

## The Killing of Jake Ice

by Darren Bonaparte - Reprinted from March 20, 1996

Josephine Angus was a Mohawk elder who lived at the Iakhisohtha Home for Elders. She was well known for her sweetgrass baskets and was once honored by the Governor of New York State for her talents. She had a warm sense of humor and was always happy to receive visitors.

One afternoon she welcomed two visitors who came to hear her recollections of her grandfather, a man known to his friends and family as Karoniateka, or Louis Sunday. "My grandfather was a guide, taking rich people around in a boat for fishing," Josephine explained, then added, "He made a quarter a day! Back then, farming and fishing were the main sources of income for the Mohawks at Akwesasne. That and basketmaking, of course.

My grandmother made baskets. She lived a long time and had twelve kids. Some of them were adopted. She had a long life and was 97 when she died, and she had a good memory," Josephine remembers. Her grandmother, Kaiatentes, was also known as Annie (Lafrance) Sunday. She passed on 36 years ago. Karoniateka passed away when Josephine was only eight years old.

The story Josephine told that day is one that many Akwesasne Mohawk will be familiar. It was one her grandmother told her when she was growing up, and it concerned the tumultuous events surrounding the imposition of the Canadian Indian Advancement Act of 1884.

Before we go into Josephine's story, it would be good to give a brief background on the Indian Advancement Act. It was one of a series of laws designed by the Canadian government to provide natives with a democratic system of electing chiefs. This law, which was imposed on Mohawk communities like Six Nations, Tyendinega, Kahnawake, Akwesasne, and Kanasatake, was vigorously opposed by the Mohawks who lived there because it stripped them of their traditional governments. They wrote numerous appeals and signed petitions to prevent the coming elections.

"The Indian Act only breeds sorrow, contention, hatred, disrespect of family ties, spite against one another, and absence of unity amongst us Indians. It also creates two distinct parties at the elections," stated the Akwesasne petition. "This law was never authorized in its adaptation among the Indians...There is only one way to recover brotherly feelings, that of substituting the seven lords appointed by each of the seven totems according to the ancient customs which we know gave us peace, prosperity, friendship, and brotherly feelings in every cause, either for personal good or for the benefit of the entire band."

Despite their well-spoken

protests, the Canadian government chose to ignore them and proceeded to schedule elections for these communities. Mohawk women from Akwesasne, however, gave it one last try and submitted a letter of June 2, 1989. An excerpt is as follows:

"We have considered the elective system as not being intended by us Indians, and we would therefore return to our old methods of selecting our life chiefs, according to our Constitution Iroquois Government. As your Excellency must know, the ancient custom of creating the chiefs is that they are selected according to the different clans, there being three from each clan, and also three women who; select her special chief from among her clan. Of these chiefs, one is considered the head chief, the second is the 'big mah' and the third is the 'crier'. As there is four distinct clans, there is twelve life chiefs who hold their offices for life."

This failed to halt the plans of the department of Indian Affairs, who wrote to Indian Agent George Long and said, "The Department is determined not to allow any of the Indian to set its authority at defiance." An election was scheduled soon after, but the Mohawks forcibly prevented it from taking place...twice!

A man named inspector McCrea was sent from Ottawa to "Lower the boom" at Akwesasne. His report back to the superintendent general stated: "They were informed in the most explicit terms that even if a return to what they consider their ancient system were allowed, of which no hope whatsoever could be held out the relations of the Indians to the law would not be changed in any particular. They might as well look for the falling of the sky as to expect recognition of their claim to hold the position of a practically independent state."

On Monday, March 27, 1989, the Commissioner of the Dominion Police sent inspector Logan and Constable Chamberlain to assist Indian Agent Long and his assistant in conducting the election at the schoolhouse in St. Regis. A group of about 200 Mohawks from both sides of the border disarmed the police and carried them away; the Indian agent was locked up inside the school until later that evening.

On the morning of May 1 of the same year, Lieutenant Colonel Sherwood and 5 police officers approached the village of St. Regis through a thick blanket of fog on the river and parked their tugboat without arousing anyone's attention. Two men stayed at the boat while three accompanied Sherwood to the Indian Agents home (which also served as his office) and he in turn sent a messenger out to summon chiefs listed on

the officers' warrants.

Accounts of the affair vary, but what is generally accepted is that the chiefs and a few other Mohawk men began to assemble at the Indian Agents office to see why they had been summoned. Chief Jake Fire recognized the plainclothes officers and immediately bolted out the door. Colonel Sherwood overtook him, but not before he let out his war cry that was quickly repeated throughout the village.

Before long, Jake Fire's brother John, also known as Saiowisakeron or Jake Ice, responded to a plea from his sister to help their brother. He rushed to the Indian Agent's office with a large number of Mohawk friends not far behind.

Jake Ice was a man of about 50 to 60 years old, but he was well known for being strong and agile. He burst through the door and attacked Colonel Sherwood, pushing him over a stove and strangling him, while his fellow Mohawks began to engage the other police officers in a fierce, violent fistfight. Sherwood threatened to shoot him, but he only scowled and told him to "Shoot! Shoot!" Sherwood shot him again, this time killing him.

The death of Ice brought a quick end to the riot, and the police managed to slip out of St. Regis with their prisoners in handcuffs. The rest of the stunned villagers stood on the banks of the river and watched the tugboat pull away. Jake Ice's body remained on the Indian Agent's floor until the coroner arrived the next day.

Josephine remembers the way her grandmother told the story. "When Jake Ice got shot, my grandfather fought with the law. He said he choked him to save his life. And when he choked him, he dropped his gun and his tongue came out! Everybody used to laugh when my grandmother had said that!"

"And they were sent to jail," she said. "I don't know if it was a month or more that they were in jail. They all started talking. 'What did I do? Why should I be in here?' and she said 'they let me go.'"

To add insult to injury, the release prisoners had to walk home...from Valleyfield. "But they did that a long time ago," Josephine said. "There was a lot of walking. Not like today!"

Louis told his wife about his time in jail. "When he got out he told her, 'We got good food.' She said, 'What was it?' He said, 'Cabbage soup.' And he said, 'They treated us good.'"

Jake Ice's wife was furious at the police for the killing and refused to have the body picked up. He was buried in a course wood casket a few days later.

A coroner's inquest was held in which the police gave their side of

the affair. It was either dead officer or dead Indian, they said, and under the circumstances they preferred it be dead Indian.

"I tell you, we were as near death as I ever want to be, and had Colonel Sherwood not shot Ice, none of the officers would be alive today," said Abe Cawdron, an eyewitness.

The Huntington Gleaner voiced anger at the handling of the affair in an editorial dated May 4, 1899. "Had the Indian advancement Act not been made to apply to the St. Regis Band, there would not be today a woman and three children mourning over a dead husband and father, and the tribe would be spared the painful ordeal they are now undergoing of being harassed by the officers of the law."

The editorial went on to say, "In reality, the whites have been the aggressors all through the wretched affair, which has had so tragic an ending. It was the whites who passed a law to interfere with the internal management of an inoffensive tribe, and the Indian were merely resisting an attempt to change the customs that are dear to them, and which concerns themselves along...They simply ask to be let alone, an independent community, ruled by themselves, and we do not see why what they ask should be withheld. The government can well afford to call a truce, stop further proceedings, and send a message of peace to St. Regis that I will be classed among the reserves exempted from the operation of the statute they so much dislike."

Nevertheless, the government was still determined to carry on with the prosecutions. Seven more chiefs voluntarily surrendered to authorities in Beauharnois upon hearing that warrants were out for them as well. Two Mohawks were even arrested at a train station when they were on their way to hire a lawyer for the chiefs. Five of the chiefs spent a whole year in jail, including Jake Fire. They were eventually released after a trial in which they were given stern warning about further protests.

The cost of the prosecution and trial was taken out of the bands funds, "as the prosecution was indubitably in the bands best interests," according to the inspector of Indian Agencies. The election was eventually held in a bar in Cornwall with only a handful of Mohawk participating. Twelve chiefs were elected. In time the former life chiefs would seek election, since it was apparent that their traditional way of picking chiefs would only land them in jail.

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