they were excellent swimmers".

After getting one load upriver, the Indians would take the boats downriver with "much dodging of rocks and islands, which gave some excitement. This shooting of the rapids was a surprise to the Egyptian soldiers and they came rushing out of their huts with their children, goats and dogs and stood on the beach to see the North American Indian boatmen".

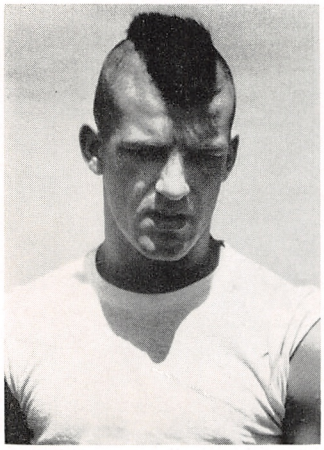
At least the boats were good. "All the boys agreed with me that whilst the Nile river boats would have been no use on the Ottawa, they could not be improved upon for the Nile service".

But too much time had already been lost. Khartoum fell and General Gordon was killed before the relief column arrived. The Indians sailed from Alexandria in February 1885, "proud to have shown the world that the dwellers on the banks of the Nile, after navigating it for centuries, could still learn something of the craft from the Iroquois Indians of North America".

In 1886 the Dominion Bridge Company began construction of the railroad bridge for the C.P.R. across the St Lawrence from Lachine to a point just below Caughna-

waga village. Bridge builders then were mostly ex-sailors who were used to heights. As the bridge began to jut out above the river, these men watched in open-mouthed amazement as groups of curious Caughnawagas clambered on the narrow girders above the void with nonchalant ease.

The Indians' lack of acrophobia had already been noted by John Lawson, an English surveyor and traveller in America, who wrote in 1714: "They will walk over deep Brooks, and Creeks on the smallest Poles, and that without any Fear or Concern. Nay, an Indian will walk on the Ridge of a Barn or House and look down the Gable-end and spit upon the ground, as unconcerned, as if he was walking on Terra firma."



A young Indian at Caughnawaga sports a traditional hair style of the Iroquois.

Below: Long words of Mohawk language appear on cross in Caughnawaga cemetery. The steel crosses mark graves of high-steel men who became victims of their dangerous profession.

Seeing the Indians' cat-like agility and complete lack of fear, company officials hired some and trained them as riveters, regarded as the most dangerous work on high steel. The Indians of Caughnawaga had found a new vocation. Today more than seventy-five per cent of Caughnawaga's men work on high steel.

In the last seventy-eight years Caughnawaga Indians have had a major share in the construction of nearly every major building and bridge in North America. They worked on George Washington Bridge in New York and Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. They riveted the steel skeleton of the United Nations building. They took part in the construction of the 102-storey Empire State Building and, twenty years later, in 1951, when it was decided to cap the 1,250-foot structure with a 222-foot antenna it was again mainly Caughnawaga Indians who did the job. Some helped build the grain elevators at Churchill on Hudson Bay. Others were sent by major construction companies to South America and the Middle East where their skill as high-steel workers was required.

They have the sort of dry humour that suits men who constantly risk their lives. "The fall is nothing. It's arriving that's so unpleasant." "It doesn't make any difference whether you fall 100 or 1,000 feet. The result is pretty much the same." "I hear they are bringing out a manual for high-steel men. It's called 'How to grow wings—quickly'."

All this does not detract from the fact that the Indians are keenly aware of the dangers of their work. When the centre span of Quebec City's cantilever bridge collapsed in 1907, ninety-six people were killed. Thirty-five of them were Caughnawagas. Their village cemetery is studded with steel crosses, erected over the graves of men who paid with their lives for their daring.

In the 1920s and 1930s, with skyscrapers mushrooming on Manhattan Island, Caughnawaga Indians began to settle in Brooklyn and now more than 400 live there. They have settled within a couple of city blocks in the North Gowanus district, near Atlantic Avenue and Schermerhorn Street, with perhaps the greatest concentration on State Street, where some apartment buildings are almost entirely occupied by Caughnawaga Indians. They have their favourite bar, the Wigwam, and most eat at the same restaurant where one sometimes hears as much Mohawk spoken as English. (The Caughnawaga Indians are now nearly invariably referred to as Mohawks, although they are of mixed origin. But of the Iroquois tribes who settled at Caughnawaga, the Mohawks were the most numerous and their language and traditions

The Verrazano-Narrows bridge opened in November 1964 at the approach to New York harbour was built, in part, by Caughnawaga Indians. The four dots in the 690-foot tower arch are high-steel men working on cables. Eddie Diabo tightens a cable covering. Pat Stacey guides derrick on a rising skyscraper near Trinity Church in New York.

finally became those of the village. The Indians now refer to themselves as Mohawks. A century ago they usually called themselves Iroquois, which would be more accurate.)

But no matter where they live or how far their work takes them, home to these Indians is Caughnawaga, a sprawling settlement along the St Lawrence Seaway. This village of 4,000 inhabitants (1,485 in 1884; 2,017 in 1902) is full of contrasts. Next to splendid modern homes, stand old tar-papered houses. Only about a hundred homes have running water. Residents from the others fetch their water at old-fashioned village pumps. None of the streets have names and the houses are not numbered. In a way, Caughnawaga reflects the proud individualism of its inhabitants.

Many of them commute between Caughnawaga and New York. They leave Sunday night, drive with only a short break to New York where they spend their work week and return Friday night to the reserve. Even those who live on a more permanent basis in New York, usually spend some weeks or even months each year at Caughnawaga. Many have become foremen and superintendents, but even this has only enticed a few to live permanently in the States. Their favourite song in Brooklyn ends with the rousing finale: "*Ka-na-wa-ḳé té-tsi-te-we*"—"Let's go back to Caughnawaga".

When the twelve-storey high stainless steel Unisphere was built as a symbol of New York's 1964 World Fair and destined to become a permanent monument for Flushing Meadows Park, most of the work was carried out by Caughnawaga Indians. The globe has 126 'windows', each marking a world capital. Near the apex of the Unisphere is a 127th window, lit red at night. It was installed as a fitting tribute to the Indians, and marks Caughnawaga, the 'capital' of North America's most famous high-steel workers. ◆