

Our Founding 'Feathers'

By Lynn Armitage

History was never my favorite subject in school. When you're young and your future is spread out in front of you like dazzling jewels, the last thing you want to focus on is the past.

Who can keep all those dates and bloody wars straight, anyway?

So imagine my surprise when I discovered in my daughter's last year in high school how fascinated I was by U.S. history. Like me, she battled boredom slogging through all the muck of the past and I thought, "What the hell? I'll tutor her." Together, we revisited the ghosts of this country's past as they were presented in her textbook: from early explorers and American revolutionaries, to suffragettes and presidents.

But this time in my journey through U.S. history so many years later—and more attuned with my Native heritage—something was notably missing. Where were the chapters on Native Americans, this country's first inhabitants? Sure, we made that iconic appearance as America's gracious first caterers at the original Thanksgiving. And of course Sacagawea got her respectful nod as Lewis and Clark's tour guide.

But what about that often overlooked, minor little detail about the influence that the Iroquois Nation's Great Law of Peace had on the drafting of our American Constitution? Where was our footnote in history—literally?

I am an Oneida, one of the six tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy. My Native grandmother taught me how to count to 10 in her Native language and passed on her homemade strawberry jam recipe. I also heard bits and pieces about her terrifying years in an Indian boarding school. But my grandmother never made mention of the Great Law of Peace, nor did her son, my father, until many years later when I was well into adulthood. And I

have to wonder: Did my grandmother even know about it? Did her Native parents pass on this amazing piece of Iroquoian heritage to her? Did my great-grandparents even know themselves about the important role their tribe played in shaping American history?

I am in no way an expert on the Great Law of Peace. But hoping to set the record straight for future generations of my family, I added my own footnote to my daughter's history lessons, in my own special way: "Honey, think of it this way: It's not really the Founding Fathers. It's more like the 'Founding FEATHERS.'" I'd like to say that I saw a light go on in her head, but I can't be sure.

According to Professor Bruce E. Johansen, the author of four books on the Great Law of Peace and a respected scholar on the subject, some progress is being made in rewriting American history. "(The Great Law of Peace) is being taught in many schools now as part of multicultural education," said the research professor in communication and Native American studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. "I have been approached by many teachers looking for curricula on the subject. That does not mean that everyone teaches it, but things have improved over 40 years ago."

As for all the critics who say that the Great Law of Peace had zero influence on the writing of the U.S. Constitution, Johansen told me: "Most of the critics have not studied the Great Law very well. That, and many of them overstate what we argue. They tend to believe that we are dismissing European influences. We are not doing that. We are arguing a role for Native (including Iroquois) precedents."

If you're an American history teacher who is enjoying the lazy summer and starting to plan your lessons for the next school year, I would suggest that you do your own homework first. Tell the whole story about the founding of this country. Learn more about America's first inhabitants and the positive influence that Natives had on the Founding Fathers, and pass that on to hungry minds.

You aren't just teaching history to future generations. You have the power to change it.

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