

M I C H A L Y N S T E E L E

A S C



CANANDAIGUA LAKE, © 2008 ALEX EMES

In the 1940s, young missionaries—dressed in suits and ties, wearing fedoras, and riding bicycles—from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived on the Cattaraugus Reservation of the Seneca Nation of Indians in western New York, about 120 miles west of Hill Cumorah.¹

ENDING THE

MOUNTAIN



A STORY OF THE PEOPLE
OF THE GREAT HILL



ur people are called the *Onondowahgah*—the People of the Great Hill²—and are the westernmost of the allied Indian nations of the Great Iroquois Confederacy. Remarkably, the Seneca people still occupy some of their aboriginal territory in New York state, despite centuries of outside pressure to remove or assimilate them. They are the Keepers of the Western Door in the metaphorical longhouse that overlays the homelands and symbolizes the fraternity of the Iroquois people. From their early days, the tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy were bound by a constitution and practiced a form of representative government.

The missionaries' arrival was met with curiosity, apprehension, and even opposition. An influential man in the community, Jacob Seneca, who was a member of the tribal council, advocated on their behalf, urging the tribe to allow them to stay and share their message. Among the first and few Seneca to embrace their message and be baptized in the creek running through the reservation were two of my great-grandmothers: Nina Tallchief Seneca (Jacob Seneca's wife) and Florence Huff Parker. Soon thereafter, my maternal grandmother, Norma Parker Seneca, and her children, including my mother, Carolyn Seneca Steele, were also baptized.

Seneca society is traditionally matrilineal. We take the clan identity of our mothers. Only those whose mothers are Seneca may enroll in the tribe. When we introduce ourselves, we often identify our mother and grandmothers: I am the daughter of Carolyn Seneca Steele and the granddaughter of Norma Parker Seneca. I am the great-granddaughter of Nina Tallchief Seneca and Florence Huff Parker. We belong to the Beaver Clan. My grandmother told me that this means that, like beavers, we are industrious and resourceful.

MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHERS: A LEGACY OF FAITH AND DETERMINATION

My great-grandmothers had few educational opportunities. Nina Tallchief Seneca, whom everyone called Grandma Jake, stood around five feet tall. She appears on the 1890 census as a three-year-old in her household. In 1898, at age 11, she went to the Carlisle Indian School, where she stayed for five years. Her course of study was sewing and laundry. Carlisle was an Indian boarding school founded by Richard Henry Pratt, whose avowed philosophy was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”³ The aim of the school—and Indian boarding schools like it throughout the country—was to strip the children of Indian identity, language, spiritual practices, and traditions in favor of forced assimilation.⁴

Nina was educated as a domestic servant and earned top marks for penmanship and behavior during her time at Carlisle. Certified as a “domestic,” she worked, like many of her schoolmates, as a maid for non-Indian families after her schooling. Although Richard Henry Pratt's goal may have been for Carlisle children to abandon all vestiges of tribal and reservation life, Nina returned to the Cattaraugus Reservation to raise a family. She spent

her working life cleaning, laundering, and cooking in large homes in Buffalo, New York, about 20 miles from her home.

Family members recall her scrupulous honesty. She was very troubled one evening when she realized she still had a safety pin belonging to her employer pinned to her apron. Nina was eager to get back early the next day to ensure that the safety pin would be returned to its owner, lest they think she had stolen it.

She also worked as a janitor at a factory, where she sold homemade baked goods to coworkers on her breaks. She faced untold hardships, outliving many of her 12 children, and was married to a man with a cruel streak. But she was quick to laugh. She loved working in her garden. She literally whistled as she worked around the house and was eager to bake for whoever came to her home. She worked hard every day of her life and did so with purpose, joy, and determination.

Florence Huff Parker's mother died when Florence was young, and as the only girl, she was tasked with caring for her large family of brothers. There was little time or opportunity for her to obtain a formal education. And yet I knew her to be an avid reader. She was instrumental to the movement on the reservation to ensure women could vote in tribal elections. Many times, I came into her room in my grandparents' home to find her reading. She had an extra-large-print Book of Mormon, which she read from each day through a large magnifying glass. She read the *Buffalo Evening News* cover-to-cover every evening. She cultivated an interest in fashionable dress and enjoyed going to the mall. In one of my last visits with her, I took her to sacrament meeting at the small congregation she had helped to pioneer, and she arose to bear her testimony, at age 105—physically weak but spiritually strong. She died on her 106th birthday.

Florence lost her first family—a husband and two small daughters—in a flu epidemic in the 1910s. She told me that the profound pain of the loss of her husband Clayton, whom she had married at age 16, and her daughters, 3-month-old Rosabell and 16-month-old Hattie, stayed with her and weighed on her soul even as she remarried and had seven additional children, including



Nina Tallchief Seneca

my grandmother, Norma Parker Seneca. She said she ultimately found peace about that loss as she read the Book of Mormon, and she pored over its pages to the end of her long life.

Florence also held out hope that her second husband, William Parker, would one day join the Church. She pressed clothes each Saturday night for him to wear to church the next day and hung them on the door. Week after week, year after year, they hung there, untouched. Finally, at about age 78 and at the invitation of a particular missionary, he put on the church clothes and went with her. He was baptized and ordained a deacon. He had a full head of white hair. My mother remembers him joining the other deacons to do his duty, passing the sacrament and concentrating to try to overcome the palsy pulsing through his hands as he grasped the trays.

My two great-grandmothers offered their faith and their gifts to build up the Church in their community. They baked pies and sold them from the back of a wagon. They made a traditional Seneca corn soup to raise money to help the Church acquire property on the reservation. Their efforts helped build a chapel in the 1950s. In an extraordinary agreement—because land is a scarce and precious resource on the small reservation—the Seneca Nation agreed to allow the Church to use a parcel in perpetuity for its building, for a cemetery, and for farming. In subsequent years, the congregation planted potatoes, corn, and an apple orchard behind the church for the Church's welfare program.

Like my grandmothers and mother before me, I worked in the field behind the church as a child harvesting potatoes and corn. In the 1970s we worked to raise funds for an expansion to the chapel by selling corn soup. We also staged a music-and-dance variety show (it was the 1970s after all)—in which I performed a very amateurish stand-up comedy



Florence Huff Parker

DRAWING BY MARY SAUER

MY GRANDPARENTS: THE STRENGTH AND VALUES OF A SENECA HERITAGE

routine—for neighboring communities to raise money for the chapel that now stands on the reservation.

As I grew up in the Cattaraugus congregation, my two great-grandmothers always sat together on the same pew. The children flocked to Grandma Jake in her place in the chapel because her purse was stocked with gum, which she gave out at the end of services.

I was around eight years old when she died. I sang a hymn to the tune of “Israel, Israel, God Is Calling” in the Seneca language at her funeral:

*Ga oh' da'swet, iis, ne jo'gweh
Iis, neh swai'wa neh'a goh;
Ga oh' da swet, he'ni gay'yah'
No'da'ni daos hah Je sus'
Ho deh'sah'oh, Ho deh'sah'oh
Neh a ji swa'yah da gwat.⁵*

My great-grandmothers now lie buried in the cemetery behind the chapel.

My grandmother Norma Parker Seneca remembers many times when the bus that was supposed to transport the children from the reservation to the local public schools passed them by without stopping. Eventually she went to a Quaker boarding school. There she was punished for speaking the Seneca language, but she was a lady with a resolute will, and she retained the language despite the school’s efforts to eradicate it.

She taught me that being resolute was a Seneca trait. She would observe, with some trace of defiance, that we, the Seneca people, were supposed to have been eliminated, or at least pushed out of New York and off our homelands. “But we are still here,” she would say and then smile.

Norma worked as an aide at a New York state hospital for the mentally ill. She observed the work of the nurses and decided that she would like to do the kind of work they were doing. In her 50s she got her GED and applied to a local community college. She graduated as an RN and was a skilled and dedicated nurse into her 70s, when cancer forced her to retire.

She was particularly sophisticated and savvy about money. She worked multiple jobs and built stellar credit so that she could finance the college education of her children. She cosigned with me to buy my first car and was eager for the salesman to do a credit check on her.

“Solid gold?” she asked with a big smile when he returned from doing the credit check.

“Solid gold!” he replied, and she beamed.

My grandfather Martin Seneca Sr. approached the local Baptist minister, Reverend Owl, and asked him to help arrange for his education when he was 12 years old. Reverend Owl enrolled Martin in Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and put him on a train. Bacone served Indian students from around the country. Martin stayed there, not returning home to Cattaraugus until he had completed an associate’s degree.

THE FAITH, LABORS, AND ATTRIBUTES OF MY SENECA FOREMOTHERS CULTIVATED SEEDS WHOSE FRUITS I CONTINUE TO HARVEST.

Martin was a man devoted to family and civic engagement. He volunteered to serve in World War II and was trained as a pilot. He served as the president of the Seneca Nation during an especially perilous time when the United States was seeking a policy of termination of tribes. He navigated the tribe through those difficult waters as well as through assaults on tribal sovereignty and territory. He served on the local school board, advocating for equality of educational opportunity for the reservation children served by the local schools.

My grandparents were determined advocates of education, seeking opportunities for themselves and insisting on opportunities for their children. They multiplied the opportunities they found and worked and saved to ensure that their children and grandchildren would have even greater opportunities.

My mother, Carolyn Seneca Steele, remembers walking home from her one-room schoolhouse with a friend during the first grade.

“I’m going to college!” she announced confidently to her friend.

“What’s that?” her friend asked.

“I don’t know. But my dad says I’m going,” she answered.

And so it was. My grandparents set the vision and expectation early that their children would go to college. As People of the Great Hill, they pointed the way their three children would need to climb, working to provide the means and then modeling the ideals and values that would allow their children to succeed. They instilled in their children the confident belief that they could do and be anything they wanted to do and be. And they understood that their heritage as Seneca people provided the strength and background to enable that journey.

MY MOTHER: THE JOURNEY UP THE MOUNTAIN

In 1957 my grandfather borrowed his uncle’s car so that the family, including my two great-grandmothers, could travel across the country to deliver my aunt Loretta Seneca Crane to the mountains of BYU. While they were in Utah, my two great-grandmothers attended the Salt Lake Temple, received their endowments, and were sealed to their deceased spouses.

Later, my uncle Martin Seneca Jr. and my mother followed to the mountains of BYU, where my mother met my father, Lynn Hoagland Steele. All my grandparents’ children graduated from BYU and went on to graduate from law school.

After they were married, my parents moved to the Cattaraugus Reservation, where I spent my childhood. When I was about 10 years old, in 1977, my mother applied to and was accepted to the BYU Law School. The circumstances of my father’s job meant that he could not move with us to Utah right away. But my mother, brother, sister, and I said goodbye to everyone in our home community and moved to Utah for my mother’s schooling.

My mother met with Professor Reese Hansen upon her arrival as a highly nontraditional student, and she remembers him being especially warm and welcoming. But within

a few days, she decided that it was not optimal for our family to live in Utah without our dad and that the Lord was directing her to change course. She returned a few days later to meet with Professor Hansen to tell him that she would not be attending after all. She found him to be a wise counselor, and he advised her to come back when she was ready.

Shortly after I turned 12 years old, in the fall of 1979, our whole family set off for the mountains of BYU, and my mother enrolled again at the BYU Law School.

My mother spent many evenings at the kitchen table reading her assignments, wearing big, blue, plastic ear muffs, and working amid the chaos of three children. She had a way of absorbing the burdens of her education so that we never shared them. I have often reflected on the courage and self-possession it took for her to turn around and go home, postponing her educational goals until the timing was right. I marvel at her courage to dream the dream in the first place and to have the strength to overcome the obstacles that could have derailed her endeavor. But she kept moving forward, even when the path was not just as she had envisioned it. In 1982 she became the first Native American woman to graduate from the BYU Law School.

My mother’s legal education has been immeasurably transformative and empowering for our family and has been a blessing to the lives of many others. Though she is now retired, she had a distinguished legal career serving not only many individuals but many Native American communities throughout



Norma Parker Seneca

Idaho, Nevada, and the Northwest. She has been a builder of institutions and an advocate for the rule of law and indigenous justice systems, serving as a tribal advocate, tribal prosecutor, and tribal judge. She has helped draft tribal codes and establish procedures to ensure due process in tribal institutions. She lived out the model envisioned by her parents to ascend the mountain of education to broaden the reach of her gifts.

Shortly before my mother's admission to the Law School, President Spencer W. Kimball set forth his prophetic view of the second century of Brigham Young University, urging all those engaged with BYU to lift their vision and lengthen their strides as they climb "the hill just before us" to gain "a glimpse of what lies beyond."⁶ President Kimball cautioned that the hills we must climb to become what he envisioned—the "educational Everest"⁷—are "higher than we think"⁸ but worthy of the effort.

Kevin J Worthen elaborated on the prophet's admonition in his inaugural address as BYU president, noting the ancient tradition of mountains as both literal and figurative places of learning, transformation, and revelation.⁹ President Worthen urged us to see the beautiful mountains surrounding the campus as perpetual symbols of the high aspirations attendant not only to the university endeavor and the special mission of BYU but to our individual hopes for growth and transformation.¹⁰

THE GIFTS OF MY DOUBLE HERITAGE

Many years and many miles later, I followed in my mother's footsteps by becoming an attorney. I worked in Washington, DC, with a law firm dedicated to representing Indian tribal clients and for the Department of Justice enforcing civil rights laws. I was also able to work on the staff of the assistant secretary for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Larry Echo Hawk, at the Department of the Interior until his call as a General Authority Seventy.

In 2012 I traveled back to the Wasatch Mountains to join the faculty of the BYU Law School. My mother and I have both been fortunate that our journey from our small home reservation has brought us to BYU and BYU Law. We have both been blessed by wise mentors here; we not only have found the blessings of education here but have also been lifted to spiritual and intellectual vistas unique to BYU.

I have been sometimes dismayed by the suggestion—both implied and express, intended no doubt in good faith—that my educational and professional achievements have come in

spite of my background as a Native American woman and whatever obstacles that may represent in observers' minds. In truth, my Seneca heritage, like my Latter-day Saint pioneer heritage through my father, is the source of any personal and professional successes that have come my way. In particular, my foremothers marked the path. My experience with Seneca culture, as observed in my mother and grandmothers and others in the community, has fitted me to meet the opportunities that have come to me and has empowered me to address the challenges that still come.

I am also sometimes asked, by both those within and without the Church, how it is that I “reconcile” my identity as a Native American woman—a Seneca—with my identity as a Latter-day Saint. The question really fails to apprehend the complexity of identity. We are all many things at once. For example, I am an American, a woman, an attorney, a daughter, a friend, an aunt, a Seneca, a Latter-day Saint, a descendant of pioneers, and many other things too. These component parts all meet in me, just as we each play many roles and integrate backgrounds and identities. But, in particular, my faith and my identity as a member of the Church is in no small part a gift of my Seneca heritage from those who came before.

The faith, labors, and attributes of my Seneca foremothers cultivated seeds whose fruits I continue to harvest. One attribute most prominent for me in each of those who came before is generosity. They were individuals with extraordinary generosity of heart and mind. My grandmother Norma was especially generous with sincere praise and with goodwill and cheer. She delighted in the good things that happened to others, multiplying her own joys by the joys of others. In her, I see the need that to truly be prepared to “mourn with those that mourn” (Mosiah 18:9), we must also be prepared to rejoice with those who rejoice—to enjoy their triumphs and good fortune without reserve. To be one of the People of the Great Hill, in my experience, is to be a person of great generosity. This includes a willingness to forgive generously and to offer to others the grace we seek for ourselves. It is an essential attribute within families and communities that I have seen modeled in those who came before me.

My grandmother Norma told me often of how her father, William Parker, was determined to let offenses go. She said when she went to him with complaints of injustices she had suffered, he would say mildly, “Just never mind about it.”

In my own experience, I have at times gone to my mother seeking her empathy and outrage about slights and injustices I perceived myself to have suffered. Her counsel has consistently been to choose grace, advising me to “throw a blanket of mercy” over the situation.

Another attribute I seek to cultivate from these women is resilience. They each faced unimaginable hardship and loss without ever losing faith, hope, or charity. Rather than allowing the tragedies and injustices of their lives to rob them of joy, they chose grace. They also each modeled lives of work. They found dignity and purpose in working hard—like beavers—to arrange for comfortable homes and to provide for the needs of their families. As much as anything else, that commitment to work hard has laid the foundation for those of us who have followed.

Finally, I seek to emulate the courage of these women, who never let life's difficulties frighten them away from learning, growing, and living fully. They suffered setbacks. They suffered great loss. But they did not shy away from the risks of leaving familiar valleys to make the tough climbs for new vistas.

The vision and impulse to look to the mountains, to ascend great hills, to overcome obstacles, and to develop one's gifts and seek education as preparation for service are all gifts from both my association with BYU and Seneca tradition. These gifts from the Seneca tradition are part of what I seek to offer in my current service to BYU. At least for me, the dual identities of being a member of the Seneca Nation and of the Church have not only peacefully coexisted, they are a kind of double heritage.

President Kimball identified part of the BYU mission as claiming our double heritage, by which he meant seeking excellence in secular learning while seeking literacy “in the language of spiritual things.”¹¹ BYU has helped me to claim that double heritage while

multiplying the gifts of my cultural inheritance and has taught me to be receptive to the abundance and diversity of gifts each student and colleague brings.

Now a member of the BYU Law faculty, I have the opportunity, hard won by those who came before me, to divide those gifts with my students and my colleagues. As I look to the mountains surrounding BYU, I seek for an elevated vision and the aspiration to excellence described by President Worthen and President Kimball and embodied at BYU Law. I do so uplifted and empowered by the dreams and determination of the People of the Great Hill. [cm](#)

NOTES

- 1 These early-20th-century missionaries were not the first to visit the Cattaraugus Reservation and the Seneca people. At the second general conference of the Church in September 1830, with Church membership totaling 62 people, the Lord instructed Joseph Smith to call Oliver Cowdery to lead a mission “unto the Lamanites” (D&C 28:8). Oliver Cowdery was accompanied by Peter Whitmer Jr., Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson. Parley P. Pratt recorded in his autobiography: “After traveling for some days we called on an Indian nation at or near Buffalo; and spent part of a day with them, instructing them in the knowledge of the record of their forefathers. We were kindly received, and much interest was manifested by them on hearing this news. We made a present of two copies of the Book of Mormon to certain of them who could read, and repaired to Buffalo” (*The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, 3d ed., at 47).
- 2 See “The League of Nations,” Haudenosaunee Confederacy, haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/leagueofnations.html.
- 3 Quoted in Lorraine Hale, *Native American Education: A Reference Handbook* (2001), at 22.
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 John W. Sanborn, *Hymnal in the Seneca Language* (1892), at 23.
- 6 Spencer W. Kimball, “Second Century Address,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1976), Article 2, at 454.
- 7 *Id.* at 445.
- 8 *Id.* at 455.
- 9 See Kevin J. Worthen, “Enlightened, Uplifted, and Changed,” Sept. 9, 2014, speeches.byu.edu/talks/kevin-j-worthen_enlightened-uplifted-changed.
- 10 See *id.*
- 11 Kimball, *supra* note 6, at 446.