

AN HONORING: A CHIEF FOR THE PEOPLE CORBETT SUNDOWN OF THE SENEICAS



CORBETT SUNDOWN

Photography by Tim Johnson

Twice every year the skies darken over Seneca land at Tonawanda, as upwards of 50,000 Canada geese and thousands of ducks including mallards, blacks, ring-necks and others make their seasonal migratory flights. They find rest and protection in the bordering Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge and the Tonawanda and Oak Orchard Wildlife Management Areas. They spill onto the surrounding communities as well. To those who know the

motions and patterns of life during the spring and fall cycles here, midwinter is quite a contrast. The marsh waters that once moved gently with the wind, are now silent clearings frozen hard. The milkweeds and grasses that sway and breath during warmer weather, wait patiently, under snow, in anticipation of the bustling activities of the next season.

When we arrived at Tonawanda to see Chief Corbett Sundown, he was inside, sitting

patiently by a wood burning stove, separating beans from their hulls. Every house seems to have its own smell, and his house was no different. It reminded me of family visits to my Great Grandmothers home in Ohsweken, 20 years ago. There is nothing like the sweet earthy aroma of burning wood in a well used home. It brings forth a relaxing, comfortable mood.

As Corbett's hands continually worked the beans free, he quietly acknowledged our presence. With him was a soft spoken woman named Edna Parker. Corbett introduced her and expressed deep gratitude towards her. Since his wife became hospitalized and his heart troubles began, she has helped him to get by. "If it wasn't for her," he said with conviction, "I might not be here."

Like most traditional Iroquois leaders, Chief Sundown had humble beginnings. He was born on national land in Tonawanda, February 21, 1909. "That's what they said..." "I don't remember too much of it." He started working at the age of 10. His mother took him out of school and brought him to a farm where he could earn a little money to help support the family. The average day consisted of getting up early to milk cows and work in the barn, then driving a team of horses in the fields, feeding pigs and other animals, and doing various chores. His average day lasted 14 hours. "At 8:00 you get done," he said, "then you don't feel like going anywhere."

At age 15 he found work with a local construction company, building roads, houses and "just about anything".

In December 1929, the Wall Street Stock Market crashed, causing over-extended banks and industry dependent upon extravagant credit systems to close. The Great Depression slammed its doors and millions found themselves out of work and on the streets. For those not aligned with mainstream society the days were particularly long. "You couldn't even buy a job," said Corbett. "If

my mother didn't make baskets we'd of starved to death. She traded off for anything you could eat, apples, cabbage, meats, potatoes, and when they offered money she took it."

During those hard times improvisation was the key to survival. Life took on a new routine, where basic needs became primary concerns. Through necessity, bartering increased between the Tonawanda Senecas and local farmers and townspeople. Functional handcrafts like baskets, wooden bowls and implements were exchanged for the foods that helpful reservation gardens could not supply.

Slowly, the economy regained a footing. The burden was lightened as various relief programs and the Works Progress Administration offered part-time jobs. Corbett finally found work with the Georgia Pacific Gypsum Mine Company.

Just like everyone else, Chief Sundown had to earn his way in life. He worked shoulder to shoulder with other men, sometimes hunched on all fours, day in and day out for more than thirty years, getting the rock mined.

When he was the age of 26 or 27, his uncle, Chief Eli Billy, died. The police said it was suicide. Corbett says it was murder. "If your feet is touching the darn floor, how the hell you gonna hang." The vacancy of the chiefs title, Sa-geh-jo-wa, left by his uncle's death meant the clanmothers would have to choose someone to fill it. After a little while, Clanmother Abby Gordon came over to his place and told him to go to the longhouse. "She didn't even mention that I was the one delegated by the clanmothers to become a Chief," he said. "Otherwise I'd have ran the other way. Yes sir, I would have never gone near that longhouse." At the longhouse she grabbed his arm and put him out in the middle of the floor. "I didn't want to fight her because she's too small," Corbett told us with a chuckle. His Chief's title is a time honored position passed down through generations of Hawk Clan Senecas since the formation of the Iroquois Confederacy, long before Christopher Columbus.

Among the Houdenosaunee, the husked beans that Corbett let fall, one by one into a box on the floor, along with corn and squash, represent sustainers of life. Called the "three sisters," their significance to survival has paralleled the duties of traditional leadership through the ages. Like the subtle nuances of nature, chiefs are selected for personal traits which include moral integrity, honesty, national conviction and compassion. The selection process is handled by the women of the clan. And who better? They watch young men grow and judge the development of their personality and character. Those best suited to handle responsibility are given it.

Unlike the political process familiar to most Americans, Corbett's selection as a leader was not the result of years of ambition. Money, fame and power are not considered motivating factors within the Iroquois political structure. In fact, a Chief receives none of these. Instead, he inherits duties which are sometimes religious, sometimes political, sometimes civic, sometimes joyous, sometimes somber, but always significant.

As condoled Chief, Sa-geh-jo-wa, Corbett was told his responsibilities. The first thing they told him was to study his own constitution. When he finished studying the Constitution, he learned

how the Chiefs sit in council, how to speak in the longhouse, how to conduct weddings, funerals, and how to settle property disputes. "And anything that comes in from the outside onto the reservation that is not to benefit our people," said Corbett, "that is my responsibility too."

His duties have taken him to many different places while representing his people. "I've been to Albany, Washington and even Ottawa, because they don't know beans." Corbett cites that the biggest problem is other North American nations don't listen or live up to their treaty agreements. "They're always trying something," he told us.

Somewhere during the course of our conversation, Corbett finished his task of shucking hulls. As he emphasized each new issue he looked me directly in the eye and pointed his finger in my face. He talked about treaties. He talked the wampum belts currently in the New York State Museum in Albany. He talked about the Geneva conference of 1977, where he gave a moving oration of Ga-nyo-ha-nyo, The Thanksgiving Adress, for the Indian delegation from all the Americas. And he talked about the earth and some of the most important lessons he has learned in life.





While Corbett remains active in council, it's the younger chiefs who now travel the globe. Events change with time and today's Confederacy finds itself involved in peace talks in Bogota, Colombia, and in consultation with western Indian nations and indigenous peoples of northern Europe. But an elder chief's issue, the survival of the earth, was most in Corbett's mind, as he pushed aside the box of shelled beans.

"The mother earth is getting tired," said Corbett. "We're getting awful close to the prophecies that I've been told of." He went on to explain some of the things he's heard, which have come down orally through generations, that foretell of pending disaster. "I've seen almost everything that they say we're going to see. They said we were going to see something on the highway, and nothing pushing, nothing pulling. What are they? You're driving them. I'm driving them. And people are going to like it. I do.

"And you're going to see iron on the ground all over the world.

And there is going to be something on that iron with nothing pulling, nothing pushing... That's the railroad. And then you're going to see something that's flying up in the air. I get in that once in a while... Airplanes."

Corbett paused, took a deep breath, and sighed before continuing. "The things I hate to talk about are the prophecies about women. It says they're going to turn like an animal. Because the women are given the privilege to bear one child at a time. What do we see today? Like I say, they're going to turn like an animal. Mostly like dogs. Because they're the ones that will have a litter anywhere from 10 to 15 of them. Now we've gone as far as eight." He went on to explain the prophecy tells of how a pre-adolescent child and an old woman, who is past her fertile years, will both bear children.

Other prophecies of a wounded Earth included trees dying from the top down, of foul-tasting water, and of the diminished size of corn from the old days. "They used to tell me, years ago," said Corbett, "that they used to be able to eat all the bechnuts, all the hazelnuts and all the rest of the stuff. Now you don't even see them. When you tell people these things now, they don't believe you."

It is also the responsibility of a Chief to lead the people in the proper direction. There are some simple values and morals that he tries to get across to the people, young and old alike. "I try to teach people that we should have love for one another and respect for others. The first thing I heard when I was a kid was respect your elders, don't talk back."

Corbett suffered three heart attacks during August of 1984. Although he is doing fine now, he has to take life easier. However, he said the attacks cause him stress - not because he's afraid of dying, but because he worries about the people, about the kids. He worries about the senior citizens because, "nobody worries about the senior citizens." He's tried to instill within the kids about their treaty rights. He does the best he can, but still he worries.

Throughout Corbett's life many seasons have come and gone. And with each passing, bits of information have accumulated in his mind. From his natural perspective regarding the environment to his knowledge of traditional ceremonies and fluency in the Seneca language, he is a virtual resource library. The knowledge and advice that he and other elders can share, will be extremely valuable to future generations. Yet in today's society, we don't always realize the worth of things until they're gone. Chiefs, like the rest of us, need encouragement.

When it came time to leave we thanked Corbett for answering our questions. He nodded his head and remained seated, as we layered on clothing before embracing the cold of January. His countenance, however, seemed more reflective. Maybe our questions had brought to mind old memories. Perhaps he was thinking of how life will be in seven generations. I wasn't sure. But as we walked out of the room that was so comfortably heated by the wood stove, it occurred to me that our faces looked much the same.

Outside, the dormant solemnness of winter awaited the coming of migratory birds. They will arrive because they always have. And in thirteen full moons, the land will be covered with snow again. It's a wonderful system that functions with balance and purpose. Inside, we sat talking with Seneca Chief Corbett Sundown, a living example of another wonderful system. Over 40 years ago, the women of the hawk clan of the Seneca Nation made the correct choice. The installed into office a man who would have to work without pay, who would have to earn a living at another full-time job, and who would receive very little thanks from his own people. But they made the right choice. Corbett Sundown, Sa-geh-jo-wa, carries on where many others would have left off.

Tim Johnson

Tim Johnson is editor of the Turtle Quarterly, The newspaper of the Turtle Museum, Niagara Falls.