

Red Jacket

Otetiani (Always Ready) was born in Canoga near Cayuga Lake about 1758. Otetiani spent his childhood near Branchport on Keuka Lake. After hearing the famous orator Logan, of the Mingo tribe, speak he decided that he too would become a great speaker. While he was still a young man he became a 'runner', a person who delivered verbal messages, within the Iroquois Nation.

At the beginning of the American Revolution, Sagoyewatha (Keeper Awake), as he was now called, and others spoke to the tribal councils to remain neutral. In June 1777, the British army convinced the Seneca and other Iroquois tribes, to ally with them. His people respected his negotiation skills much more than his skills on the battlefield. Before the end of this war Sagoyewatha became known as Red Jacket. He received this name when a British Officer gave him a coat as an award for his fleetness as a messenger.

After the Revolution the US government set up several "treaties" concerning Iroquois lands. They restricted the use of the land by the Natives though the Iroquois Council never approved any of the treaties. During this time of debate and conflict, Chief Red Jacket of the Wolf clan, spoke for his people. He spoke against the giving up of native lands and against the unequal treatment of Native Americans. In 1792, George Washington presented him with a silver medal for his efforts at obtaining peace and understanding between the Seneca people and the Americans. (This medal was later given to Ely Parker when he became sachem). Red Jacket wore the medal for the rest of his life.

In 1794, the Treaty of Canandaigua was signed by the US government and leaders of the Iroquois Nation. This was the first treaty since the Revolution that was acknowledged by both parties and it helped to end many years of dispute over claim to the land. Timothy Pickering, an American Commissioner, presented Red Jacket with a second red jacket. The Treaty of Canandaigua cleared the title issue, but the American settlers wanted to move west without the 'threat of 'Indians"'. The Seneca wanted to remain on their ancestral land. In 1797, there was a meeting at Big Tree (Geneseo). Red Jacket again argued against the sale of land, but it soon became obvious that a sale would take place. Red Jacket then set about to get the largest amount of land possible set aside in reservations.

During the early 1800's Red Jacket became a spokesman for the traditional Seneca way of life. One famous speech in 1805 Red Jacket addressed a missionary who wanted to teach Christianity to the Seneca. He said the Seneca had a religion that taught them honesty, trust and other virtues. Since the arrival of the white man the Natives have been poisoned by alcohol and their lands have been taken away. If the missionary would teach his religion to the surrounding white settlers and their treatment of the Seneca improved then the Seneca would reconsider his offer.

The missionary debate continued until the start of the War of 1812. In part due to their treatment after the last war the Seneca people remained neutral. However, the reservation land was between the warring British and Americans and when the British invaded, the Seneca felt they had to defend their land. In 1814, Iroquois living in Canada were fighting Iroquois living in the US. Red Jacket devised a mutual withdrawal of Iroquois soldiers from the war. Red Jacket continued to be an active and vocal participant in any matter concerning his people.

He died in January 1830. His family buried him in the Buffalo Creek Missionary Cemetery. After the Buffalo Creek Reservation was sold, his remains were transferred to the Cattaraugus Reservation until they were finally reinterred at Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo. By the time of his death Red Jacket's speeches had been printed in textbooks, pamphlets, anthologies, magazines and broadsides, a fitting tribute to a great orator.