

INDIAN MAGNA CARTA WRIT IN WAMPUM BELTS

Six Nations Show Treaty Granting Them Independent Sovereignty as Long as Sun Shines

By HOWARD McLELLAN

SOME priceless wampum belts of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, hidden from white men's eyes since George Washington saw them at a treaty-making powwow, have been brought out of the "Long House" of Iroquois Council Fires on the Onondaga Indian reservation near Syracuse, N. Y., in an effort to ward off efforts to include the Indians in American citizenship. A group of eight belts on which are woven the hieroglyphic record of various treaties made by the Iroquois comprises the collection. One belt, made in 1550, is the only documentary evidence of the existence of the creation of the League of Iroquois Nations, a crude forerunner of the present League of Nations at Geneva.

It may seem odd that natives living in the midst of evidence of the opportunities that come with American citizenship should decline—actually fight off—a privilege for which most of the newcomers clamor.

But the aboriginal Iroquois, after centuries of association with the whites, still maintain a racial reverence for the political institutions of their forefathers and cling to their treaty rights to detachment and independence. Hundreds of haughty Iroquois, living on ancestral land in Western and Central New York, within a day's ride from Broadway, believe that to merge themselves in American citizenship would be an unforgivable insult to the Great Spirit of their elders. According to Indian interpretation, the records woven into the wampum belts preclude them from accepting our citizenship and guarantee their separateness forever.

Carried to Washington

In their official turns Peter Stuyvesant, Dutch Colonial Governor of New York; Sir William Johnson, British Colonial Indian Superintendent; George Clinton, first Governor after the outbreak of the Revolution, and George Washington saw the belts, after which they were put away with great ceremony. Three weeks ago Chief Jesse Lion, hereditary Keeper of the Wampum and Iroquois Prime Minister, was directed at a Great Council Fire to take them out, dust them off and carry them to Washington. Ten Iroquois braves escorted Lion and the belts to the Capitol, where their Indian meaning was read to the chiefs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

They laid particular emphasis on the Belt of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, made in 1794, which, according to their reading, gave to "the Six Iroquois Nations and their Indian friends living with them" the perpetual right to live on their reservations in independent sovereignty, "never to be disturbed."

This provision the conservative or pioneer Mohawks, Oneidas, Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas and Tuscaroras, who comprise the Six Nations, construed to mean that they never could be eligible for, nor be impressed into, American citizenship, no matter how many bills Congress passed, not excluding the bill enacted last Fall when citizenship was conferred upon all native Indians in the United States. The progressive or modern Iroquois, who have adopted the white man's ways, did not join the mission to Washington, but remained on their reservation farms and fruit groves.

The conservative delegation registered their interpretation of the ancient belts at Washington and that was about all. The Bureau of Indian Affairs questioned the interpre-

tation. Thereupon Chief Lion, who is proud of the political astuteness of his tribe, the Onondagas, and glories in the fact that General Washington called the Onondagas "the Romans of the New World," carried the belts to Cornell University to submit them to their white friend, Sa-Go-Ye-Watha, for interpretation. Sa-Go-Ye-Watha is better known on the Cornell campus as Dr. Erl A. Bates, Director of Indian Extension at the college, and a chief in eleven Indian tribes. The Iroquois call him Sa-Go-Ye-Watha because "he stirs them up to plow and sow."

When Dr. Bates reached a hand for the belts which the Wampum Keeper had brought for his examination, Chief Lion dug into the folds of his blue silk shirt and produced photographs of the belts, handing these instead to Dr. Bates with the suggestion that the photographs would make inspection easier—not that his native astuteness mistrusted his white friend, but because the Council at the Long House admonished him not to let the belts out of his possession. So Dr. Bates is studying photographic prints in lieu of the real wampum.

Deciphering the belts is a considerable undertaking. Each of the six larger ones contains hundreds of purple and white wampum pieces strung on buckskin. Each wampum piece has a meaning; every one must be counted and color and arrangement interpreted. The relation of one belt or token to the other, and to the whole, must be carefully studied to supply continuity to the record. The expert Iroquois wampum makers who shaped thick strips of clamshell into cylinders and then hollowed them with tiny and brittle stone drills were forty full moons—or more than three and a half years—fabricating each belt.

The League of Nations, or Iroquois Confederacy Belt, begun in 1550, is the most ancient of the belts and a prize from the standpoint of the archaeologist. Museums have offered Lion large sums for it—as much as \$50,000—which, of course, he refused. It records the world's first

League of Nations for peace established by Hiawatha, earliest chief of the Onondagas, whom tradition has raised to an Indian sainthood. Only five nations are represented on this belt. The wandering Tuscaroras had not yet returned to the Iroquois fold.

The Confederacy Belt was part of a collection used by the Iroquois in 1662 when their chieftains were sent to Norman's Kill, below Albany, to make covenant with the Dutch, who, to the Indians, represented "the whole Europeans." Two years later the Iroquois, using the same belt, made a treaty with the English, agreeing not to aid the New England Indians who had murdered a Mohawk chief.

The Belt of Law

The next oldest belt is the Belt of Law. Its two lines of purple wampum, running along the edge of the belt but separated by solid white wampum, established the law of the Indian and the law of the white man. One line represents white man's law; the other Indian's. They do not meet and are separated by "the rest of the world," or white wampum, indicating to the Indian that the two sets of law "must always run by themselves and never touch." The Iroquois say it guarantees their independence from the white man's world.

The original belt of the Six Nations, which announces the return of the lost Tuscaroras, was finished about 1714 and records that all previous treaties made by the Five Nations is binding upon the Sixth Nation. The Six Nations are presented by step-like purple wampum designs denoting the rise of each nation. At the lower left-hand corner of the belt is a similar design which appears incomplete. It represents the white man's nation just appearing on the Indians' horizon. Each step in the purple designs is linked together by a small bar as a token that each nation, tribe and family is bound to the other in the faithful observance of all covenants made by the Six Nations.

Of most importance to the pend-



Chief Jesse Lion, in Iroquois Costume, Holding a Sacred Wampum Belt of the Six Nations.

ing citizenship controversy are the Belt of Peace and Friendship and the Belt of the Central Council Fire of Six Nations. They were completed in 1795 to mark the ratification of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Thirteen States—the basic American treaty with the Iroquois by which the Indians ceded large territories in return for their independence and the right to live on their reservations and "hunt and fish over the entire country, that ceded as well as retained, as long as the sun shines, the grass grows green and water flows down hill"—the Iroquois idea of eternity.

The political significance of the Belt of the Central Council Fire is indicated by its almost solid purple. It does, in fact, record the most important political step ever taken

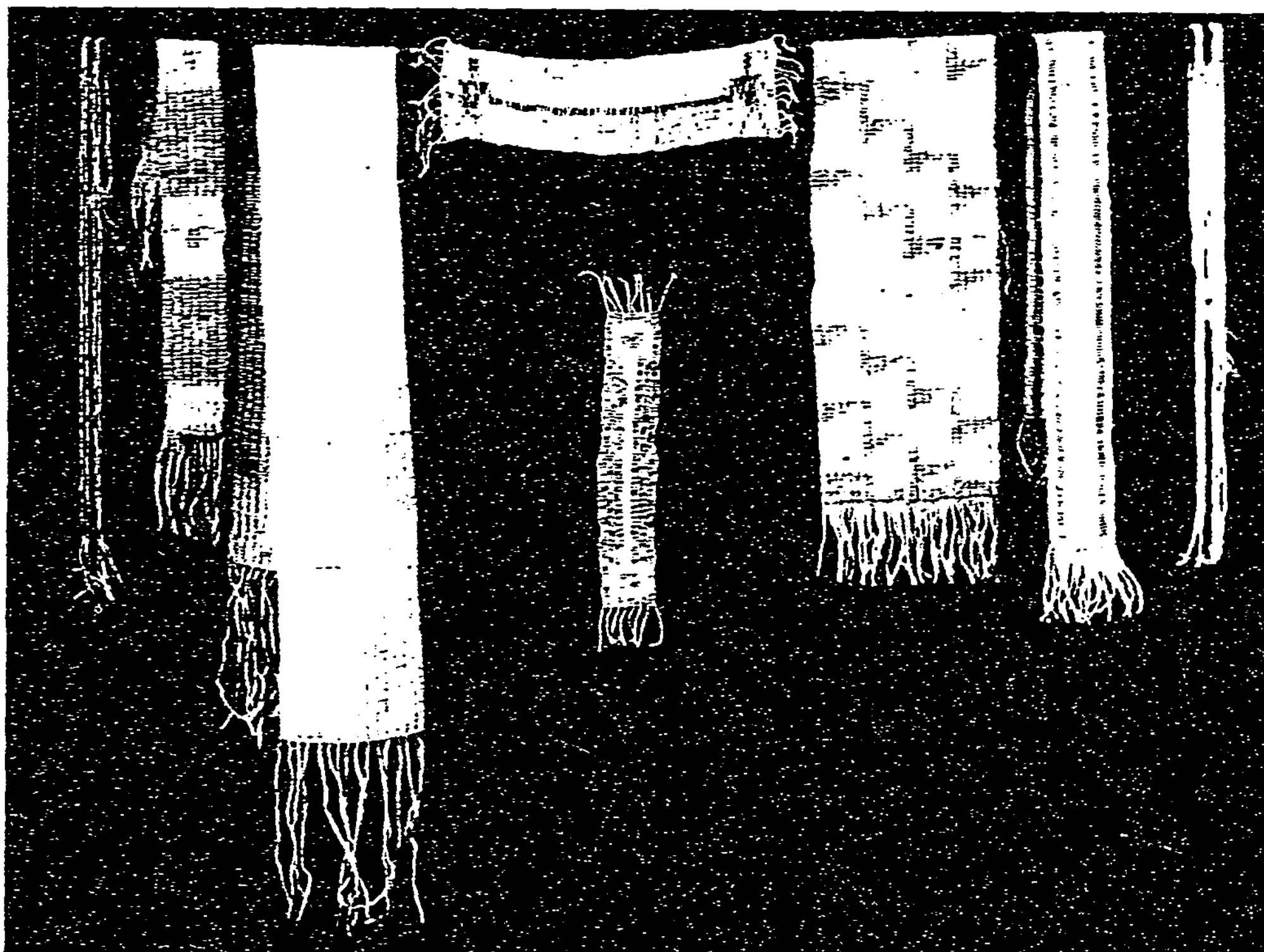
by the Six Nations. The old wampum makers worked overtime to get it ready. General Washington had foretold important events in the history of the new American nation, and by this belt the Six Nations hastened to cement its friendly relations with the new white Government known to the Iroquois as "the Great Council of Thirteen Fires." It symbolizes also the faith Iroquois politicians had in the infant nation and marks the disappearance of European nations from New England affairs.

Longest Belt of All

The longest belt, made entirely of white wampum, and known as the Land Belt, describes the treaty provision which gave the Iroquois nations 65,000 acres in upper New York State for reservations. The solid white wampum means that the white man has no place on the Indian lands, but that the Indian has rights to hunt and fish everywhere. To this day Iroquois nationals roam the hills in and out of their reservations regardless of the white man's game season restrictions or license requirements. That is their ancient right under the Land Belt. Furthermore, the belt signifies that the reservations are not a political part of the United States and that the Indians on them are not wards of the State nor of the Federal Government, but "free children of the Great White Spirit," as independent and separate from the jurisdiction of the United States as any European nation.

The two remaining belts in the group, called Condolence Belts, are strings rather than belts. Though smaller than the others and representing less labor, they are almost as important. Technically they are perhaps more important, for they constitute the credentials which empowered the Council Fire to sit; they represent the legal authority for their deliberations, and describe in what manner a new chief may be selected and how a dead one must be buried—rites of basic importance to the Six Nations.

It will be months before Dr. Bates of Cornell has finished his readings and translations of the political belts. More than three years were required to make each belt and it takes almost that long to read them—a task which only a patient red man could thoroughly enjoy.



Sacred Wampum Belts of the Iroquois.
Photos by J. P. Troy, Ithaca.