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# The Erie Indians

About a little known tribe of Indians that once existed.

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The French called the Erie Indians “The Nation of Cat” because of the cat pelts the Erie Indians used to make blankets. The Erie Indians belonged to the Huron Iroquois branch. The name “Erie” is derived from the word Erielhonan, a word that means, “ long tail” in the language of the Iroquois.

In New York State they occupied areas south and east of Lake Erie. In larger context their territory covered south from Lake Erie to the Ohio River and east to the lands along the east bank of the Allegheny River. Also their territory covered the west line of the Genesee River and on a line running eastward from the head of the Niagara River to the west watershed of Lake Erie. Also their territory reached to The Miami River in Ohio.

In seventh grade I learned about the Erie Indians. The information I learned was scant. I never knew they once occupied areas of Chautauqua County, NY where I reside. I found this information when I was casually flipping through books of Chautauqua County history.

The Erie Indians were first mentioned in 1615 when Etienne Brule met a group of Erie near Niagara Falls. Knowledge of the Erie Indians comes partly from records by French Jesuits. In The Jesuit Relations there are references to the Erie Indians beginning in the 1640’s. The Jesuits LeMoyne, LeMercier, DuQwen, Chaumonot and Dublan wrote the Jesuit Relations.

At that time the Erie Indians had an alliance with the Neutrals and the Wenro Indians. It is possible that they were also allied with the Susquehannock Indians. The Susquehannock traded in European goods. Because the Erie Indians traded with the Susquehannock they may have received some European weapons. The Susquehannock gave the Erie Indians a limited supply of weapons. The Huron and Neutral tribes made similar precautions.

For many years the Erie Indians lived in peace and security without the fear of being attacked in the open. Their settlements were scattered over a large area. When war, sickness or starvation came, the Erie Indians deemed it was dangerous to live in the open. They built villages with sometimes as few as ten buildings or as many as 140 buildings. The Erie Indians had many towns and villages within several divisions. They cultivated the soil and spoke a language resembling that of the Huron Indians. Through the Jesuits records it was stated that the Erie Indians usually selected a site for occupation on the shore of a lake

or point of land between a stream and its branch.

The women made earthen pots for cooking and wove rush mats. They also spun twine from hemp of which they made mats by rolling them on their thighs. They pounded corn with stone pestles in wooden mortars. The Erie Indians used stone axes, spears, arrowheads and bones for fishhooks.

The main crops were corn, beans and squash. Following a harvest the Erie Indians would embark on a winter hunt. They made clothes from the skins of animal such as deer and beaver. The skins were converted into leather. Some of the skins had the hair left on them so the hairy side could be worn next to the body in winter for warmth. In warm weather they would wear skins with the hair outward. Sometimes they would make coats out of the feathers of turkeys. They made shoes of deerskins.

Sometimes the Erie Indians built palisades of three concentric rows lined inside with bark above bark. They would construct standing places on these palisades for defenders. They had gutters to carry water to put out fires started by assailants.

The palisades or stockades of the Erie Indians were made of wooden stakes from tree trunks that were between fifteen to thirty feet high. Each stake was placed very close to the next one and each was sharpened to a fine point. Sometimes they built the stockades extra thick. They would build three rows of stakes and planted the middle row straight up and down. They crossed and interlaced the other stakes.

Fire was the only way to destroy an Erie stockade. Sometimes fire would not succeed because each stockade was equipped with firefighting equipment. Inside a stockade wall about five feet from the ground was a top platform lashed to upright supports with rope made from inner fibers of a basswood tree. On this platform they kept clay or leather pots of water to put out the fires of burning arrows. They also kept a supply of stones on the platform to throw at assailants.

The Erie Indians dug a trench about four or six feet deep all around a village. The earth was removed and piled next to the village to make a wall of earth ten to twelve feet high. On top of this wall they placed a thick layer of brambles and briars. The noted warriors of the Erie Indians fought with poisoned arrows.

The Erie Indians built funeral mounds. Records of the Erie Indians' funeral practices come mainly from Brabeaf a Jesuit who resided for years among the Erie Indians. According to Brabeaf when an Erie Indian died the body was first placed on a scaffold. The tribe would hold a crying ceremony.

They also sang and danced around a fire. This ceremony lasted five days. When the ceremony started, five knots were tied in a piece of milkweed. Each day of the ceremony they would untie one knot. A great funeral ceremony was held at intervals of every ten to twelve years. The remaining flesh was removed from corpses and the bones of other dead were gathered. All the Erie Indians usually participated in this ceremony. The corpses and bones were arranged in order of the largest houses of different villages.

Amid weeping and howling, bones and corpses were born upon litters on the shoulders of the Indians. A great concourse was assembled from different villages at the principal town to participate in funeral games. Houses were filled to overflowing and some gathered around campfires in the woods. Funeral gifts, bones and corpses were suspended from cross poles over graves. A deceased person was first interred in a single grave. Every fifteen years single graves were dug up and the bones reburied in common graves. Much dancing and feasting accompanied this event.

In 1635 a war with an unknown Algonquian enemy forced the Erie Indians to abandon some of their villages. The alliance with the Neutrals ended when the Erie refused to support the Neutrals in war. In 1637 the Erie Indians were weakened by epidemics including smallpox.

The rupture of relations between the Erie and the Iroquois started in 1651. The Erie accepted thousands of Huron and Neutrals refugees from the war with the Iroquois. The Erie refused to give up the refugees to the Iroquois. The Iroquois destroyed a palisade of the Erie Indians. The Erie Indians then burned a Seneca town. An Iroquois war party returning from the region of The Great Lakes were killed by a rear guard of eighty Erie men. Erie scouts came to one of the Iroquois towns and captured Annearaes one of the greatest warriors of the Iroquois at that time.

The Erie received delegates from a northern nation of Indians with whom the Iroquois were at war. Yagowamea a female ruler of the Erie at the Niagara Ridge betrayed a Seneca deputation to the Iroquois' enemies of the north.

Efforts of peace were made. The Erie sent a deputation of their thirty principal men to the Seneca to confirm a peace treaty. A Seneca was killed in a casual fight with an Erie Indian. The Seneca killed thirty Erie ambassadors. The Erie captured a famous Onondaga chief. They gave him to the sister of one of the murdered Erie ambassadors. She had the choice to receive him as her brother or have him put to death. She chose death for the Onondaga chief. The prisoner was clothed in fine garments and there was a feast. The prisoner was assured he would be sent back to his people. He was taken to the sister's house, stripped of his clothes and then killed. Before he died he warned that the entire nation of Erie would be burned and the earth would be avenged of his death.

In June of 1654 the Onondaga in central New York told the French they were planning to lead an army against the Erie Indians. This was in retaliation for the Erie Indians burning of a Seneca Indian village and the massacre of an Onondaga war party. In August or September of 1654, 1200 Onondaga and 700 Mohawk entered the Erie territory. They burned villages and killed many Erie and also took captives. During the winter the Onondaga talked about further attack on the Erie for the spring of 1655. In the fall of 1655 the Onondaga requested use of soldiers and weapons from the French.

1200-1800 Iroquois warriors moved into Erie territory. They embarked in canoes upon Lake Erie and coasted along the shore of Chautauqua Lake. They found the Erie gathered in a fortified position in a stockade. Two Iroquois chiefs dressed like French advanced and called on the Erie Indians within the stockade to surrender. Their request was denied. The poisoned arrows of the Erie repelled the first assault of the Iroquois. In a renewed assault the Iroquois used canoes as shields and ladders to scale the stockade. In the last struggle mostly Erie women and children were slain. The survivors were driven into the fields and forests. The remaining Erie villages were abandoned. The survivors were later captured by the Seneca and intermarried with them.

In 1680 the last small group of Erie Indians surrendered to the Iroquois in southern Pennsylvania. After 1655-1656 the Erie Indians no longer existed as a nation. There were indications that small groups may have survived. French map makers for the next fifty years continued to place The Nation of Cat on maps. On the maps The Nation of Cat was indicated to still occupy lands south and west of the Iroquois.

In 1656 an unknown tribe fleeing from the Iroquois entered the area of James River in Virginia. They built a large fortified village. The local Powhatan tribes called them the Ricahecrian. A combined English and Powhatan force tried to expel these strangers but were defeated. The Ricahecrian abandoned their village and disappeared. The name Ricahecrian means "from beyond the mountains." Given the date of 1656 that coincides with the end of the war between the Erie and the Iroquois, the Ricahecrian may have been a group of Erie. Where did the Ricahecrian flee? They may have continued South Carolina. During the 1670's a mystery tribe called the Westo appeared in the area. They built a fortified village. The local Siouan Tribes feared them. The English were told that the Westo were cannibals. The colonists and the Shawnee another new arrival destroyed the Westo in 1680.

Because the surviving Erie Indians intermarried with the Seneca, the ancestral stock of some of today's Seneca Indians may have come from the Erie Indians. There is a group of Seneca Indians in Oklahoma that claim they are descended from the Erie nation.

There are many funeral mounds and former occupations of the Erie Indians located in Chautauqua County. The Erie and Proto Erie Indians inhabited the region as early as 5000 B.C. A later influx of Indians associated with the Hopewell culture of Ohio and Illinois moved to the region around 100-200 A.D. They found their way by traveling northeast by the Ohio and Allegheny rivers to Conewango Creek and then Chautauqua Lake.

The remains, burials and former occupations of the Erie Indians have been found in the following areas in Chautauqua County. There is much more information than what I will state here. This article would become too long if I compiled all the data. The following information is some of the main sites of the most importance.

- 1) A burial mound in the Town of Gerry. Twenty-five skeletons were found among pestles, mortars and other stone implements.
- 2) In Ripley at the elevation known as Dewey Knoll graves were found on the south and west slopes.
- 3) The Old Indian Fort located on a farm then owned by Kenneth G. Lawrence by the village of Ellington. Professor Edmond Carpenter from Rochester, NY with students from the University of Toronto along with Sherman Redeye, a Seneca Indian excavated this fort in the 1970's. They found arrowheads, pottery, pipe bowls and animal bones dated to 300-400 years ago. The artifacts were taken to Toronto for study and later put on display at the Allegheny State Park Museum. A second fort was located across the valley in woods above a pond. In Ellington along the low hills bordering either side of the Valley of Clear Creek are circular enclosures.
- 4) Four circular mounds in Clear Creek Valley on lot 29.
- 5) Two mounds in Dexterville.
- 6) In the Fredonia Censor newspaper dated July 15, 1835 an Indian tomahawk was found within the heart of a white oak later cut down. This tomahawk at that time was less than 200 years old. An Erie Indian possibly left it.
- 7) Near the southern boundaries of the Town of Charlotte in the village of Westfield is an ancient burial ground.
- 8) In Bemus Point east of Lake Road is a funeral mound thirty to forty feet across and forty to forty five feet high. To the east another eighty feet is another mound almost as large. At Griffith's Point is a mound in a level meadow.

9) West of the village of Fluvanna one half mile from Chautauqua Lake within the bounds of a highway running north and south on the town line between Ellery and Ellicott is a mound fifty five feet in diameter at the base and ten feet in height. It is flat on top. Three races used it; the Seneca and the French also buried their dead in this mound.

10) In Frewsburg in the Town of Carroll on the south side of Frew Run ancient bones of several persons were found.

11) In Stockton, Mina, Arkwright, French Creek, Town of Poland, along Cattaraugus Creek in the Town of Hanover, Dewittville and Fentonville evidence of ancient Erie Indian occupations has been found.

12) Six miles from Fredonia a circular fortification covering three acres was found. Quantities of arrows, pestles, mortars and bones were recovered.

13) Remains of two or three forts can be seen in Sheridan.

14) There was also an Erie village called Kentuientango at Bemus Point.

15) Near eastern boundary of Fredonia is the remains of two fortifications.

16) A funeral mound was found in Sinclairville. It was excavated in 1889, fifty skeletons were found.

17) An ancient French map of Frankuelin of 1684 on upper waters of Allegheny River mention possible towns of the Erie Indians corresponding to the area of Chautauqua Lake. It states, "Two villages destroyed". East of this location is the words "nineteen villages destroyed".

In my research of Chautauqua County history I found no mention of further excavations of funeral mounds, forts or occupations of Erie Indians after the 1970's. These excavations were not very extensive. I do not know if any other excavations in recent time have taken place in other areas outside of Chautauqua County. In the little research I have done it seems that the most densely populated center of the Erie Indians was in Chautauqua County.

I think further information needs to be compiled on the Erie Indians. They did not have less importance than the other tribes of Native Americans in the United States, so why should we ignore their legacy? Their name was given to one of The Great Lakes so this shows they had importance.

My great great grandmother or great great great grandmother was a full-blooded Seneca Indian. This story has been passed down in my family. This

story has never been authenticated. Though in old family pictures some of my past relatives have Native American features. My grandmother looks an indian to some extent. My brother was asked by a cab driver once if he was an indian. Although the indian in our blood is a small amount, it still shows or else the cab driver would not have asked if my brother was an indian. Because the Erie Indians intermarried with some of the Seneca it is possible that a small amount of my DNA and other members of my family's DNA was contributed by the Erie Indians.

The legacy of the Erie Indians may perhaps be in my blood. This is why I am interested in learning more about them. I feel a tie to these people. There is a connection however small.

I will continue in my endeavors to learn more. I do not have the credentials to dig into a funeral mound. Perhaps someday others who do have the credentials will continue the excavations that were left off in the 1970's. More needs to be discovered if "The Nation of Cat" is to take their rightful place in history besides the other Native American tribes.

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