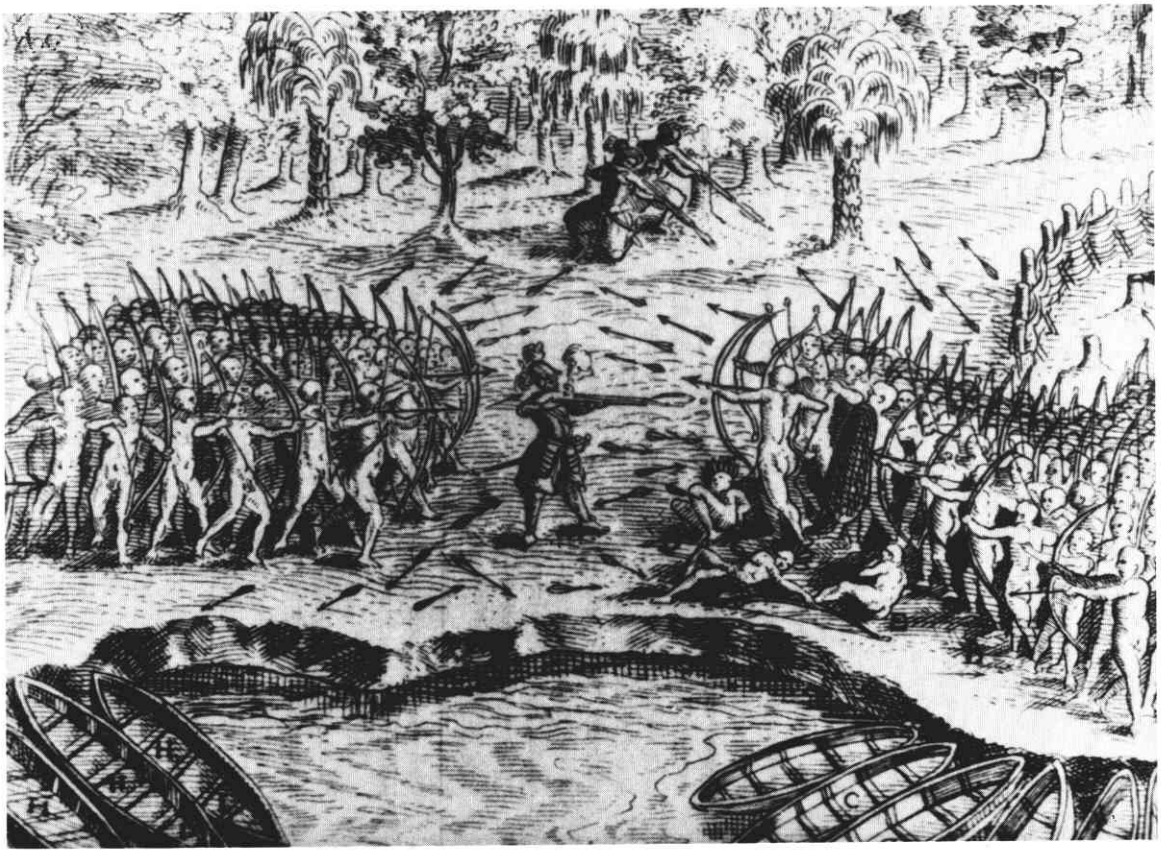


The French and Huron battle with the Iroquois on Lake Champlain in 1609.
***From The Ottawa Valley Portfolio,* Pat and Rosemarie Keough. Nahanni Productions Inc., Arnprior, Ontario.**

The Story of the Rise and Fall of Sainte Marie Among the Hurons

Gordon A. Longfield

The singing you would have just heard when I spoke is in the tongue of one of the major North American Indian tribes. They were once the proud Huron Nation living at the time of my story in what is now southern Ontario, between the Great Lakes, just south east of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron.

Look for them no more. Their descendants no longer exist in pure form and the Huron tongue is no longer spoken in the world.

The story I am about to relate has to do with the demise of a people and the part early firearms played in their total destruction on the American frontier.

The time I refer to is the first half of the 17th Century and the place of my story is that part of North America to include the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence river basin, what is now New England and upper New York State in the very area where we now sit, and to a lesser extent it involves the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys extending to Louisiana.

Apart from the Vikings from Scandinavia, who most certainly reached major land masses in the North Atlantic and on the east cost of North America by the 8th and 9th Centuries A.D., French and Portuguese fishermen were probably the first Europeans who made annual voyages from Europe to America to obtain fish on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland in the 15th Century. Their names are not recorded because they failed to advertise their presence.

However, Jacques Cartier, known as "the discoverer of Canada," raised the flag of France on the Gaspe peninsula in 1534. In his own journal he records that French and Portuguese fishing vessels were at anchor in the bay when he arrived. So you can see at once the importance of publicizing what we accomplish if we are to become famous.

For most of the next Century, following the voyage of Jacques Cartier, there was increased presence of French explorers and fishermen on the east coast of North America, seeking cod fish and furs to take to the markets of Europe.

In 1608, Samuel de Champlain, known as the Father of New France, sailed up the St. Lawrence river to the site of the natural fortress named Kebec (Quebec). Here, below the huge rock promontory, which rises almost vertically 335 feet above the river, he built his first habitation during the summer of 1608.

During the first year fewer than fifty Frenchmen made the Habitation at Quebec their home; each summer additional men and women from France joined the settlement at Quebec. Champlain had, prior to 1608, explored the coastline of what is now New England and the Maritime provinces of Canada. After giving his report of his voyages back in France, Louis XIII, King of France, gave instructions which were threefold:

A) Exploration

B) Colonization

C) Bring Christianity to the Native aboriginal peoples of North America.

Within a year of Champlain's arrival and settlement at Quebec, the surrounding Indian tribes found it to their advantage to trade furs which they possessed to the Europeans for useful tools and utensils made of metal which they did not possess. Trade items which the Indians eventually desired included clothing, woolens, silver decorative objects and, of course, guns, traps and whiskey.

Word spread quickly and Indians from ever greater distances repaired to Quebec to trade furs for European goods heretofore unavailable to them.

It seems almost certain that in the 1608-09 period, all Indian braves were totally unfamiliar with firearms, which were in short supply even among the French. We do know that Champlain and his soldier companions brought with them to America a number of matchlock arquebus muskets.

The native Indian warriors were unable to understand the technology involved with firearms and at first were convinced that the French carried "thundersticks" which could strike instant death to persons and animals at a distance after a loud report like thunder. They considered at first that the whole thing was nothing short of magic or the supernatural.

The Huron tribe I referred to earlier were linguistically closely related to the Iroquois of the Mohawk valley of New York State and actually sprang from the same roots. Nevertheless, they had for centuries been mortal enemies, and from unrecorded times had engaged almost continually in warfare with each other for the taking of captives, plunder and young squaws. It was also a proving ground for young warriors.

Champlain was impressed with the Huron braves who made a 1000 mile journey from Huronia, where they lived, to Quebec in order to trade.

A "Mousquettier" (French?) with arquebuss: from Jacob de Gheyn, *The Exercise of Arms*, S'Graven Hage, 1607.

Champlain saw in them the perfect tribe to carry out his third mandate of the King of France, to bring Christianity to these stone age creatures. He therefore studied and learned the spoken Huron tongue (spoken only and not a written language), and begged to be allowed to return with them to their Huronia so that he might study the possibility of setting up a mission in their midst.

The Hurons were reluctant to allow Champlain into their home territory, but finally sometime during the spring or summer of 1609, they agreed to allow him to journey with them back to Huronia, provided he first accompany a Huron war party into New York State.

Naturally the arquebus muskets which the French possessed were calculated to bring destruction to the Iroquois in what is now New York State.

I quote an account of this encounter as recorded in Champlain's own journal. Champlain and his two companions concealed themselves in preparation for their moment of glory. Their muskets were their secret weapons. The story must be told by Champlain alone:

> I saw the enemy come out of their barricade to the number of two hundred, in appearance strong, robust men. They came slowly to meet us with a gravity and calm which I admired; and at their head were three Chiefs. Our Indians likewise advanced. The Iroquois had not yet noticed my white companions off in the woods. Our Indians began to make way for me and put me ahead some twenty yards and I marched on until I was within some thirty yards of the enemy. . .who halted and gazed at me and I at them.
>
> When I saw them make a move to draw their bows. . . I shot straight at one of the three Chiefs, and with this shot two fell to the ground and one of their companions was wounded. I had put four bullets into my arquebus.
>
> There must have been terror among the Iroquois as they found that their wood and hemp shields were useless.
>
> Then from the woods, the two other Frenchmen joined in and fired more volleys. The skirmish was over in seconds, and within three hours the Huron warriors were headed home. But they did not leave until the Indian rituals of victory had been indulged in to the fullest.

What followed was a barbaric celebration designed not only to enforce victory, but to drive home the extent of the defeat. Champlain could not have been a stranger to the "spoils of war" nor to the idea of brutal vengeance taken out on the vanquished; Europe in this Century knew its own barbarism. Nonetheless, Champlain tried to intercede, but could not stop the killing and torture:

> Meanwhile our Indians kindled a fire, and when it was well lighted, each took a brand and burned this poor wretch a little at a time in order to make him suffer the greater torment. Sometimes they would leave off, throwing water on his back. They tore out his nails and applied fire to the ends of his fingers and to his membrum virile. Afterwards they scalped him and caused a certain kind of gum to drip very hot upon the crown of his head. When he was dead, they were not satisfied; they opened his body and threw his entrails into the lake. They cut his heart into several pieces which they offered to his brother and other companions who were prisoners.
>
> When this execution was over, we set out upon our return with the rest of our prisoners, who went along continually singing without other expectation than to be tortured.

There was a terrible price to pay for this battle between the Iroquois and the French and their Huron allies. Because of this small victory, which incidentally took place in the general vicinity of our meeting, it placed the powerful Iroquois Confederacy on the warpath, and, as you will see, caused the extinction of the Huron Nation and the destruction of Sainte Marie. Never again would a battle in America be so easily won by the French. For one hundred and fifty years the Iroquois would fight their new enemy, the French, proving that the four musket balls from Champlain's arquebus were the most expensive metal in the early history of this Continent. Champlain had only temporarily stunned the Iroquois with his weaponry. They would recover all too soon and obtain firearms from the English and Dutch of New York State and learn how to use them.

Champlain and his French soldiers made subsequent raids on the Iroquois in 1610 and during the next few years. Thus an alliance was forged between the French and the Huron Nation.

The allegiance was eventually sufficiently strong so that Champlain was permitted to return with the Huron warriors after their annual trading trip to Quebec in 1615. Champlain, Etienne Brûle and a French Jesuit priest, Father Le Caron as well as sixteen Frenchmen set out from Quebec to spend the winter of 1615 and 1616 in Huronia among the Huron villages.

In the spring of 1616 he amassed a force of approximately 500 warriors at Cahiagué near present day Orillia, Ontario

They travelled overland to Sturgeon Lake, through Pigeon Lake, Buckhorn, Upper Chemong, Clear Lake, Otonabee Rivers and into Rice Lake. They exited through the Trent River, into the Bay of Quinte at the site of present day Trenton, Ontario. They crossed into New York State at the eastern end of Lake Ontario at the Thousand Islands and eventually on October 11th, 1616, engaged the Iroquois at a fortress on Lake Onondaga near present day Syracuse, New York.

The Indian fortress which they attacked was enclosed by four stout palisades and was the best Indian fortress Champlain had ever seen.

The attack went poorly and became a rout. Champlain himself was wounded by arrows in the leg and knee and could not stand. He was carried away from the scene of battle on the back of a Huron brave.

This event made clear to both Hurons and Iroquois that Champlain and the French were not invincible even with the advantage of their muzzle loading matchlock arquebuses.

Champlain was bitter over the Huron lack of discipline and their failure to follow the plan of attack. The element of surprise attack was entirely lost by his inability to control the Huron warriors, who immediately launched a disorganized offensive as soon as their canoes reached the shore.

Consequently he suffered loss of omniscience in their eyes and subsequently the Hurons were less willing to follow his orders.

Nevertheless the alliance between the French and the Huron Nation continued and was strengthened by trade of goods and the presence of the French at Huron villages in Huronia.

When the Hurons first met the French they were not at all impressed. The Hurons, indeed, considered themselves physically and intellectually superior. They considered themselves much more handsome and particularly disliked the beards and excessive hairiness of the French. Most of you will know that purebred North American Indians have minimal facial and body hair. They shaved the sides of their heads and pulled the scanty facial hair using clam shells as tweezers. They particularly disliked beards which they thought reduced a person's intelligence. They also looked down on the French as helpless wimps who had to be assisted by the Hurons in order to survive the first years in the wilderness.

The French were quick to adopt Indian skills in hunting, fishing and stalking of game. The French also quickly adapted to Indian moccasins and clothing to aid survival and learned how to make birch-bark canoes and how to shoot rapids.

Champlain died in Quebec on Christmas Day, 1635. However, his efforts came to fruition in 1639 when a dedicated band of Jesuits took an inspired step beyond the known to found the first inland European settlement north of Mexico. The site was named "Sainte Marie Among the Hurons" and was a pallisaded community of some twenty buildings set in a plain near the shores of Georgian Bay and surrounded by almost impenetrable forest. It was almost fifteen hundred miles from the eastern seaboard of Canada.

A Huron Warrior. From *The Covenant Chain - Indian Ceremonial and Trade Silver.* National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Canada.

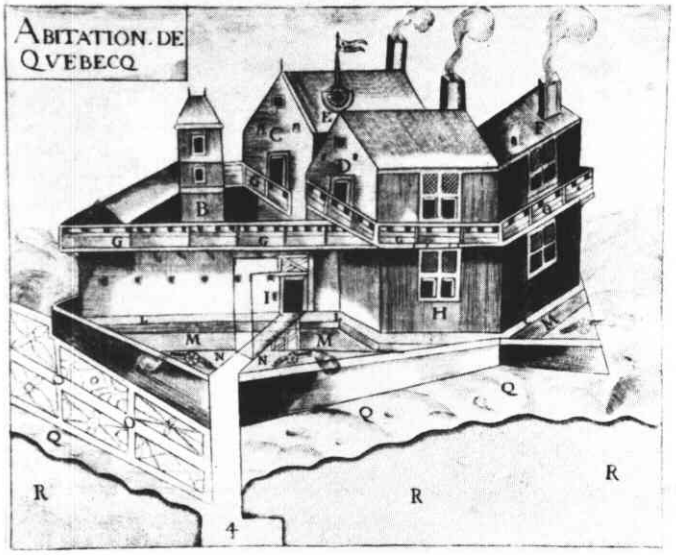
At its peak, Sainte Marie housed one-fifth of all the European population of New France. But the Mission was short-lived. Caught up in Iroquois raids on Huronia, Sainte Marie was destroyed by its builders only a decade after its inception.

Jesuit priests who accompanied the traders and explorers into Huronia made slight progress in bringing Christianity to the savages.

Before the French came, the Hurons lived in twenty to twenty-five villages in an 800 square mile area between Lake Simcoe and the Eastern shores of Georgian Bay.

The Confederacy was composed of four tribes: The Bear Tribe, the largest, lived in the extreme west; next was the Cord, then the Deer, and in the east, the Rock. Although these tribes were inter-related, they carried on their business affairs independently of one another and came together only for special feasts, ceremonies, or war.

One of the largest villages, Cahiagué of the Rock tribe was thought to have 4500 to 5000 inhabitants in the early 1600s. Huron villages were generally located on high, well drained land, near a creek or spring, and the main ones were fortified with a protective palisade of saplings laboriously felled with stone axes in the nearby forest. The largest villages archaeologists find had about fifty longhouses, some of them more than 100 feet in length. They were constructed by placing elm bark over a frame of saplings tied together



Champlain's *Habitation* in Quebec, 1608. From a 5¢ 1908 Canadian postage stamp of the Quebec Tercentennial issue, 1608-1908.

with smaller branches or vines. Each longhouse was inhabited by eight to ten families related through the female line.

Corn was the staple food. It has been estimated that the Hurons must have had several thousand acres under cultivation to feed the population which Champlain, by counting fires, estimated at 30,000 to 35,000 people.

The Hurons traded surplus corn with neighboring neutral and Petun tribes for dried fish and meat, tobacco and wampum and with Algonkin tribes as far away as Lake Nipissing for beaver, deer, highly prized black squirrel skins, copper and charms. All trade was dominated by, and carried out in, the language of the Hurons. Trade was very ritualistic.

For the Hurons everything was inhabited by spirits, some bad, some good. Sharing was encouraged and accumulation of goods and wealth frowned upon. Courting rituals involved sexual intimacy, usually shortly after puberty, before a woman decided to accept a suitor. Marriage, although easily broken, was monogamous while a relationship lasted and children were especially loved and well cared for.

Many Hurons did not suffer gladly the intrusion of the French into their community and lives. They were quick to note that with the presence of "The Black Robes" came disease to which the Hurons had no natural immunity. Thousands of Hurons died from measles, smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis and many of the Huron braves advocated killing these Europeans or at least banishing them from Huronia. The majority, however, were willing to put up with the missionaries because they wanted to continue the benefits of trading with the French.

They were also quick to note that the priest's hasty baptism of the hopelessly ill was often immediately followed by death. Only limited number of Hurons adopted Christianity, while the majority clung to their own beliefs and culture. Some underwent conversion to Christianity, thinking it would advance them in the eyes of the French traders in Quebec.

Incidentally, the French traders had to continue the ritual of trading demanded by the Indians of all tribes. To the Indian, the ritual was at least as important as the articles obtained in trade. Several days of ceremony always had to precede the actual trading, at which time the chieftans received gifts, particularly of rich fancy clothing, firearms, metal axes and silver articles. The French watched with great attention to see what the Indian chose in trade. The physical shape, colour and texture were very important to the savage. The Europeans could never understand why they traded often for useless beads and pieces of glass rather than practical items which would enhance their lifestyle. The Indian particularly liked mirrors and articles made of sterling silver. They were quick to reject articles of a more base nature such as brass or german silver in favour of sterling.

Thus the Mission at Sainte Marie continued with dubious success from its founding in 1639 until March 17th, 1649 (350 years ago).

Father Brebeuf and Father Lallemant were at the outlying village of St. Louis on that Sunday morning when runners from St. Ignace to the east brought word that the Iroquois had fallen on their village, killing all except for a few who ran off into the woods.

Brebeuf and Lallemant at this time saw smoke from the burning of St. Ignace. They rejected going immediately to Sainte Marie where they would have been safe, at least for the time, but rather elected to return to St. Ignace to do what they could to bring some measure of peace to their converts.

History records that Father Brebeuf and Lallemant were horribly tortured by hot metal objects and slow mutilation applied by the Iroquois, who were most adept in the art of inflicting suffering on their victims. We are told that Brebeuf, who was a very strong giant of a man, did not yield to death for almost 24 hours after the attack.

Smoke from the burning outlying villages of St. Louis and St. Ignace was noted by the forty-five or so Europeans living at Sainte Marie. They hastily decided to set fire to their beloved Sainte Marie rather than see it fall into the hands of the invading Iroquois. Thus in a matter of an hour they saw the work of a decade go up in smoke.

They slipped away quietly with whatever they could carry to Christian Island in Georgian Bay, where they barely survived for another year.

By that time they realized it was futile to carry on and they reluctantly returned to France. The Huron Nation, which had been reduced through diseases, was literally decimated and destroyed. The Iroquois systematically fell on one village after another until all were burned and destroyed. Men, women, and children of all ages were massacred. Only some three to four hundred escaped westward and down the Mississippi to Louisiana where they eventually intermarried with southern Indians, French and Spanish. Today no pure Hurons exist. The Huron tongue is no longer spoken.

For almost two Centuries after the burning of Huronia people gave a wide birth to this area of Ontario, believing it might still be inhabited by evil spirits and the ghosts of those who lost their lives. Occasional hunting parties dared

to venture into the area and early maps marked the site of Sainte Marie as old French Ruins.

In the last half of the 19th Century the area was surveyed and settlers began to clear farms.

Not until 1942 and 1943 did Mr. Kenneth E. Kidd of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto undertake archaeological studies of the site. Between 1948 and 1951 Mr. Wilfred Jury of the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario undertook more detailed studies on behalf of the Ontario Government. Jury was able to show that the palisaded Mission at Sainte Marie was much more extensive than previously believed. The Jesuits were required to make frequent reports to France on activities at Sainte Marie.

Jury was able to gain much information from these reports, called "Relations". He visited France to study building construction of that period and, with extensive archaeological work, was able to direct the reconstruction of the Mission of Sainte Marie located 1000 miles inland from Quebec City.

In all probability the reconstruction is so accurate that Father Brebeuf and Father Lallemant together with their associates and Donneś would be able to find their way without difficulty in the dark to the various shops, stables and dwellings within the compound.

For many years the locations of St. Ignace & St. Louis were unknown. An aged, uneducated labourer from Midland Ontario who knew the country well from many years of hunting and fishing the area suggested, just before World War II, the only likely sites from descriptions in the Jesuit Relations. Archaeological studies have now confirmed without a shadow of a doubt the location of St. Louis and St. Ignace, upon which the Iroquois fell on Sunday morning March 17, 1649. Post mould from the massive central supporting post of the Church at St. Ignace has been uncovered and it almost certainly marks the exact site around which Brebauf and Lallemant underwent unspeakable torture at the hands of the invading Iroquois.

Ste. Marie Among the Hurons from the Wye River. From the book *Ste. Marie Among the Hurons.*

Thus we see the full price paid by the Hurons, by the Jesuits, and ultimately by the French nation, who lost their North American colonies, as a result of the use of firearms. When Samuel de Champlain fired his arquebus on the unsuspecting Iroquois, here in this very area where we are now, he sealed the doom of a proud and powerful Indian Confederacy. The Hurons are gone forever. Only the colorful historic account of their destruction remains.

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The Casino