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## THE ABENAKIS: ABORIGINES OF VERMONT—PART I

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*This address by Mr. Laurent was a feature of the afternoon of July 28th, the second day of the five-day summer session of this year. Mr. Laurent, hereditary chief of the Abenakis, was born on the St. Francis Reservation in the Province of Quebec; he is a graduate of Nicolet Academy and College, Nicolet, P.Q. His father, Joseph Laurent, Chief of the Indian Village of St. Francis, P.Q., published in 1884, New Familiar Abenakis and English Dialogues with an Etymology of Indian Names. A copy is in the Society's library. Stephen Laurent is a scholar in his own right. Editor.*

**P**AAKUINGWZIAN, Nidobak! In other words, How do you do, my friends! Although the word "paakuinogwzian" really means "You look new to me," it is the nearest approach to the English greeting, "How do you do?" Well, it is safe to say that I probably look new to you also, and perhaps a little bit disappointing, especially if you read the January issue of *Vermont History*, in which it was announced that you would have at the July meeting a hereditary chief of the Abenakis. It is safe to say that many of you expected to see such an individual all decked out in deerskin leggings, shirt of buckskins, a feather headdress, and the rest of what is generally considered to be the Indian's regalia. Had you been told that this so-called hereditary chief had red hair, wore glasses, and looked as if he came from East Boston rather than from the Indian village of St. Francis, you probably would have said: "We don't have to go to the Historical Society meeting to see such an Indian: there are countless numbers of such Indians up and down Main Street in our own town."

The topic of the talk this afternoon being the Abenaki Indians as the aborigines of Vermont, it would seem that the first step would be to define our terms and see how the Abenaki relate to other groups ethnically, and then to consider our group under the aspects of *language, religion, and medicine*.

The Abenakis were a subdivision of the Algonquin nation. According to the ethnologists, there were two great native confederacies at the time of Cartier and Champlain: the Algonquins and the Iro-

quois. The Algonquins stretched from Newfoundland to the Rockies and from Hudson's Bay to the Carolinas. Like an island in the midst of these Algonquins were the Iroquois, or Five Nations, with New York State as their main habitat. Generally speaking, the Algonquins were divided as follows: the northern division, north of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes; the northeastern division, comprising the Maritimes, Eastern Quebec, and Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont; the central division, in the mid-western states; and the western division, as far as the Rocky Mountains. The Abenakis belonged to the northeastern division.

The Abenaki Indians were only one of many New England tribes and were themselves further subdivided into smaller groups, like the Sokoki, the Penobscots, the Coossucks, the Missisquoi, and others, according to the names of the regions, rivers, or lakes near which they lived. The difficulty that specialists today have in making strict tribal distinctions is due to the fact that these names are geographical rather than racial. Once an anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Speck, said to my father, "Well, Chief Laurent, I have studied your language and culture from an ethnic standpoint, and my conclusion is that you belong to that group of Abenaki Indians known as the Kanibessinoaks." A few years later he came back to visit my father and said, "I'll have to take that back, about your being a Kanibessinoak. Further research leads me to believe that you belong rather to the Penawobsket sub-tribe." My father just smiled and said: "Well, Dr. Speck, I hope that I'll live long enough to find out before I die just what kind of Indian I am!"

The Abenaki Indians, as I have said, belonged to the northeastern division of the Algonquian family. The term *Wobanaki* means *Eastlander*, "from the land of the rising sun." Most of your historians agree that this is the group with which the history of Vermont is concerned. We know, of course, that at the time of Champlain the Iroquois occupied the upper Hudson and the shores of Lake Champlain. But the founder of New France with his trusty arquebus weakened considerably the hold of the Iroquois on the lake and its shores. The Abenaki Indians then resumed possession of the land. The fact that most of the Indian names in Vermont can be traced to the Abenaki dialect and few to the Iroquois is of significance. Father Ducreux in his map of 1660 shows Lake Champlain as the western limit of the Abenakis. Nevertheless, there is considerable darkness surrounding the Indian occupation of Vermont in the early part of the seventeenth century. The Jesuits probably deemed it wiser to establish their missions as

far away as possible from what the Iroquois regarded as their domain. And so we have full accounts of what happened in the missions along the Kennebec and the Penobscot Rivers, but precious little about any attempt to reach the Indians west of the Connecticut. Another supposition is that they may have thought it not worth their while to investigate villages which may have been only summer colonies in Vermont. Some writers, like Parkman, believe that the Indians in Vermont were merely nomads; others say, "No, the Indians had more or less permanent villages which they left on occasion for hunting or fishing or corn-planting." Still another possible explanation for the scarcity of Indian traces in Vermont is the epidemics that decimated them after the coming of the white man. In short, the difficulty with finding out about the Indians is that they were very careful not to leave any state papers behind as they moved from one stream to another! Even the burial-ground evidence is scarce because of the Indian practice of disinterring their dead and taking their ancestors' skeletal remains along with them when they moved on. This was commonly practised when the encroachment of the white man's cornfields threatened profanation of their ancestors' relics. In Hemenway's writings mention is made of a group of Indians who went to an Indian graveyard in the vicinity of Nulhegan Pond and removed the bones of their ancestors lest they might be desecrated by the white man's furrow.

Truly, therefore, most of what the historian has to go by must be found in the field of linguistics. It is for this reason that the study of place names is recognized as a significant field for research. Our friend, Dr. John C. Huden of the University of Vermont, is now engaged on a serious study along those lines, and he is doing splendid work. Language study, by the way, in one instance saves the reputation of the Abenakis in Vermont. The St. Francis Indians, who were the Abenakis established along the St. Francis River in Canada, go down in history as fiends; they always have been painted in red for their raids upon the British colonies. However, in one case the evidence of a chance word clears them of guilt. In Thompson's *History of Vermont* we read that in 1780 "the Indians came down from Canada" and destroyed Royalton. The casual reader might conclude that the raiders referred to here were the St. Francis Indians. It seems, however, that while the plundering was going on, one of the Indians suddenly espied a pair of silver buckles on shoes. Immediately he cried out: "Wistaneron! wistaneron!"—"Silver! Silver!" Again our reader might infer that the word "wistaneron" is Abenaki for

silver. But anyone familiar with both the Abenaki and the Iroquois dialects would know that "wistaneron" belongs to the latter. Therefore, the finding of this one word would be sufficient evidence for us to assert that the Iroquois Indians were the guilty ones in the Royalton raid.

## I

Because of its importance as a tool of historical research, it might be appropriate to say a few words about the Abenaki language and its characteristics. I shall later give you a sample of its sound as a living tongue by narrating two historical episodes in Abenaki and translating them into English for you.

Like all North American Indian languages, the Abenaki dialect belongs philologically to the group called *holophrastic*, from a Greek compound meaning that a phrase or an entire sentence or description is telescoped into a single word. The Indian mind delights in synthesis and compresses into one word both object and action, with all that modifies either object or action. For instance, the word *awanoch*, meaning *white man*, consists of *awani* and *uji*, or *who* and *from*. We are told that when first the Indians beheld the white man, they exclaimed to one another: "Awani uji?" "Awani uji?" meaning, "WHO is this man and where does he come FROM?" But they considered it a waste of time and breath to say the whole sentence. To the Indians it was sufficient to say just: "Who from?" Ever since then the white man has been called *awanoch* (pronounced *awanoots*), and it comes from that memorable day when the red and the white race met for the first time. Since the word *awanoch* was on everybody's lips, lacking a name for the white man, the Indians figured they might as well call him *awanoch*.

Another interesting example descriptive of Indian synthesis may be found in the remarkable word "*skerekwati*," Iroquois for *the left side*. Actually it means, "the side from which the blood flows." That is worthy of notice since it would seem to indicate that the Indians had discovered the circulation of the blood even before the celebrated scientist Harvey propounded his theory. *Skenekwati* is broken down as follows: '*nekw*, flowing blood; *ati*, the side from; while the initial syllable *ske* shows return to the point of origin. In Abenaki, the word for *moon* is *nahmbossat*, "the one that travels by night"; for *northern lights* we have *abasandoganal*, "the lights in the shape of trees."

The coming of the Europeans demanded an expansion of the Indian vocabulary which they met by Indianizing strange terms or coining

their own names for new objects. Strangely enough the St. Francis Indians, living amongst French-speaking people, Indianized the *English* word pancakes into *pongoksak*; while the Penobscot Indians, surrounded by English communities, have instead Indianized the French word *des crepes* (pancakes) into *tayklapsak*. Trousers are called *peljes* from *breeches*; *vinegar* has been changed into *pinegal*. As examples of coined words, we have, for *umbrella*, *obagarwatahigan*, or *the thing that makes a shadow*; the word for *rum* is *akwbi*, "bitter water," while a Prince Albert coat (or tuxedo) was called *pap-sigagihlonk pitkozon*, meaning "the coat with a slit in the back." One of the most amusing and characteristic examples of word-Indianization is the Abenaki word for clock. Not realizing the usefulness of the clock but noticing that it was a noisy contraption which made quite a racket during the night as well as in daylight, they promptly called it *papizokwassik*, "the thing that makes a lot of noise for nothing."

The main characteristic of the Abenaki tongue is its softness. Rowland E. Robinson poetically describes it as so soft and fluttery that it would not disturb the birds or jar with the rippling streams. It does not have the harsh sounds that one is liable to find in the Iroquois. Perhaps this harshness in the Iroquois language contributed to their ferociousness. The Abenaki dialect has no letter *r*; neither does it have the guttural *ch* sound so frequent in German. For the soft *ch* as in *chin*, they would substitute a still softer *tz* or *dz*. An example is the Abenaki word for *king*: *kinzames*, coming from *King James*. The harsh *j* is here replaced by the softer *dz* sound. When first the Abenaki came into contact with the whites, they inquired what they called the chief in the country they came from. Since James I was then reigning, the answer was, "King James." Now the nearest that the Indians could come to pronouncing "King James" was "Kin-zames." It did not occur to them that it consisted of two words, the last of which was a proper name; they thought that they had been taught how to say *chief* in English. Therefore, when other kings came to the throne, whether it was Charles, George, or Edward, they would refer to him as Kinzames Charles, Kinzames George, or Kinzames Edward. Even to-day the Abenaki Indians use the same word *kinzames*, and not one of them suspects that it means *King James*. The derivatives from this word may seem to slight the dignity of the Royal Family, but at any rate we have to give credit to the Indians for coining enough words so that no one could possibly feel left out. They lined them up as follows: the king was *kinzames*; the queen, *kinzamesqua*,

or the King's squaw; a prince, *kinzamessis*, meaning a small king; while *kinzamesquassis* meant a small queen or princess. Finally, the Indians housed them all comfortably in a *kinzamesigamigw*, palace (or "king's wigwam").

As stated earlier in my talk, the etymology of Indian place-names is of great importance to all students of Americana. Unfortunately, that is an exceedingly difficult branch of philology because of the fact that these Indian words have been so corrupted by the English. Sometimes the Indians themselves were at fault through either mispronunciation, faulty diction, or inadequate articulation, as a result of which there arose frequent misunderstandings and false conclusions. In his "Etymology of Missisquoi" Dr. MacAleer gives an amusing example illustrating how some white men would jump to erroneous deductions as regards the meaning of Indian words. He writes that there was a hunting lodge in the Adirondacks called *Nehasne*, and the owner told all and sundry that the meaning of this Iroquois word was "Beaver on a log." Doubting the correctness of that etymology, someone got in touch with Iroquois-speaking persons and was told that it was a common enough expression meaning: "There it is! There it is!" They explained his delusion thus: Probably the owner of this lodge had been out hunting beavers in the company of two Iroquois guides. They came to a beaver dam but found no beaver. Finally, one of the Iroquois espied a beaver squatting on the end of a log. Excitedly he cried out to his companion: "Nehasne! Nehasne!" and at the same time pointed to the beaver on the log. The white man, overhearing this, immediately concluded that it meant *Beaver on a log*.

"The Etymology of Missisquoi" is itself proof of what a will-o'-the-wisp chase etymologizing on Indian names can be. At the conclusion of the book, after having consulted innumerable maps, read countless volumes, corresponded with numberless savants in the field of linguistics, Dr. MacAleer concludes: "This study was undertaken with an unbiased mind and it is ended without predilection." In other words, after all was said and done, the meaning of Missisquoi was still a mystery.

The New Hampshire State Development Commission likes to assert that "Winnepesaukee" means "the smile of the Great Spirit." Actually nothing in that word even remotely suggests either "smile" or "great" or "spirit." There is the word *nebes* or *nepes*, meaning *lake* or *region* or *territory*. It is anybody's guess what the initial syllable means; therefore, no one can be dogmatic about the word and state as a fact that it means this or that. The best that any ety-

mologist will do is to hazard a guess. I once asked Dr. Speck, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, how far back he had traced that erroneous etymology for "Winnepesaukee." He replied that he had come across it in the writings of the Jesuit Father Vetromile, missionary to some Maine Indians in the 1860's. In fact, one old Penobscot Indian named Lobal told him the following story and vouched for its authenticity: Once Father Vetromile was entertaining a visiting priest. Lobal and another Indian were paddling them lazily along the Penobscot River while the good Father was holding forth on the etymologies of this, that, and the other Indian name. When he came to the word "Winnepesaukee," he said, "Take the word 'Winnepesaukee,' for example. That means 'the smile of the Great Spirit'." Then he turned around to Lobal for confirmation. "Isn't that right, Lobal?" Lobal, drowsing over his paddle, assented with a nod, saying, "Yes, Father." When they reached their destination, the priests and the Indians parted company. Suddenly Lobal's partner upbraided him for supporting the Father in his error as to the meaning of "Winnepesaukee." Said he, "You had a good chance there to put an end to that nonsense about 'Winnepesaukee' meaning 'smile of the Great Spirit'." Lobal merely smiled and explained that it was such a beautiful afternoon, he was enjoying so the singing of the birds, the sighing of the wind in the trees, the skating of the insects over the water, that he just didn't want to spoil it all by starting an argument over something so inconsequential as the meaning of an Indian word. Lobal's viewpoint seemed to be: after all, if the white man liked to think that "Winnepesaukee" meant "the smile of the Great Spirit," what harm did it do? It wouldn't make or break the world whether "Winnepesaukee" meant that or something more prosaic like, let us say, pork and beans.

The linguistic difficulties of Father Vetromile with the Abenakis in Maine were paralleled by those of Father Aubery and other missionaries with the Abenakis of St. Francis. The Abenaki word for priest is *patlihoz*, from the French *patriarche*. Since the Abenakis always substitute the letter *l* for the letter *r*, they Indianized the French word *patriarche* into *patlihoz*. Well, there was nothing wrong in that. But sometime later the nuns put in an appearance. Since they were dressed in black like the priests, and led similar lives of prayer, meditation, and dedication to God, the Indians naturally assumed that these were wives of the priests. So they called the nuns *patlihozsqua*, or the *priest's wife*. No insinuation was intended. They just figured that since it was normal for every man to have a wife, this time the priest



had brought his wife with him; they were glad for him, knowing that he had heretofore led rather a lonely life, whereas now he would have someone to look after him. Needless to say, the priests were much exercised at first and went to no little trouble to explain that there was positively no relation whatsoever between the priests and the nuns. They even went a step further and forbade the use of the Indian word *patlihqzsqua*. But to no avail; as with the white man, so with the Indian: pass a law against anything, and that thing becomes all the more popular. To this day, the Abenakis still use the word *patlihqzsqua* when referring to a nun.

The missionaries did not make out so badly at that, when we consider the term wished upon the Trappist monks by the Iroquois on the Oka Reservation north of Montreal. Since the Indians live close to nature, they like to find names taken from plants or animals or birds with which they are familiar and apply them to new objects or persons they come across. In the case of the Trappists, the garb of that religious order brought to mind an analogy with a small animal, mostly black but with a white stripe lengthwise on his back. So the natural word for the Trappist, according to Indian deduction, was *Ratinitas*, which is Iroquois for *skunk*. This story was told to me by a missionary attached to one of the Iroquois Reservations in Canada; he chuckled goodnaturedly as he explained the meaning of the word *Ratinitas*, knowing full well that the Indians had not the slightest intention of being malicious or even disrespectful.

On the Abenaki Reservation of St. Francis, the old Indians still relate how much trouble the nuns had with the mischievous little boys when they first attempted to teach them the dogmas of the Christian Faith. The Sisters were pretty much dependent on the Indians for the translation of French words into Abenaki. One day a nun asked a boy: "How do you say 'morning prayers' in Abenaki?" The boy paused for a moment, then replied: "Segueskejakhigan." (Thar's Abenaki for *fricassee*.) The next question was a little more complicated: "Now, how should I say, 'To go to heaven you must say your prayers every morning'?" The Indian boy scratched his head for a moment, closed his eyes as in laborious concentration, as if contriving the correct answer in his mind, and came out with: "Chaga kadi llosa spemkik, kdachowiba mitsi segueskejakhigan attassi kisdad." (Real meaning: "In order to go to heaven, you must eat fricassee every day.") The unsuspecting nun committed the boy's answer to paper, and the next morning, at the opening of her classes, said in French: "Now we'll have to start the day right by first saying

our morning prayers, because, you know, if you want to go to heaven you must say your prayers every morning." Then she went on, in her halting Abenaki, hoping to reach those who did not yet understand French: "Chaga kadi llosa spemkik, kdachowiba mitsi segueskejakhigan attassi kisgad." On seeing the little Abenaki boys and girls look at one another, giggling behind their books, she immediately (and correctly) suspected that she had been given a wrong "steer" by her translator.

At other times the missionary would be led astray. It was necessary for him to obtain the Abenaki equivalents for those abstractions in which all religions abound. Unfortunately, the Indians had no use for the abstract: to them only the concrete was worth bothering with. Therefore, they had no words meaning *contrition*, *mortification*, *absolution*, *Extreme Unction*, and such. They had an abundance of words for the plants, for the animals, and for the birds; just for the moose, for example, they had no less than six different words according to whether it was a one-year-old male moose, or female moose, a two-year-old male moose, or female moose, etc. The same was true for many other animals. So that the Abenaki Indians did not encourage their missionaries too much in their questioning. To translate French terms into Abenaki meant too much strain on the Indian's lazy intellect. In most cases they would take the easiest way out and give the first word that in any way approximated the French idea. As an example, one Abenaki, on being called on to translate "Extreme Unction" in his dialect, answered, "Awassoswipemi." The good Father dutifully recorded the strange expression in his rudimentary lexicon, not at all suspecting that he was writing down the Abenaki equivalent of "bear grease." The Indians had observed that in giving the last rites the missionary would dip his finger in oil or grease (to an Indian the two being the same) and rub it on the body of the dying Indian. So they figured it must be bear grease. But imagine the missionary's surprise when next he visited a dying Abenaki and said to him, "K'dachwaldam awassospemi?" to have the moribund brighten up momentarily and say, "Kaalatta, n'mitogwes!"—"Sure, Father!" The priest had wanted to say, "Would you like to receive Extreme Unction?" What he actually had said was, "Wouldn't you like to have a little bear grease?" Now an Indian, even on his death-bed, is not going to refuse the gift of a bit of bear grease.

All his life the Indian used bear grease liberally: it made him handsome, he thought, by giving his skin a glistening appearance. He attributed the sickly appearance of the white man's skin to the fact

that the white man did not use bear grease. We are told that it was not unusual for an Indian to walk up to a white man, observe him closely, especially the white skin with hair growing all over it, then turn away in disgust muttering, "How ugly you are!" And he meant it too. There is no doubt about it, the Indians seemed to say, *we* are the superior race, if for no other reason than that we have the best-looking skin. The mental superiority of the white man, which they readily conceded, left them indifferent: to the Indians, the appearance of the skin was of far greater moment. As the eminent historian John Fiske well expressed it, "There never has existed, anywhere in the world, a people that did not take for granted its own pre-eminent superiority."

[Part II in January number]

