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## THE ABENAKIS: ABORIGINES OF VERMONT - PART II

By STEPHEN LAURENT

*Part I of the address delivered by Mr. Laurent at our July summer session appeared in our October issue. The hereditary chief of the Abenakis, trained as a scholar and informed, as his father was before him, in the history of his people, in his address he offered significant information of lasting value. Copies of the October number are available. In closing Part I Mr. Laurent was discussing the reasons why the Indian felt superior to the white man; he quoted this sentence by the historian John Fiske: "There never existed, anywhere in the world, a people who did not take for granted its own pre-eminent superiority."*

APPARENTLY, the Abenaki Indians were no exception: like the rest of mankind, they considered their own race to be the cream of the crop. This belief was further strengthened by their theory of the creation of man. This is how it went: First, the Great Spirit made the white man and found him too white. Next, he decided to make a black man; so he made the colored race. Well, this time the man was too black. Finally, he thought he would try making a man neither wholly white nor completely black; so he made his masterpiece, the American Indian, correcting in this last creation the various imperfections which he had found in the two previous models.

Before leaving the subject of language I shall give you, as I promised, a sample of story-telling in Abenaki, so that you may have an idea of how it reads and sounds. It deals with an encounter between a party of Iroquois and a smaller group of Abenaki Indians from Missisquoi. As you undoubtedly know, there were, even as late as 1790, a cluster of about fifty Abenaki lodges at the place now called Swanton, Vermont. They had extensive cornfields near their huts, but it was also necessary to do a certain amount of hunting and fishing, and sometimes they had to go quite a distance. Once they were intercepted by a greater number of Iroquois somewhere in the vicinity of Saranac Lake. Although the Iroquois were in greater number, they did not quite dare to attack the Abenakis; so they just stayed on their guard, very much like two wildcats ready to spring at each

other. Finally, the Abenakis got hungry and started eating the pith of a pine tree. This restored their energy and gave them new courage; so they said to one another: "Well, we might as well fight now!" So they sang the war song, executed the war dance, and uttered the war whoop. On seeing this, the Iroquois slyly retreated. When the Abenakis saw their enemies pulling out, they shouted after them: "Maguak! Maguak!"—"Cowards! Cowards!" And ever since then the Iroquois have been called "Maguak" by the Abenakis.

In return the Iroquois called the Abenakis "Adirondacks," meaning "bark-eaters." They gave this name scornfully, as much as to say: "We Iroquois are man-eaters, but you soft Abenakis are mere bark-eaters!" (The word Iroquois does mean "man-eater": this name was given to them by the Algonquins on seeing how cruel and ferocious the Iroquois were.) But the old Indian who told me the story, far from being ashamed that his ancestors had been called bark-eaters, was actually proud of his forebears. He reasoned it this way: our ancestors were so hardy that if game was scarce, or if hard times came their way, they could always go off into the woods and live off the bark of trees, while awaiting the return of better times. His old eyes glinted as he boasted: "Nos ancêtres étaient des mangeurs d'écorce!"

In Abenaki the story goes thus:

Ni agua pasgueda wakaswak Wobanakiak weskokogonozsa Maguak, *Once upon a time a few Abenakis were intercepted by the Iroquois,* kwahliwi Salonnaki Nbesek. Maguak paamalozhanik ondaki agmowo, *not far from Saranac Lake. The Iroquois were more numerous than* ni mziwi Wobanakiak wmataoogwobanik chaga Maguak onda *they, and all the Abenakis would have been killed if the Iroquois hadn't* wzakpowlegwo. Ninawa wibiwi wdaskooldino, taholawiba niswak *been afraid. Therefore, they just waited, very much like two wildcats* pezoak ompchi kadawi awdidida. Ni Wobanakiak kadopidid, azi pazgo *about ready to fight. Finally, the Abenakis got hungry, and began to* w'mowon manhakwogana; ni sibiwi kistodid waji migakadit. Nitta achi *eat the pith of a pine tree, and then decided to fight. Immediately they* adoji moja nawadwadid, pmegodid, ta kwakwahomidid. *started their war song, performed the war dance, and shouted the war-* Ni kadonalgodijik kizi polwaadid, wmamhlawi Wobanakiak *whoop. The enemy slyly withdrew, whereupon the Abenakis cried* kogolwano: "Maguak! Maguak!" Ni onka waji askwa liwihlomek *out: "Cowards! Cowards!" Since then they have been called Maguaks*

Maguak. Ni ozidaiwi Maguak wdeliwihlono Wobanakiak "Adirondack" (Cowards). In return the Iroquois called the Abenakis "Adirondacks" (Manhakwogana mowojik). (Bark-eaters).

[This story as told by Mr. Laurent in the Abenaki tongue was recorded on tape for preservation in our Living Voice Archives. Editor.]

Like all other Indian peoples, the Abenakis had a conception of Divinity, but this conception was not much higher than might have been expected. Instead of yielding homage to one all-pervading and omnipotent Spirit, they would pray and make sacrifices to a multitude of greater and lesser gods. To the Indian mind it was a superiority to have many gods, and they made it clear at the outset to the missionaries that they were not going to be so foolish as to give up their thirty-seven gods for the white man's one god.

One great characteristic of the Indian religion was their worship of the Devil. In their mind it was far more important to pray to the Evil Spirit than to the Good. The latter could always be depended upon to do that which was right by them, but it was vastly different with the Devil: he had to be propitiated with offerings, prayers, and sacrifices. Of course, to the Indians the gods are not thought of as being morally good or evil, but rather as benevolent and malevolent forces. The Devil is not a tempter: he is the source of diseases, death, afflictions, and misfortunes. The Good Spirit, on the other hand, is the spirit which brings good fortune and ministers to the necessities and desires of mankind.

In addition to these good and evil spirits, the Indians had a veneration for certain animals. The bear, for instance, which by the way was the totem of the Abenakis, was held in especial esteem. They have been known to address a wounded bear with a harangue of apology. Some Indians, in fact, would apologize indiscriminately to all animals they were forced to kill. Never approving of taxidermy, they would often blow tobacco smoke at a stuffed moose, deer, or other animal: this was intended to be a propitiatory offering, since, in their opinion, the spirits of these animals must have been offended at the indignity shown to their remains.

Since the bear was the totem of the Abenakis, it was considered a good omen to have children born bow-legged. The parents would then say: "He'll turn out to be a good Abenaki: he'll go through life walking just like our totem, the Bear." A would-be wit, or nitwit, wanting to jest at the Indians' expense, once asked my father (who

was very bow-legged): "Chief Laurent, are all the Indians bow-legged?" My father replied, very seriously: "No, only those who belong to the Bear clan." Not expecting to have his joke boomerang in that fashion, the inquirer went on: "Do you mean to say that those belonging to the Bear clan are invariably born bow-legged?"—"Well, if they are not born that way they are made so by their parents. In my case, for instance, my mother took a small log and placed it between my knees when I was very, very young, then tied my ankles securely with wartap (fine roots of the red spruce). As I grew older, she used still bigger and bigger pieces of wood, until a time came when I was permanently bow-legged."—"But," said the awanoch (white man), "where was the advantage in that?"—"For the future hunter, and most of us would finally end up by becoming hunters, it was of considerable advantage to be bow-legged, if for no other reason than that we could straddle ever so much better on our snowshoes. Going to the opposite extreme, imagine a knock-kneed man trying to go on snowshoes!" Then my father explained that he could snowshoe and make only one furrow, whereas most white men snowshoe so much like knock-kneed men that they actually make two parallel furrows. In a way it means all the difference between having to look after the upkeep of a one-lane road as against a two-lane highway! When my father got home that night, he told the story to my mother, and they both had a good laugh at the white man's credulity. My father's comment was: "The white man will swallow everything, arrow, bow and quiver, just so long as it's an Indian that tells it!"

Since they had a belief in immortality, the Abenakis always showed great respect for their dead. It was customary to keep a fire burning over a fresh grave. Their conviction was that it took seven days for the souls of the departed to reach the happy hunting-grounds, and they must on no account be left in the dark, lest they lose their way. I remember, as a boy, that there were still a few at St. Francis who clung to this old pagan custom of keeping a light burning over the recently deceased. Since the custom was frowned upon by the missionaries, only a very few dared to go through with it. But I still recall vividly seeing some old Indian going towards the graveyard at dusk with a lantern in his hand; this he would plant on a pole over his relative's grave. The next morning he would go and fetch the lantern, then repeat the same performance in the evening, and this for the next five or six days.

In very ancient times, food also was left on the grave, the purpose

being the same: namely, that the departed should have a little food for the journey, since they might have some difficulty at first finding the necessary victuals in their new surroundings. Since the woodchucks and the raccoons probably took care of all such delicacies left on the graves, the Indians would believe that the departed had made good use of the food left there the night before.

Indian superstition made a bridge between religion and medicine, as we see in the institution of shamanism. The shaman, or "medicine man," combined the functions of priest or soothsayer, and physician. As an example of the former of these functions, we have the following story, which also explains the origin of a place-name:

It seems that once the Iroquois attacked an Abenaki village when all the warriors were absent, and, of course, killed most of the old Indians, women, and children. Upon their return to the village, the Abenaki warriors took stock of the situation, held a council, and decided to lay their case in the hands of a shaman and abide by his decision. After many incantations, adjurations, and magical songs, he said to those listening outside his magic tent: "I see our enemies: they are forty in number and are about ready to eat; they are on a small island. We will go after them immediately, and not one of them will escape."

Wdali payononi wlogwiwi, tadbogo menahanizek aoldidid Maguak.

*They arrived in the evening, exactly at the little island occupied by the Niga agua niswak Wobanakiak, Tmakwa ta Moskwas, Iroquois. And we are told that two Abenakis, Beaver and Muskrat, wbikagokamguinno li senojiwi menahanizek. Wzokwassino ompchi dived to the shore of the island. They remained submerged, while the maowimitsoldowak Maguak. Ni sogmo adoji idak: "Tcha, nguilotahon Iroquois were in the process of eating. And the chief said: "Tcha, I am going Wobanaki." Ni adoji mamhlawakad kchi wskan li senojiwi. to hit an Abenaki." And he hurled a big shin bone towards the shore. Nigaki na wawlitahon Moskwassa wdepek. Nitta Tmakwa And behold, it hit Moskwas right on the head. Immediately, Beaver wgedobanon widoba waji onda waowlakw. ducked his friend's head under the water so as not to attract attention. Ni kizi mziwi Maguak kaoldidid, ni agma adoji tedozek mziwi As soon as the Iroquois were all asleep, he punctured all their canoes, wigualal, ni sibiwi pedgi kamguid li widobaikok. Nitta Wobanakiak then dived back to his friends. At once the Abenakis got ready, but they*

wgizojoldino, kanwa momanni wbikagono nanni achakwak. Ni kizi wli *crossed very cautiously at dawn. After they had surrounded the Iroquois, wiwnikawodid Maguak, nitta w'moja migakomono: sibiwi mamhlawi immediately they began to fight: they shouted the war-cry and kwakwahomidid ta wmattaowo mziwi Maguak. Ni oji wnimakwhamno killed all the Iroquois. Then they stuck on poles all the heads of the Iroquois, mziwi Magua'wdepal, ni yulil wiwnigobadono menahanizek. Ni onka and these they planted all around the little island. And ever since this enni menahanis waji liwitozik "Wdepsek."* island has been called "Wdepsek" (Head's Island).

[This story has been recorded. Editor.]

This incident explains why one of the islands north of Grand Isle in Lake Champlain appears on the old maps as Head's Island, or, in French, Ile aux Têtes.

### III

The subject of illness and medicine should interest the layman as well as the medical profession. Since there is an estimated population of 20,000,000 Indians of pure or of mixed blood still living in North and South America, and since the Indian blood is continually becoming more widely diffused among the white people, we have a practical reason for inquiring into just what the Indian represents in illness and in health.

From an article entitled "Disease, Medicine, and Surgery among the American Aborigines" appearing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, November 12, 1932, we gather certain similarities and differences between the red and the white races. Under normal conditions, the American Indian had a markedly slower average pulse than that of the white and other races. Common opinion to the contrary, the Indian gives a lower record of muscular strength than does the white man. Furthermore, according to the medical profession, the Indian in general differs from the white man in the chemical properties of the blood. According to the anthropologist Coon in *The Story of Man*, the American Indians, barring a few exceptions, all belong to the recessive group o. These differences must needs have a bearing on his illnesses and the course they follow.

To a certain group of diseases the Indians were singularly immune, while to others they had a complete lack of immunity. Before the coming of Columbus, this country was apparently one of the most

healthful continents. Ethnologists and curators of museums, who have access to the skeletal remains of Indians of undoubtedly pre-Columbian dates, tell us that these remains are remarkably free from disease. And as you know, much can be predicated as to the health record of a person from a study of that person's skeletal remains. There was no tuberculosis. Cancer was rare. There was no plague, cholera, typhus, smallpox, measles, or leprosy. There was a greater scarcity than among the whites of many diseases of the skin and of most mental disorders. On the other hand, the following illnesses were comparatively frequent: digestive disorders, pneumonia, arthritis, and a certain affliction of the eyes which is called, I believe, trachoma. Even on our reservation, I have noticed that many of our Indians, as they grow older, are very much subject to eye trouble. Many lose one eye; some become even totally blind.

Some four-and-a-half centuries ago, the white man started bringing his diseases to this country. He brought in scourges to which the Indian lacked any immunity—to name only three, typhus, smallpox, and measles, which went through the native population like a wildfire. Syphilis and other venereal troubles brought from Europe also wrought great havoc. But the most insidious scourge of all was tuberculosis. At that time the contagious nature of the disease was unknown. Therefore, whole tribes became infected and great numbers perished. Of course, it must be admitted that many of the Indian customs are flagrantly unhygienic. As an example, take calumet-smoking on important occasions. They would take *one* calumet, which they would decorate with feathers, fur, porcupine quills and fine beadwork. In all treaty ceremonies, this calumet, called a ceremonial calumet, was passed around to everyone, even before the speeches were made and the problems discussed. The belief was that it made one think clearly and endowed the smoker with great wisdom. Perhaps it did. But it also was an important factor in spreading contagious diseases from mouth to mouth.

From the viewpoint of the white man, the discovery of America was one of the greatest events of the middle ages. From the viewpoint of the American Indian, it was the greatest calamity that ever befell a race, because, along with gunpowder, firewater, and other so-called benefits of civilization, the white man brought a multitude of infections against which the Indian was woefully helpless. For the diseases they knew they had various methods of treatment, but they had none for those unknown complaints brought in by the white man. Even as recently as 1925, one epidemic of measles killed off

most of the Ona or Foot Indians at the southernmost tip of South America. It was apparently their first contact with the white man. What we call minor ailments or pesky nuisances, like the common cold and measles, turn out to be major affairs and fatal to primitive peoples. It has been said, and with considerable truth, that germs and bacilli did a much better job than the cannon and gunpowder when it came to ridding this continent of the American Indian.

Their treatment of diseases was partly natural and partly supernatural. Disorders of which they knew the cause were considered rationally and treated in the same manner. In every tribe the older men and women knew scores of herbs and various mechanical and other means, which they used exactly as did your country grandmothers and grandfathers, simply, rationally, and often with marked success. They knew poisons, emetics, cathartics, tonics, and narcotics. They had antidotes. They employed massage, pressure, cauterization, bandaging, enemas, cutting, scraping, suturing, and the sweat bath. The latter was probably one of their most rational forms of treatment. It was used before all ceremonial occasions—also, after a battle or when a person just felt tired out. It was almost always used in the treatment of arthritis and rheumatism. It was generally taken in what they called a sweat lodge—a small conical hut made of wickerwork and covered with skins, blankets, bark or some other fabric. Stones would be heated in the center of the lodge, then cold water poured on them, generating steam, which, in turn, would induce profuse sweating.

But whenever the cause of a complaint was obscure or when all known modes of treatment had failed, then their minds turned to the supernatural. The ailment was then conceived as an affliction caused by some offended or evil spirit or deity, as the vengeful act of an enemy, or as the magic of a sorcerer. And since the causes of the disease were supernatural, the cure could be effected only through supernatural means. And this is where the shaman, or medicine man, came in. There would be several such in each larger tribe. They had their specialties, and they had differing reputations. Some became thoroughly imbued with their function and power. They grew into venerable healers who exerted a great and generally beneficial influence in the tribe, aside from healing. They tended to become also the preservers and transmitters of the tribe's sacred traditions.

On the other hand, many of the medicine men were of lesser caliber. They ranged all the way from the well-meaning but not highly competent to mere and not seldom mischievous impostors.

There comes to my mind one of these medicine men who achieved such success, not only on the St. Francis Reservation, but also in the outlying French communities that he decided to expand his territory. In fact, he actually went to the bustling city of Montreal and opened an office on St. Denis Street. He had noticed that there were many professional men on that street—doctors, dentists, chiropractors—so he decided he would have his office right there. He hung out his shingle, which read thus: "Abenaki Indian Medicine, Inc." I called on him one day. In the course of our conversation, one of his patients, a middle-aged man, came. The shaman said to me, "Why don't you go into the other room? This will take only a short while." Through the partly open curtains I could see from where I sat what went on in the consultation room. After the usual preliminaries, the patient said to the doctor, "I have a feeling that I have high blood pressure." Without "batting an eyelash," the shaman replied, "Is that so? Well, why don't I take your blood pressure right here and now?" So the white man sat on a straight-backed chair, and the Indian stood behind him, with his hands on the patient's shoulders. Then he instructed him to take a deep breath, exhale, and say "99." The white man complied repeatedly, and the Indian meanwhile pressed the patient's neck with his hand so as to give the impression that he could tell by the pressure on the neck just what the pressure was in the veins and arteries as the blood coursed up and down. After this had gone on for a few minutes, the shaman finally said, "Well, you do have a little high blood pressure, but it's nothing to worry about. I can give you some medicine that will correct that right away." The patient presently left, with an expression of satisfaction and relief, and—who knows?—it may be that the old spell of shamanism or the modern technique of suggestion had wrought a cure!

As I pointed out at the outset of my talk, it is sometimes difficult to get the Abenaki equivalent of our everyday expressions. In the case of "How do you do?" the Indians generally used "Paakuinogwzian," meaning, "You look brand new to me." Likewise, for their parting words they had not the exact translation of the white man's "Farewell" or "Good-bye"; but there was one expression which they invariably used whenever they had to separate to go off on their hunting expeditions, or when they had to bid their friends adieu. It was, "Wli nanawalmezi," meaning, "May you have good health." I can think of no better expression than to wish each and every one of you "Wli nanawalmezi!" or "Good health to you all!"