

Mohawk Peter - Legends of the Adirondacks and Civil War Memories

by Henry G. (Gustavus) Dorr; Illustrations by Nellie L. Thompson
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(This summary of the Massawepie-related portions of the book was compiled by Peter Collinge, 2001, as part of a Massawepie 50th anniversary history project. See www.MassStaffAlumni.org)

Foreword by Nathan Haskell Dole

"Henry G. Dorr's life of more than four score years has covered many interesting and unusual events. As a young man, not yet out of his teens, he sailed ..., for Hong Kong." In a storm the ship put in at Port Elizabeth, and Dorr stayed in the Cape Colony for two years and a half. In July, 1859, he discovered an odd-looking pebble that a jeweler later identified as a diamond in the rough. "He had discovered the diamond-fields of South Africa, and if it had not been for the sudden death of one of his friends in London the two might have returned to the Cape Colonies provided with ample funds to make explorations and exploit the mines which have since provided the world with a half billion dollars' worth of precious stones." Back in Boston, in 1862 Dorr "enlisted in the Union Army and served gallantly until the end of the war." In January, 1864, "he was commissioned major. He was under fire twenty-six times and, as one of his war reminiscences relates, was captured by Rebels during an engagement near Middleburg in Florida. The war stories in the present volume were written for his fellow-members of the Loyal Legion and the Kinsley Post, G.A.R., Boston."

"Sometime later than the close of the Civil War Major Dorr came into possession of an extensive property in the Adirondacks including Lake Massawepie, around whose shores many Indian tales and memories cluster. While developing Childwolde Park as a summer hunting and fishing resort he found it interesting to jot down some of the aboriginal stories associated with that delightful wilderness. ...

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*This tale is "a protest against unsportsmanlike slaughter of game, which is too often practiced in the Adirondack forests as is elsewhere the case upon this continent." While the location is unspecified, the setting could easily be Massawepie.

Mohawk Peter, Ch. I (p.5)

The author claims to have returned to his cabin from canoeing across Massawepie Lake, and found Mohawk Peter there. Peter is a 60-year-old (+/-) Mohawk Indian from the Ottawa River area in Canada. He says that the Mohawks long ago owned the Massawepie area as their summer hunting ground, with their winter home on the Mohawk River. Since the Mohawks sided with the British, at the close of the American Revolution they were driven into Ontario.

Peter says that his grandfather had his wigwam on Pontiac Point (not called that in the text) on Massawepie Lake. During a raid on French Canada, the Mohawks took a prisoner, Lt. Paul Davout. (French prisoners were often held for ransom.) They returned near Massawepie to a famous camping grounds and spring on the Raquette River, named Flat Rock and Flat Rock Spring. This area was "a time-honored rendezvous of the Mohawk Indians, where councils were held for civil and military purposes, forays were planned, and reprisals were enacted upon prisoners."

"The Flat Rock Camp and spring were used simply for the convenience that they afforded for camping purposes. The real monument that gave its name to the rendezvous was the Rocking Stone lying about a half mile distant. This is a huge boulder, weighing upward of five hundred tons, which is perched upon the very verge of a precipice of a hundred or more feet in depth, and is so perfectly balanced that a slight pressure from one's hand will set the immense stone rocking."

Peter's grandfather (a chief) brought the captive to his wigwam on Pontiac Point. They became friends. No ransom came. Eventually, the captive Davout married "in the Indian way of marry" the chief's aunt. Then the Mohawks got ready to move south for the winter, but Davout didn't want to move to the Mohawk River, so close to his enemies the English. Davout took a canoe and escaped down the Raquette River to Canada. His wife was pregnant, then died soon after giving birth to their daughter. When the daughter, Pauline Davout, came of age a British soldier named Percival and a Mohawk chief both wanted to marry her, but she chose the officer. The chief threatened to attack Percival's camp (at the site of Dorr's cabin, on a high bank overlooking the lake across from Pontiac Point, with a fringe of trees between the cabin clearing and the lake). When Pauline found out that he was meeting with other braves at Flat Rock, she asked her Peter's grandfather to take her there. He did, and she told them that if Percival was killed, then she would die too so that the other chief wouldn't have her. The other chief attacked Percival's camp anyway, first starting fires to drive Percival's people out. In the midst of the battle Pauline jumped up and yelled in Mohawk "I, Pauline Davout, am here! If you attack this camp then you fight me who belong to you!" The Mohawks left, but in the dry woods the fire burned almost around Massawepie Lake. (This would have been in the early 1800's.) Pauline and Percival escaped to Albany, and were married. After spending several years in Britain, they returned to live the rest of their lives in New York.

Mohawk Peter, Ch. II (p.31)

Peter tells that councils had been held at Flat Rock camp on the Raquette River long before white people came to North America. He mentions that the French made friends with the Canadian Indians, but ever since Champlain have been enemies of the Mohawks. In one battle, the Mohawks captured a French officer (Captain Bonaparte) and his daughter. French prisoners were usually kept for ransom, but a Chief wanted her as his "squaw". But the girl and father resisted this idea. The chief sent a runner to Albany to see what ransom the British would pay for the captain. In Albany, word got around (perhaps from when the runner was drunk) about the girl and her father and the chief. So the British replied that they would pay ransom in guns and powder and blankets, but only if both the French captain and girl were delivered together.

The chief was mad at this reply, and sent a runner to Montreal to try for a better ransom for the captain alone. But the reply from Montreal was the same, and the French threatened to retrieve the hostages by force if they were not returned. Again, the chief was mad.

A solar eclipse occurred, and the Indians thought it might be punishment for keeping the 2 prisoners. But the chief ignored this sign. Then a great storm came, and the girl claimed that meant that the Great Spirit was mad, but the chief still wouldn't release them. Finally, the chief saw the girl's compass and was scared by it, and she claimed it had magic that could harm the chief. But he still kept them captive.

The captain tried to escape several times down the Raquette River, but was captured each time. Then an offer came from Quebec for a larger ransom, but only if both prisoners were returned. Then a British party arrived to take the captain and girl back, but the chief says that the girl has run off. Then the British captain Vincent) takes the chief and braves across the Raquette River to the Rocking Stone. The British soldiers cut a spruce tree into a large pole, and start to dislodge the Rocking Stone. They stop, but then threaten to roll the stone down into the valley if the girl isn't returned. The chief threatens that the whole Mohawk nation will fight the British. But the British captain insists on having the girl back, and won't allow the chief to leave until he sends one of his braves to get the girl. The girl arrives (her skin had been stained to make her look Indian), and the British release the chief. Then the British take Captain Bonaparte and his daughter to Albany, where she eventually marries her rescuer, Captain Vincent.

Mohawk Peter, Ch. III (p.41)

One autumn morning Peter and the author had canoed to the "outlet of Massawepie Lake into Grasse river". There, they killed a buck, and storm came up suddenly. While returning, they found that their canoe was too heavily laden with the buck, and so stopped at "Rocky Point", a high, rocky promontory with an old dilapidated log camp. Peter points out that the site commands the lake and is easily defended, and made a good camp for Indians who didn't feel safe from attack. He tells that Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas (enemy of the British, friend of the French) once camped there for that reason. Apparently Flat Rock on the Raquette was sometimes used for Indian councils when they wanted to be away from the British and French. Pontiac came there (via the Grasse River from Canada) to invite the Mohawks to help him attack the British fort at Detroit. He made great promises of "scalps, plunder, and money from the French." Pontiac was daring to come so far through the land of his enemies, the Mohawks and Oneidas, but he apparently arranged some kind of "safe conduct".

Pontiac spoke of his plan to drive the British back into the sea, and to save America for the Indians. He had already convinced the Senecas, and hoped that if the Mohawks joined then all of the Iroquois would follow. This was so important to his plans that he came personally to persuade the Mohawks, rather than sending an emissary. Pontiac convinced many Mohawks, but the British Sir William Johnson had already met with the chiefs along the Mohawk River. Johnson had great influence, as he was known as a trusted friend of the Mohawks, so the Mohawks were divided.

While Pontiac was waiting for an answer, a French prisoner of the Mohawks escaped and came to Pontiac's camp. The prisoner had been with the Mohawks 3 or 4 years, and had been "adopted into tribe as Mohawk", and had been married to a Mohawk and had a baby. But he told Pontiac that he also had a French wife and child, and that Pontiac as a friend of the French must return him to them. Pontiac refused, and said that the man must remain with his adopted tribe. But the French "squaw-man" still meant to escape, as the Mohawks suspected, and they were ready to capture and scalp him. His Mohawk wife was jealous of his French family. She told her father, a Mohawk chief, that he should ask Pontiac to take the man back to Canada because the Frenchman is bad luck due to his red and blue devil tattoo. Pontiac refuses, since he doesn't want that bad luck with him, just as the Mohawk wife had hoped. Then the Frenchman uses the tattoo as a sign of his power to convince an Ottawa brave to sneak him along with them.

Most of the Mohawks agree to join Pontiac's attack on Detroit. Pontiac breaks camp and hurries back to Canada. But halfway back, a Mohawk runner catches up with Pontiac and, though exhausted, throws down a war token (a bundle of arrows tied with snake skin) at Pontiac's feet. Pontiac asks why, and the runner says that it is because Pontiac has taken the French prisoner with him. Pontiac denies this, and the runner starts to leave thinking that Pontiac is lying. Pontiac then makes inquiries and finds the man, with stained skin, hidden among his braves. The Frenchman tries to convince Pontiac that his tattoo will bring the Ottawa luck, but Pontiac smashes the man's skull with a tomahawk and hands the scalp to the Mohawk runner. Tradition says "That was reason Mohawks were not in fight at Fort Detroit."

Mohawk Peter, Ch. IV (p.51)

On a rainy day during Peter's visit to "Camp Sorghum", after catching trout for dinner, Peter tells in the evening that he was educated at the Ottawa reservation in Canada. Peter says that his father's father's wife was Oneida, daughter of an Oneida Chief. The chief's tribe of Oneidas had a village about 20 miles west of Massawepie on the Oswegatchie. The chief came to Flat Rock camp when the French burned an Oneida village along the St. Lawrence River and made a settlement there. Peter's grandfather went with the Oneidas, and while there saw the chief's daughter, Bird-that-Sings, and decided to make her his wife. Then the Oneidas and Mohawks went to fight the French, but couldn't drive them out of the settlement. The Oneida chief asked Peter's grandfather to get help from the other Iroquois (Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas; later also the Tuscaroras). Peter's grandfather said he could only get help from the other Mohawks, and only would do that if he could marry Bird-that-Sings, who seemed willing. But the chief said that Bird-that-Sings was promised to another Oneida chief. So Peter's grandfather headed back for Massawepie via the Oswegatchie. The Oneidas follow, and again ask for help, but Peter's grandfather again asks for Bird-that-Sings. So the Oneidas and Mohawks arrange a council at the Rocking Stone in two days.

The Mohawks returned to Massawepie Lake, but Peter's grandfather remains behind. Next morning, Bird-that-Sings is in his wigwam on Pontiac point at Massawepie. Her father and her intended chief arrive later that day, and demand her back, but Peter's grandfather refuses. He gives them the choice of fighting the Mohawks or holding the council. They decide to hold the council, and while there smoke the peace pipe with Peter's grandfather. It appears that Bird-that-Sings' father isn't too unhappy about the match, but didn't want to offend the other chief.

As this story concludes, Peter mentions that he is not the first Mohawk who was educated. Pauline Davout (see Ch. 1) was taken in by Peter's grandfather and Bird-that-Sings after the death of Pauline's mother, and was eventually educated in an "English town - maybe Albany." Another daughter in the family, named Bird-that-Sing after the mother, was friendly with Pauline and also wanted to go to the English school. She eventually did, although her father objected that it was "bad for Indian girl to know too much." Here Peter and the author digress and agree that the Indian men know better than the whites how to keep a women in her right place making "home comfortable and pleasant to live in for her man." Anyway, when Pauline Davout marries Percival and goes to England, Bird-that-Sing goes along too. Eventually, Bird-that-Sing decides to come back home, but doesn't really fit in with the Mohawks now.

One day a sailor appears in the Mohawk village. He is an officer of the warship that brought Bird-that-Sing home from England, though he calls her Singing Bird. The sailor wants to marry her. Peter's grandfather is delighted, but Singing Bird plays hard to get. One night she and the sailor disappear, and then are heard of in New York, and then in England. Peter's grandfather later admits that he helped the sailor "kidnap" Singing Bird, since she appeared to want him to "win her" by decisive action.

The next day after this story, Major Dorr drove Peter, wearing a set of the major's clothes, the 6 miles to the train station and put him on a train to Ottawa. The following January, the Major received a package in Boston containing four fine beaver skins and a note from peter promising another visit in the future.

Mohawk Peter, Ch. V (p.62)

Two years later, Peter appears again at "Camp Sorghum" on Massawepie Lake. Major Dorr greets him. Peter says that he's been to Quebec and to London with his then-15-year-old granddaughter Pauline (daughter of his son Pete), and that he has Pauline with him now (though she's not in sight). Pauline was named after Pauline Davout (see Ch. 1), and also has some white blood. The girl's grandmother was captured by Indians in Missouri and raised Indian, and married a chief. Their daughter was Peter's wife, mother of Pauline. Pauline was educated in a convent school, before being taken to see the world. Peter now "retrieves" Pauline from where he had left her, having been assured that Major Dorr would appreciate her visit. Dorr describes her as small, Italian-looking, and clad Indian-style in fawn skins. She was actually "Princess Pauline", since her ancestors were Sachems. Dorr describes Pauline as quite educated (reading and speaking in English, playing piano), but also quite adept in the ways of the woods (canoeing, hunting, fishing, etc.). Her grandfather gives her a great deal of freedom during their stay, but she still defers to him instantly when he speaks.

Peter had aged considerably since his last visit, and was content to stay indoors, cooking and telling stories. When Major Dorr asks for more details about Pauline's origin, Peter says that her mother was captured by Mohawk Indians in Missouri in 1861 at the age of 10 during a cattle raid in which all of her family was killed and their ranch burned. The girl was brought to Canada and adopted in to the tribe, and married the son of the chief who captured her. Their daughter was Pauline. Pauline's mother was also clever, and taught in an Indian school, so it was she who arranged for Pauline to be educated in a convent school.

Dorr asked if any efforts had been made to find surviving relatives of Pauline's mother (Peter's wife). Peter said that his wife had tried without success. She wrote to several Missouri newspapers, which printed her letter, and eventually got a reply from a former cavalry soldier who arrived after the ranch was burned, and then tried unsuccessfully to catch up with the raiding Mohawks. Then Pauline's mother got sick, so Peter wrote back to the ex-soldier (about 4 years before this visit to Massawepie), who replied that he's now talked with another ex-soldier who says that the owner of the ranch was named Howell. Apparently Mr. Howell and his young wife arrived from England about 8 or 9 years before the Civil War, and bought the ranch while in New York City. They are described as "close mouth - and don't tell where they come from." When Peter's wife recovered, she wrote again and found that the ex-soldier was now dead. After telling this, Peter stops talking, looks moody, and walks off by himself to the boathouse pier.

Soon, Pauline returns with a brace of partridges from a distant pond, with only their heads shot off by the Winchester rifle "proving her remarkable marksmanship". (Dorr speculates that this may show her white blood, as "Indians are indifferent shots with a rifle.") She refrained from shooting a buck since they already had enough venison, and Dorr wishes that many white "sportsmen" would show similar restraint.

Mohawk Peter, Ch. V (p.62), continued

After dinner, cooked by Peter, and after Pauline retires, Peter again begins to speak. He's apparently decided to disclose what was troubling him earlier. Peter begins by alluding to the earlier Pauline Davout, who left to live in New York and England. Dorr encourages him to "come out with it", and Peter admits that he's been keeping a secret for fear that his granddaughter will leave permanently for New York. Dorr offers to help if he can, and Peter finally says that Pauline does have a surviving relative in New York. Peter says that the ex-soldier wrote that a 12-year-old son of the Howells survived the ranch fight because he was elsewhere at the time. The son thought that his entire family was dead, not knowing that his sister had survived. After his initial shock, the soldiers took the boy back with them, and their officers arranged to have him sent to school in New York using some of the money in his late father's bank account. So Peter's wife has an uncle, and Pauline has a great-uncle, in New York. However, Peter has never told them for fear of losing his favorite granddaughter. But the soldier did find out from one of his former officers that the boy "was now rich man in New York City, and have wife and children - and all happy. His name Howell, and he tell me where he live."

After this story, Dorr spends a troubled night. He has offered to help, and thinks that Pauline and her mother should know the truth, but doesn't want to hurt Peter who would be broken-hearted to lose his cherished granddaughter. Major Dorr also considers that Pauline's relatives would want to know of her, but that she might also have a claim to a portion of her grandfather's estate from Missouri. Dorr thinks that Peter was wrestling between "self-love on one side, and justice on the other", and that justice prevailed when Peter told the story. This is confirmed the next day when Peter asks the major to write a letter for him to Howell in New York. Peter says that he thinks Howell should know about these relatives.

Two days later, a reply arrives at Camp Sorghum, "full of surprise, but most kindly expressed." Dorr writes, "In less than a week from that time, Camp Sorghum was deserted, closed up and battened down to resist the fierce winter storms."

"Pierre Orfraie, and the Princess Pauline had taken passage to New York City, to fulfill an engagement made with the said Mr. Howell, acknowledged relative of the princess, to visit his home there, and I had the honor of accompanying them as far as Albany where I was obliged to leave the train to enable me to continue my journey Eastward."

Dorr adds that he received a letter from Pauline a few weeks later, saying that her "Grandpère" was returning to Ottawa with Mr. Howell to see her mother, and that "We are all going for a visit in the Spring." She says that her cousins are trying to teach her to be a "city girl" which "is hard for an Indian girl, but I try hard, and I am very happy." Pauline's cousins think that she has much to learn, but she also thinks the teaching should not be one-sided, as "They are all right here, but such girls are of not much use in the forest, and would get lost if they went alone. They cannot even fire a rifle! They have much to learn."

Finally, Dorr quotes Peter's word when they last met "That other Pauline - that first one - she got white blood - yes -but she got Mohawk blood too - and that Percival - he proud of it. It best blood of Iroquois nation - yes - that so! This Pauline - my Pauline - she just same - plenty Mohawk blood. And that Howell he see it - and know it. And he proud and glad it so - I hope my Pauline will get marry to soldier - like other Pauline. It best thing can be! Daughter of great Iroquois Nation must get marry to soldier. It must be - that so!"

Dorr concludes, "And she did!"