The Nation of the Cat.

Read before Chautauqua County Historical Society by Walter Edsam of Jamestown N.Y.

Oct. 1-1927 3 O'clock

96-7-62
THE NATION OF THE CAT.

Long before the white man came here, the site of the County of Chautauqua lay within the territory of the Eries - the Nation of the Cat. That nation of Indians disappeared from the face of the earth in the year 1656 - just at the dawn of history in this part of the world. No records of their past have ever been found. Little even of tradition concerning them has been handed down to us. It is not certain that any white man ever visited their country while they existed as a nation. A strange, adventurous Frenchman, named Stephen Brulé may have done so, but his story is almost as deeply hidden in mystery and tragedy as that of the Cat Nation itself.

The first white settlers in Chautauqua County found evidences that these people once had lived here, had loved our hills and valleys, forests and streams, lakes and rivers even as we love them to-day. The sites of their villages and forts and cultivated fields could be distinguished, although there had grown over them trees that appeared to be about one hundred fifty years old. These portions of the forest were different from the remainder of the trees that covered the entire county. Limbs grew lower upon the trunks than upon the trunks of the older trees indicating that these younger trees had grown in the clearing. In such
places the remains of the forts, ash heaps, and pottery, stone axes, arrowheads and other implements could be found. Here and there human skeletons and heaps of human bones were dug up. Close observers have found proof of the abruptness with which their occupation here came to an end.

The historian, Francis Parkman, tells us that little is known about the Nation of the Cat, except the fact of its existence. We do, however, catch a glimpse of it in the very hour of its destruction by looking into a most remarkable collection of letters and reports known as the Relations of the Jesuits. It may seem strange that the earliest mention in writing of the inhabitants of our county should be found, not in English records nor Dutch records but in some musty, worm-eaten bound volumes that have been preserved for centuries in the city of Paris. It is well known that before the outbreak of the French and Indian War, DeGeloron, a French officer, with a company of soldiers, Indians and Canadians, came to the harbor of Barcolona in 1749 and thence over the portage trail to Chautauqua Lake. They journeyed down the lake and the outlet, Cassadaga Creek, the Conewango and the Allegheny rivers to the site of the city of Pittsburg, depositing at certain places leaden plates upon which were engraved words indicating that all of this region was being claimed for the king of France. What is now Chautauqua County had from the time of Samuel de Champlain been
claimed as a part of New France.

Champlain, you remember, and explored the St. Lawrence River and founded Quebec in 1608. The next year Henry Hudson, in his ship the Halfmoon, sailed up the river that bears his name. In that same year of 1609, Champlain also came within the boundaries of what is now the State of New York. He ascended the St. Lawrence and Richelieu Rivers and rode in an Indian canoe upon the waters of the lake that bears his name. Both of these explorers entered our state over the highways nature had provided. They were the only highways that then existed. There were other rivers that rose within the state but they were not known to white men. It would have been possible to go up the Delaware, the Susquehanna or even the Mississippi and arrive within the state but the only routes then known to the white man were the ones followed by Hudson and Champlain. Travel by land was obstructed by mountains and trackless forests. As Hudson came up the river, mountains lay on either side of him and the same was true of Champlain as he moved up Lake Champlain. The Berkshire Hills and the Green Mountains cut off the New England coast from all communication with the valley of the Hudson. The Catskills and the Adirondacks formed a barrier to the west except where the Mohawk River flowed from what is now the central part of our state toward the east to join the Hudson.

This peculiar geographical location of our state on the
divide between the St. Lawrence river system at the north and the other great river systems leading to the south has had much to do with making it the Empire State. Centuries before the white man had learned to know the wealth and love the varied scenery of our state, another people had appreciated the advantages of the location in the central part of the state that could be reached from the east only by ascending the valley of the Mohawk. If one came from the St. Lawrence by way of Lake Champlain and Lake George or up the Hudson, his only route to the west lay along the valley of the Mohawk. There in that valley he would find an Indian nation - the Mohawks, one of the members of a confederacy of five nations. These Mohawks were the guardians of the eastern gate of that confederacy. West of them in what is now known as the finger lake region lived the other four nations. Their names have been preserved in connection with the lakes near which they lived. From east to west they were the Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas. The Senecas were the guardians of the western gate and their lands extended to the valley of the Genesee River. Beyond them to the west lived the Nation of the Cat. They occupied the region lying between Lake Erie on the north, the Genesee River at the east, the Allegheny River at the south and the eastern part of what is now the State of Ohio.

Hidden away behind this Iroquois confederacy of Indians, the Cat Nation did not come in contact with the white man.
Utterly destroyed in 1656, they never became a part of the Indian problem with which our first settlers had to deal.

The Iroquois Confederacy, or rather the League of the United Households had been organized before Columbus discovered America - about 1450. It was formed for the purpose of establishing peace among Indians of the Huron-Iroquois family. The organizer was Hiawatha, an Onondaga Indian - not Longfellow's hero. He was sincere in his desire for the establishment of peace and was successful within the league. All of those nations had been constantly fighting against each other before the formation of the confederacy, but Hiawatha's ingenious system brought an end to such wars. He intended to include all Huron-Iroquois nations in the league, but that could not be done. The Cat Nation belonged to the Huron-Iroquois family but not to the League. The same was true of the Neutral Nation that occupied both sides of the Niagara River, the Hurons that lived between Lake Huron and Lake Simcoe, the Tobacco Nation farther west in Canada and the Andastes on the Susquehanna River. All these became enemies of the league. Chief among the enemies of the league were the Hurons who outnumbered the Iroquois. For some time the Hurons were victorious, but the tide was turning against them when Champlain came to Quebec. He first came in contact with the Algonquin Indians who lived along the St. Lawrence River. They feared and hated the Iroquois Confederacy and were almost constantly at war with the Mohawks.
It was these Algonquins who persuaded Champlain to join one of their war parties in an attack upon the Mohawks. That was the occasion of his first visit to Lake Champlain. He and two other French soldiers with their guns were regarded as powerful allies. Champlain wore a coat of mail and was called the man of the iron breast. A battle was fought and the firearms proved to be too much for the nerves of the Mohawks. The victory, however, was dearly bought for it won for the French the undying hatred of the fiercest, boldest, most politic and most ambitious savages in America. From that day the Iroquois Confederacy was almost constantly at war with the French and Algonquins. The French thought they had found a powerful ally when the Hurons were made their friends but the hatred of the Iroquois was only made more bitter. After a few years they attacked and destroyed the Huron villages and scattered the Huron people in all directions. The French and Algonquins suffered constantly from the raids of the Iroquois until one day there appeared unexpectedly at Quebec a delegation of Onondaga Indians proposing a truce. One of the Indian orators stated that they desired peace with the French but that the earth was trembling and quaking in the direction of the Nation of the Cat. He asked that Jesuit priests be sent by the French as missionaries to the Iroquois - to show them the way to heaven.

The Jesuit priests knew that the Iroquois had before captured, tortured, killed and eaten such missionaries but
Simon Le Moyne was brave enough to respond to this call. He visited the Onondagas in 1654 and it is from his story and the stories of those who followed him that we learn about the destruction of the Eries.

It is perfectly clear that the Nation of the Cat was so powerful and its warriors so brave and fierce that even the Iroquois Confederacy hesitated to attack them.

Father Le Moyne met the leaders of the Onondagas at their chief village. He made them a long speech and gave them many presents. Then they made speeches and gave him presents. Soon after he arrived the report came that three Onondaga hunters had been killed by the Eries. That meant that a war was kindled in that direction. He gave a hatchet to each of the Iroquois Nations to be used in that new war. Another one of his gifts was to renew the courage of one of the nations that had lost some of their number in that war. Still another gift was to wipe away the tears of all the young warriors caused by the death of their great captain Annenraes who had been taken captive by the Cat Nation not long before.

On the 14th of August, 1654, a young captain, chief of a levy of eighteen hundred men who were to set out as soon as possible to prosecute the war against the Cat Nation begged Le Moyne to baptize him. The priest had some doubts about his sincerity but was persuaded by his eloquence and finally baptized him and gave him the name Jean Baptisti.

The Nation of the Cat hoped to avoid war with the Iroquois
and sent thirty ambassadors to the chief village of the Senecas. Unfortunately, a quarrel arose between one of the ambassadors and a Seneca Indian. The Seneca was killed. His nation retaliated and nearly all of the Erie ambassadors were killed. Five or six escaped and returned to the Cat Nation. A war party of Eries then attacked a Seneca village and burned it, killing and capturing many of the inhabitants. These difficulties with the Senecas did not necessarily mean war for the Eries with all the nations of the confederacy but there had been trouble with the Onondagas as well. Finally there fell into the hands of the Eries a much respected chieftain of the Onondagas, Annenraes by name. The leaders of the Cat Nation realized that war would follow if they killed or tortured Annenraes. In accordance with Indian custom, they gave him to an Erie woman expecting that she would accept him as a brother. She would not accept him and ordered that he be burned at the stake. The chiefs protested but she insisted and again, according to custom, she had her way. As the Onondaga warrior was being consumed by the fire, he warned the Eries that they were burning their own bodies as well as his.

This was the provocation for the sending out of the war party led by the young Onondaga chief, Jean Baptiste. With his eighteen hundred warriors he invaded the country of the Nation of the Cat. He seems to have traveled along the shore of Lake Erie or some other water course. The people of the Cat Nation deserted their villages as he approached.
and sought shelter in some stronghold that lay further west. Just where the battle was fought no one knows but at last the Eries made a stand at a place called Rique. Jean Baptiste approached their fort and called to them demanding that they surrender and warning them that they would be beaten because the Master of Life fought on the side of the Iroquois. The Eries scoffed at the idea and asked, "Who is the master of life?!" Our bows and arrows are the masters of life." At first the assailants were driven back. Then they approached with their canoes held before them to protect them from the poisoned arrows of the Eries. The canoes were placed against the palisades and the Iroquois climbed over by means of the crosspieces. A terrible slaughter took place. Many of the Iroquois were killed and wounded. It was a long time before they could complete burying their own dead and caring for their wounded but the Nation of the Cat was utterly destroyed. Men, women and children were slain. A few escaped to join other nations and some were carried captive to the land of the Iroquois. A tradition among the victors is authority for the statement that on the night after the battle a thousand fires were burning in the land of the Nation of the Cat and that at every one of them an Erie was burning at the stake.

The brave and warlike Nation of the Cat thus disappeared from the face of the earth - victims of the insatiable ambition of the great confederacy that had previously destroyed the Hurons and the Neutrals and that subsequently
overcame the Andastes and finally completely blocked the plan of the French for the establishment of New France on the American Continent.