



Books & Articles by Mabel Powers

BEATITUDES OF A SUFFRAGIST
STORIES THE IROQUOIS TELL THEIR CHILDREN
AROUND AN IROQUOIS STORY FIRE
THE PORTAGE TRAIL
THE INDIAN AS PEACEMAKER
THE ORIGINAL BLUEPRINT FOR PEACE

Mabel Powers is more than a great storyteller. She is an earnest student of the principles of a more democratic and spiritual civilization, actively interested in the ideals of citizenship and peace, and elemental rights that are the birthright of all.

— Chautauqua Daily

Brochure researched by
Joan Smith
Courtesy of Burleigh Mutén



Mabel Powers

Yeh sen noh wehs
— She Who Carries and Tells the Stories —

1872-1966

International Lecturer
& Performer
Peacemaker
Nature Lover
Author
Suffragist
Storyteller
Keeper of Indian Lore

One of the stories *Yehsennohwehs* often shared was about the meaning of the name, Chautauqua. "The true significance of the Indian word, 'Jahdahgwah,' we are told, is 'Place where the fish was taken out.' It comes from two Indian words, 'Gajah,' meaning 'fish' and 'adahgwah,' meaning taken out. Dropping the two prefixes, as is the Indian custom, gives us 'Jahdahgwah'.

As a party of Senecas paddled through the lake en route to Lake Erie, one of the travelers caught a peculiar looking fish (muscalunge) and threw it into his canoe. "After making portage to Lake Erie, he discovered that the fish was still alive and threw it into the water. In time, this new species became abundant in Lake Erie, where none before had been known. Hence, 'the place where the fish was taken out' was named 'Jahdahgwah'.

— THE PORTAGE TRAIL

The North American Indian traveling through a country leaves no trace of his passing.... He moves like a fish through water, a bird in the air, so completely does he identify himself with nature. Unlike the white man.... The Indian did not build a great material civilization as have Americans today, nevertheless he has built into the etheric consciousness of this continent a spiritual structure that is almost beyond compare: ideals of democracy, dreams of peace, an understanding of the spirit of nature and a racial response to the beneficent powers of the universe that Americans of the twentieth century must re-discover before they can become truly American. There are truths in this background of our continent in the Indian's imperishable record that must be incorporated into our national life — if America is to achieve her destiny.

— THE INDIAN AS PEACEMAKER

On the nature trail we have glimpsed God in Nature, in our Brother, in Ourselves. Many more portages await us, for life is a series of portages and each means a new sun coming, new and undiscovered worlds, within and without, wider vision, greater truth, larger love, more abundant life. Thus we are transformed from glory to glory and it is not made manifest what we shall be.

— THE PORTAGE TRAIL

In Nature's law only is there freedom, strength, content. I know for I have kept Her Law.

— 'THE PINE'

Mabel Powers was born in Hamburg, New York, educated at the Buffalo State Normal School and the Philadelphia Shoemaker School of Elocution and Oratory. She taught reading and dramatic arts in Rochester, speaking and writing nationwide on women's rights, education and peace. As an interpreter of the Native American way of life, Ms. Powers expressed her deep admiration of Indian values and worked throughout her life to create a broader understanding of that ancient tradition.

In 1910 Mabel Powers was adopted by the Tonawanda Seneca Nation — Snipe Clan, and she was given the name *Yehsennohwehs* — She Who Carries and Tells the Stories. In 1924, she was appointed by Jane Addams to represent the Indian peoples at the World Peace Conference for Peace and Freedom. She was ranked Grand Sachem in the Woodcrafters League of America and appears in Who's Who in New York State and America. Principal Women of America states that Mabel Powers has done for Western New York what Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving did for Eastern New York.

Ms. Powers heralded the Great Law of Peace, which was created by the Iroquois Community of the Five Nations over 1000 years ago, as the first American attempt to abolish war, create peace and to make government by the people as a basis for democratic principals. "This is the early pattern of democracy woven into the background of our country," she said. "As the framers of our constitution drew upon the wisdom and political sagacity incorporated in this original blueprint for peace, the founders of a new world government may also find in this ancient race a spring of wisdom and democracy that will some day bring peace and healing to our fighting, competitive, mechanized civilization."

Like other early feminists, Mabel Powers was inspired by the roles of Iroquois women who were guaranteed the rights of popular nomination, referendum and recall, as well as equal suffrage.

Ms. Powers was especially fond of spending time at Chautauqua, which was known for centuries to the Indians of this region as a place of power to which the wise came to hold council with the Great Spirit. Ms. Powers was active in the restoration of the Chautauqua grounds to their pristine beauty and enhanced many programs with her presence. In Native dress, Mabel Powers held fire circles in the Native American tradition and told Indian stories in the south Ravine of the Institution, at her home Wahmeda Lodge and at the Chautauqua Gorge as a way of teaching Indian values. Her animated performances, often scheduled in the Amphitheatre, captivated audiences of children and adults. She championed the Indians for living in harmony with Nature for the good of all. Her deep respect for the Indian's spiritual way of life and for the sacred history of the Chautauqua grounds were an integral part of her message.

Nov. 18, 2000

Mr. Roderick A. Nixon
Chautauqua County Historical Society
P.O. Box 7
Village Park
Westfield, NY 14787

Dear Mr. Nixon:

I received your letter of Nov. 1 and have noted the date, August 11, as the time for my program with the Chautauqua Historical Society at the First Presbyterian Church in Westfield. That day will work fine for me. I look forward to being with your group.

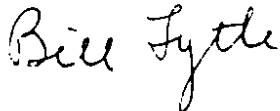
Following is a statement to be used in the publicity. Feel free to add to it or take from it as you wish:

"Our program will focus on Mabel Powers, who came to western New York around 1910 and made her home in Wahmeda until her death in 1966. Early on, she was adopted as an honorary member by the Seneca Indians who gave to her the name, Yeh sen noh wehs, which literally means, "She who carries and tells the stories". Dr. Bill Lytle, a retired Presbyterian minister from San Antonio, spends the summers with his wife in Wahmeda. Their summer home is Mabel Powers' original home, so they have become interested in knowing more about this unusual woman. Dr. Lytle will tell us something of Mabel's personal story and share one or more of the Indian stories that she loved so much."

I am also enclosing some biographical information, some of which you might want to use.

I look forward to being with you this summer. May the winter months be beautiful for you and yours.

Sincerely,



Bill Lytle

Bio for William P. Lytle

Bill was born in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1923. At the time, his father was pastor of the Ben Avon United Presbyterian Church. Bill attended the College of Wooster and Princeton Theological Seminary where he received both a B.D. and a ThM degree. He is married to Faith Williamson of Maplewood, NJ. who was also attending the seminary.

Following graduation, Bill and Faith served as Sunday School Missionaries with the Presbyterian Church in New Mexico for 15 years. From 1962 to 1973, Bill served on the faculty of the College of the Ozarks (now University of the Ozarks) as director of the Ozarks Area Mission. In 1978, while serving as pastor of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, he was elected Moderator of the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in San Diego, CA.

Bill helped to organize several social service programs for needy families and transients in San Antonio; worked with Central America refugees; served on the San Antonio Habitat for Humanity Board and was an organizer of an ecumenical, congregation-based community action group called Metro Alliance.

In his retirement, Bill has served as interim pastor for a number of small congregations in the San Antonio area including the San Antonio Mennonite Church. For the past five summers, Bill has led the Palestine Park program on Sunday and Monday evenings for the Chautauqua Institution.

Bill and Faith have four married children: David and Aimee who work with computers; Paul, an architect; and Ruth, a Presbyterian minister. They have nine grandchildren.

Mabel Powers
Chautauqua County Historical Society
August 11, 2001

Mabel Powers - what a woman! In preparing for this talk, I've spent some time in the Library Archives - There are articles about Mabel in 123 Chautauquan Daily's, dating from 1917-1961. I doubt that there is any person, male or female, living or dead, who has appeared more often on a Chautauqua platform.

Moreover, Mabel had made a reputation for herself before coming to Chautauqua as is evidenced by the following write-up in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle newspaper in the early 1900's:

"Miss Power's reputation is so firmly established and her talent so widely known in this society that it is only necessary to make the announcement of a reading by her for the public to recognize that a treat is in store. Miss Powers is one of the best readers who ever graced a Rochester platform. She possesses a beautiful voice, her enunciation is perfect and her readings, both grave and gay, are artistic to an unusual degree."

About the same time, the Lockport Daily Journal had this to say about Mabel: "Miss Powers is an elocutionist of rare ability. Her impersonation is so perfect that her hearers forget the speaker and become participants in the event she portrays."

Where did she get those skills? She was born on a farm, near Hamburg, NY on July 23, 1872. She got her teacher's certificate from Buffalo State Normal School and taught special reading courses in the Rochester School District for several years. Later she went to Philadelphia to take special work in elocution at the Shoemaker School for Elocution and Reading.

She was an educator, a feminist, a champion for human rights who wrote many articles on women's rights and educational issues for newspapers and periodicals. Her real passion was world peace, but the articles she wrote on that subject were not picked up by the publishers. That rebuff led her to say on one occasion, "If this is civilization, then let me be a savage."

Perhaps it was that rebuff that prompted her to enter into her lifelong journey with the Indians, through her specialty of storytelling. She travelled extensively among the Iroquois tribes from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. From the start, she insisted, "I went to the Indian not to do him good but to find the good in him."

Her interpretation of the mind and spirit of the Indians of the past led the Senecas of her own day to invite her in 1910 to the Green-Corn Feast on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation near Akron, NY where she was adopted into the Snipe clan of the Seneca Tribe. They gave her the name, Yehsehnohwehs, "the one who carries and tells the stories". She mingled and lived at different times not only with the Senecas, but also with the Onondagas, the Oneidas, the Tuscaroras, the Cayugas and the Mohawks.

It was soon after her adoption as a Seneca Indian that she settled in Wahmeda and constructed the 'Sun Lodge', a khaki house tent, set on a platform down by the lake. She loved to walk in the woods and tell stories around the camp fire, which, by the way, she almost always started the Indian way, not with a match but by rubbing sticks together to bring forth the fire that was in the heart of the wood.

She built her cabin around 1915. Don Douds would have been 3 years old at the time and has some childhood memories of Mabel. She often came to the Douds' house for water before having her own well dug. A year ago, Don wrote us a letter in which he said, "I remember when I was a boy that she often came to our house to discuss with my father world events and her great passion for world peace and the example of the Iroquois Nation's successful peace treaty."

She gave a series of recitals at Chautauqua in 1917, the year her first book was published, Stories the Iroquois Tell Their Children. The July 23rd edition of the Chautauquan Daily in 1919 reported on Mabel's appearance the night before in the amphitheater where, among other things she told how Iroquois children were told, "Keep tongue in mouth when little - when old maybe you have thoughts of value for your people."

Mabel Powers opened the 1921 season at Chautauqua with a talk in the amphitheater, entitled, "Around an Iroquois Story Fire". Mabel was no doubt working on her book by that title which had its first printing two years later. (Here, read the Dedication)

Then tell the story - "How Giving Evil for Evil Ends".

It was about this time that Mabel was having the house built that we purchased from Gene DeMambro 11 years ago. Gene had bought it in 1967 at a Chautauqua County delinquent tax auction, a year after Mabel's death.

You see today peace posts with symbols from around the world. Mabel's built a peace porch. Joan Smith has done a study of the symbols' in and around our house. She sent us a letter in February of 1999 with the following information:

There are other symbols on the porch posts. The one that first attracts attention is the familiar swastika. Used by almost every culture, it was placed here to represent the art of all people. From far western trails came a North American Indians' arrangement of 3 arrows, each inside the other, facing in the same direction. This is an Indian peace sign and pictures 'all moving together'. In another pillar is found the ying/yang symbol on a stone, symbolizing the dual principles of change in the Chinese philosophy of creative evolution. Someone from Switzerland placed a Maltese cross in one post, and a man who had taken a long trek from faraway India left behind a palm leaf molded in stone which is the Brahmin symbol of peace. There also is the Christian cross.

Hearth stone - Woodcraft - futeh, henty, futeh + hny

The next year, 1924, she was invited by Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House in Chicago, who was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1931, to represent the Indian people at the world congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in "Washington, DC.

In that same year, her third book, The Portage Trail, was published. There is so much here of interest to us in this area - story of Wahmeda, the Indian princess and of the Jahdagwah.

In 1932, Miss Powers' book, The Indian as Peacemaker, was printed. In the Forword, Mabel wrote:

"Believing that the most essential factor of peacemaking is the study of the backgrounds of peoples differing greatly in racial and traditional life, together with the recognition of the peculiar genius and good of each, I have attempted to record the Peace story of the red man...Every race has its own contribution to make to Peace. Each nation must bring its owns beautifully colored and carved stone to place in the great Temple of Brotherhood where foundations are being laid."

In this book she wrote about the formation of the League of the Iroquois (1570). Messengers were sent to all four parts, north, east, south, west, to call for a General Council. 25 nations responded, sending 2 or more delegates. Each delegate was required to observe strict silence for 7 days of retreat and preparation for peacemaking, entering the 'Wigwam of Silence'. After seven suns, representatives entered the 'Wigwam of Oratory' to discuss problems. "Silence, she wrote, "a vital living silence, means power and illumination. The great deeds of the world have come out of the 'still' place." (p.121) She loved stillness herself and, after her story-telling around the fire circle, she would often say, "And now let us go off in the silence."

She tells how young braves settled disputes by making an excavation in the ground. The disputants would come, in turn, and tell their grievances into the hole, literally unburdening themselves. The earth would then be replaced and stamped down. Mabel suggests this was the origin of the term, 'burying the hatchet'.

In an earlier talk she had whimsically said, "We must match friendships, not warships, in our relations to other nations and we must realize that there only one plane from which warfare can be waged and that is the high plane of justice, equality, brotherhood and love." (Daily, July 25, 1929) She noted that there was "no word for 'thine' or 'mine' in the Indian language. They lived and worked in the terms of all and not for the benefit of the individual. (Daily, Aug. 16, 1920) Moreover, there was no profanity in the Indian language. If they swore, it had to be in English or French. (Daily, July 1, 1930)

She called the Peace Law of the Iroquois, the treaty that was formed among the 5 nations, later to include the Tuscaroras, "The Original American Blueprint for Peace". Her article under that

title was printed in the Amerika Indigena, the official publication of the Inter-American Indian Institute in Mexico. Subsequently the U.S.State Dept. had that article reprinted and translated and sent to its missions throughout the world.

That was the title of her last address at Chautauqua on July 29, 1961, "The Original American Blueprint for Peace" She was 89 years of age at the time.

"We love the Indian, "Miss Powers said, "because he brings to us the joy, freedom and peace of the waters, the beauty of the woodland, the power, poise, and endurance of natural rhythmic motion, and most of all, the kinship and oneness of life."

Then tell the story, "What the Maple and Ash Tree Learned".

I conclude with her words: "The Indian has held in trust for us the Soul of America. While we have been wandering in the far country of commercialism and materialism, he has kept the guide fires burning until we Americans would arise to claim our heritage. There is a place in the Sun that belongs to the American Indian."

And I would add, there is a place in the Sun that belongs to Mabel Powers.

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Mabel Powers spirit alive in firecircle Indian stories

by Erin Weinberger
Staff Writer

Storytelling at the Mabel Powers Firecircle at 5 p.m. today in the south ravine under Thunder Bridge will include "How the Tree Brothers Gave," from *Around the Iroquois Storyfire*.

The program, sponsored by the Bird, Tree and Garden Club, features storyteller Rev. William Lytle. He will share a variety of Mabel Powers' stories.

A retired Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Lytle owns the original

home of Mabel Powers in Walmeda, a community adjacent to the north end of the Institution.

Almost exactly 67 years ago, on August 9, 1933, an Indian Tree Pageant was held in the same south ravine. It was sponsored by the BTG. Mrs. Thomas A. Edison was president. The pageant was adapted from the Iroquois legend and lead by Mabel Powers.

In her introduction, Powers talked about Chautauqua Lake as "the Place of the Mist, where Indians came to reverence the Great Spirit. The shores were used as a spiritual retreat and a place of communion with the Great Sky Father, for healing, renewal and inspiration of life."

The Rev. Lytle will tell his tales again on August 17. The storytelling sessions are open to all audiences, young and old.

An adult should accompany children under 12. In case of rain, the gathering place will be Seaver Gym.

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