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The Christian Mohawk Chief

by Rev. Edward J. Byrne, D.D., Ph.D.

A commemorative monument, bearing a bronze tablet with an inscription in perpetuation of the name and character of Athasata, "Kryn," "the great Mohawk," as he was called by the Dutch, English and French contemporaries, is proposed for erection in the autumn near the entrance of Powder Mill Park on the old Indian trail now followed by the main highway between Pittsford and Victor.

As public interest will thereby be aroused concerning the great Indian thus honored, it is proper that the readers of the CATHOLIC COURIER, which for years has been rendering praiseworthy service in publishing historical data concerning the beginning of the Christian religion and civilization in the diocese of Rochester, should have first-hand information concerning this little recognized historical figure of the second half of the seventeenth century.

During the past summer at various places where once stood the principal villages of the Seneca Indians, there were held celebrations commemorative of the 250th anniversary of the De Nonville Expedition in 1687 against the Seneca Indians. A commemorative medal of the anniversary was issued.

The erection of a monument to the great chief who led the Indian forces which made up one-third of the De Nonville army is therefore a timely event.

There are other reasons for its opportuneness. A not uncommon opinion concerning the De Nonville Expedition is that it was purely a military invasion of the country of the Seneca whose lands were coveted by the French. That is a view, in part, a correct one, but it is undoubtedly true, since the French like the Dutch and the English undoubtedly desired trade and territory. But that it represents the whole truth, a complete picture of the reality, is untrue.

The DeNonville Expedition was planned by the French Governor of New France or Canada shortly after he assumed office, because says O. H. Marshall, an authority on the subject, "he found it necessary to restrain the ferocity and curb the pride of the Iroquois, who maintained a tone of insolent defiance towards the colony."

The expedition was largely of a punitive nature, designed to punish the Senecas in particular for their raids against the French colony and against the Indian tribes which the French had befriended.

The Iroquois had utterly destroyed the Huron nation in 1649; the destruction of the Neutral Nation, occupying territory on both sides of the Niagara, had soon afterwards been accomplished; then the Eries were attacked. None of the Indian tribes outside the Iroquois Confederacy, even those lying far to the west, seem to have been free from attack.

Many of these tribes were friendly to and favored by the French. So when De Nonville undertook to organize an expedition against the ferocious Iroquois, there was not much difficulty in enlisting the help of other long-suffering tribes. One-third of the Army of De Nonville was made up of Indian forces. It has been calculated that in those Indian forces 18 tribes were represented. So that it is not accurate to characterize the De Nonville Expedition as a purely French invasion of the Seneca territory.

Athasata, whose memory is commemorated by the monument near Powder Mill Park on the route followed by De Nonville, commanded at least the Christian Iroquois who were with the Indian forces.

There are some authorities who think that he commanded the entire Indian section which made up one-third of the De Nonville army. He

had already distinguished himself as a leader in battle. The English at Albany referred to him as "the Indian General."

It is therefore very probable that he may have, as some historians hold, commanded the entire Indian force of De Nonville's army.

The Governor himself, in a letter to M. de Seignelay, wrote: "I cannot speak too highly of the assistance we received from the 'Great Mohawk.' Our Christian Indians surpassed all and performed deeds of valor, especially the Iroquois, upon whom we had not dared to rely to fight against their relatives." Athasata therefore is worthy of commemoration, as an eminent Indian leader of the De Nonville Expedition.

Willing To Die For Treaty

But it was not in war alone that this Indian distinguished himself. It is recorded of him that he was a faithful observer of the obligation of treaties and that on one occasion he even told the infuriated Iroquois that he was determined to die in defense of a treaty which had been concluded between the Iroquois and the French.

In this he set a noble example to both parties, which at times were lax in observance of such sacred obligations. This reverence for treaties Athasata owed at least in a height-

and other such works. The evidence of modest heroism, therein contained, speaks for itself.

But the labors of the Jesuit missionaries among the Iroquois were not unsuccessful, were not without permanent results. It is true that there are at the present time very few Catholic Indians living on the reservations in the State of New York.

The reason for this is that even in the time of the Catholic missions among the Iroquois Indians many of the converts to Christianity retired, whenever possible, from central New York to the Christian villages of Canada on the northern shore of Lake Ontario and along the St. Lawrence River, where they were able to fulfill more easily the obligations of the Christian religion.

But aside from the Christian emigrants to Canada, there existed, during the period of the activity of the Jesuit missionaries in the Iroquois country, flourishing groups of Christian converts in the cantons themselves. It was only when the French Jesuits were driven out and a price put on their heads by the English Colonial authorities that the number of Christians in the Iroquois country was further lessened by the emigration of Christian Indians who followed the Blackrobes to Canada.

Many of those who did not then emigrate, remained faithful in their homes in Central New York and kept in contact with and were secretly ministered to by the missionaries of Canada.

Catholic Iroquois have, for the most part, departed from the land of their fathers; but in a large measure they have kept the faith elsewhere. They exist in families scattered over various parts of Canada and the western parts of the United States. They flourish in groups in various localities, particularly in the vil-

lages and towns where they were long ago settled by their Spiritual Fathers. Some of these communities are among the most cultured centers of modern Indian life in America today.

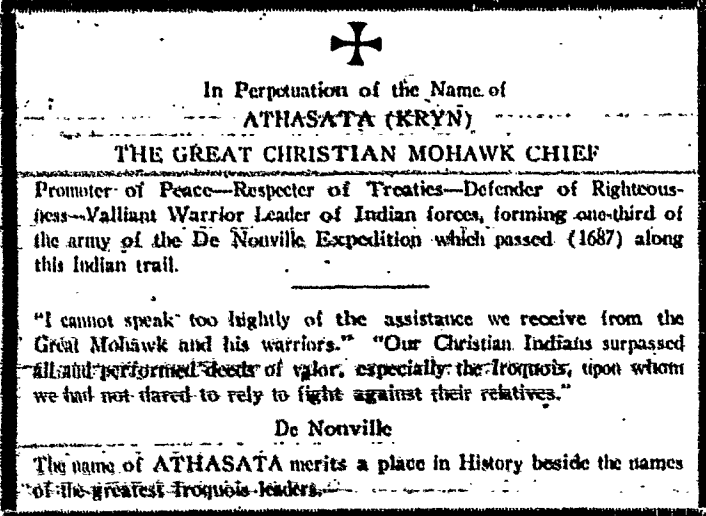
Let anyone skeptical of this assertion visit the Catholic Indian villages of the Province of Quebec. Let him visit, for instance, the village of Caughnawaga in the neighborhood of Montreal. There, as elsewhere, he will find ample evidence that the labors of the Jesuits among the Iroquois were not a failure but have borne abundant fruits which in turn have produced good seed for the propagation of the Christian religion elsewhere.

It is not commonly known, for instance, that the introduction of Christian Missionaries among the Indians of the Rocky Mountain district and of the northern Pacific was due to repeated invitations from the Flathead and other Indian tribes there, due to the persuasion of emigrant Indians from Caughnawaga. Thus began among them the work of the great Father De Smet, which his successors have continued to this day.

The success of the Jesuits among the Iroquois of central New York before 1687 in the Iroquois country was attested in a striking manner in a letter of the Earl of Bellomont, Governor of the province of New York to the Lords of Trade in London, England, written at New York, on the 17th of October, 1700.

To understand this letter it is necessary to remember that Jesuit missions had been going on at intervals from 1642, when St. Isaac Jogues first came as captive to the Mohawks, up to 1687, the time of De Nonville's army, when all Frenchmen left the territory of the Iroquois.

From 1687 to 1700 no Jesuit missionaries were among the Iroquois;



Inscription of the monument to be erected near the entrance to Powder Mill Park between Pittsford and Victor on the route of De Nonville