

## The Native Peoples of Flint & Feather

By **Bob Murch** with thanks to Lee Van Schaik & Roderick Robertson

The miniatures game Flint & Feather (our title is borrowed from a famed book of poetry by Canadian/Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson) is a semi-historical table-top skirmish game set in the legendary pre-European contact period of the Eastern Woodlands of North America. The primary antagonists of this setting are an indigenous culture and language group collectively known in modern times as the Iroquoian peoples. The term 'Iroquoian' should not be confused with the name 'Iroquois', as that name specifically refers to the people of the Iroquois or *Haudenosaunee* confederation of tribes. Iroquoian refers instead to a larger area of culture and language much in the same way as the name 'Celtic' refers to the ancient European culture and language group.

This article will attempt to differentiate some of the major tribal combatants of Flint & Feather and place them within their historical (or pre-historical) time and place before the arrival of European guns, germs and steel. It will also attempt to explain their fascinating warrior culture and put forward some of the conjectural reasons behind their many conflicts with one another and how we incorporated this culture into the Flint & Feather game.

### The Peoples

Let us begin with the location of the Flint and Feather world. The Iroquoian peoples lived, for the most part, in areas of modern central and western New York State and south eastern and southern Ontario. It is an area of deciduous forest, networked by numerous rivers and dominated by Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Lake Huron and the St. Lawrence River. This land is rolling and quite fertile, which was of advantage to the peoples who lived here as they were agriculturalists, growing the 'Three Sisters': maize, beans and squash. Iroquoian peoples lived in sizable settlements, sometimes in groups of up to 2000 people. Of their other major activities, hunting, fishing and trade figured prominently, as did warfare. They lived in villages of large bark-covered longhouses that were often encircled by palisades for defense. The fields of Maize must have stretched for considerable distances around the villages. Summers in this region are hot and often humid. The winters are cold and snowy. Winter was usually a time when hunkering down to survive was the primary concern. Warfare was seldom conducted during this season.

Our description of the various Iroquoian people begins in the region of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay with the Huron Confederacy. Known to themselves as the *Wendat* people, the Wendat nation was one of the largest and most powerful groups. At one time they lived on the north shore of Lake Ontario but at some point moved up to the Georgian Bay region, possibly so they could dominate the trade routes upon which native wealth and prosperity depended. Even before the European fur trade, transport of essentials and luxury goods formed a critical part of North American civilization. The Wendat were adept

middlemen when it came to moving goods from one part of the continent to another. Valuable goods included native copper and silver, exotic shell, and raw flint which was essential for making tools. Agricultural products, primarily maize, was also in demand by Algonquian peoples to the north. Modern archeology has shown that Native trade was considerable and the Wendat were well situated to be a critical nexus point of that trade. It was this economic factor that led to the strength of the Wendat Confederation.

To the south west of Huronia lived the *Petun* or Tobacco Indians, also called the Tionontati. They formed a smaller nation that remained relatively friendly to the Wendat. South of the Petun lived the people we call the Neutral Indians. These were also Iroquoian peoples and because of their location in Southern Ontario, living first along the Thames and then the Grand River, they formed a buffer between the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The Wendat called the Neutral Indians *Attawanderon*, which roughly translated means, 'those who speak a slightly different language'. We do not know what the Attawanderon called themselves. Despite their pacifistic name, the Neutral/Attawanderon engaged in quite ferocious warfare. In the historic period it was recorded that they went to war with the Fire Nation to their west. Approximately 2000 Attawanderon warriors besieged 900 enemies in a palisaded town that eventually fell with dire consequences to the defenders who suffered severely at their hands.

The Wenrohronon originally lived on the north-east side of Lake Erie but Haudenosaunee pressure forced them into Southern Ontario to seek protection from the Wendat Nation with whom they eventually merged.

Finally we come to the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederation. The Haudenosaunee were made up of five previously-warring tribes that eventually came into an alliance under the guidance of the semi-mythical chief known to us as Hiawatha. These tribes were the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Seneca and the Cayuga. In terms of cohesive strength, the Wendat were their only significant Iroquoian rivals. The Haudenosaunee war parties regularly crossed from New York State into Southern Ontario. These small raiding parties, or occasionally larger armies, were intent on capturing numbers of captives and booty. The 'Iroquois' have earned a historical reputation for being fearless and ferocious warriors. This is primarily due, in my opinion, to the fact that the wars of the historical period eventually saw the near complete destruction and absorption of the other Iroquoian confederations by around 1680. The Haudenosaunee came out victorious which enabled them to go on in history to take a prominent place in the later story of North America. They were likely, however, no less or no more war-like than the other Iroquoians. It was more probable that the Haudenosaunee access to European firearms gave them a distinct advantage in their final great war with the Wendat which was fought over control of the fur trade. With the fall of their primary rival, the Haudenosaunee were then able to freely finish off and absorb the Attawanderon and Tionontati tribes with little opposition. In other words, the introduction of the musket, with which the Haudenosaunee were well equipped with before the other tribes, tipped the delicate balance of power that had previously existed for centuries.

We should also note the Algonquian Peoples who were the northern neighbors of the Iroquoians. The Algonquians were/are a different culture and language group from their southern neighbors. Some of the tribes who were part of this stock were the Ottawa, the Montagnais and the Mississauga. Northern

Algonquian peoples were hunter/gatherers and did not, for the most part, engage in farming. However, the agricultural products of the Iroquoians were greatly desired as a cache of maize could mean the difference between surviving a harsh winter in the pine forests of the Canadian Shield, or not. The Wendat were usually good trading partners with the Algonquians. The Haudenosaunee on the southern bank of the St. Lawrence River often had a more antagonistic relationship with the Montagnais and Ottawa tribes.

## **Reasons for Conflict**

The Iroquoians were, by most estimates, almost constantly in a state of war to one degree or another. But what were the causes leading to this? One of the problems we have in determining circumstances of pre-contact Native cultures is the fact that they were pre-literate societies. Most knowledge was transferred by oral tradition and so, as with the story of Hiawatha and the Peace Maker's unification of the Five Nations into the Haudenosaunee Confederation, we have only a mythological explanation behind which lies a historical reality. Europeans arrived in the New World in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and for the next 100 years made only halting progress in exploring Eastern North America. Mostly they clung with trepidation to the Eastern seaboard. This reticence, however, did not prevent European goods and technology from making its way inland via ancient and established trading routes. These materials, especially metal tools in the form of iron axes, arrow heads, knives and copper kettles, had a significant impact on the Iroquoians even long before they first saw an actual European in person. This period of European influence before actual contact is known by archeologists as the proto-historical period which is the time between pre-historic and historic. It is this misty period that must have seen significant changes in Iroquoian societies before the first explorer or missionary ever met these peoples and began recording details about their cultures. As a result of this factor we must resort to archeological sources and conjecture based upon the later historical records, and to the mythology that has been passed down to us, to form some opinions about the reasons leading to warfare in Iroquoian civilization.

Iroquoian society was rigidly structured. Women were responsible for managing most of the affairs inside of the villages as well as planting and tending the crops. The men were responsible for clearing the land in preparation for planting, as well as hunting, trade and warfare. There were two classes of Chief: the Village or Peace Chief, and the War Chief. Both of these roles were considered a great honor and responsibility. When deciding who would be granted these titles, the matriarchs of the tribe were the political power. Women also held the ability to displace a given Chief with a more worthy appointee. Power within Iroquoian society was granted, not taken, and in many ways they were a true democracy. In order for men to achieve greater status, they needed to be seen to be selfless and generous providers for the people and defenders of the village. Trade and hunting were prominent ways to bring home wealth to the people and thus gain in status. Warfare was another way to rise in society.

*In the Flint & Feather game we have focused on these War Chiefs. Players will be represented on the tabletop by a Great Warrior figure. These represent the same warriors that aspire to be War Chief. The*

*Warband that a player creates based around his Great Warrior represents his close friends, dubbed Companions, and War Bearers, other warriors from the tribe who are inspired to join the Great Warrior on a raid or hunt. The Flint and Feather game brings focus to these real historical personalities during warband construction.*

Warfare had many larger practical benefits to the society. It could enable a tribe to gain control of critical trade routes or bring home captives who could be absorbed into the tribe and increase their numbers and ultimately their strength. Through warfare, new hunting territory could be established or new land acquired to settle. This was important to Iroquoian villages, which would exhaust the surrounding land of its fertility and fire wood and need to relocate every 15 years or so.

On a personal level, warfare was a dramatic way for a young man to demonstrate his courage and intelligence and rise in personal status. A man who consistently proved himself in fighting the tribe's enemies, achieving martial goals with minimal losses to the tribe's young men, would eventually be granted War Chief status. A War Chief who continued to lead well could become the Peace Chief of the village upon achieving elder status. It was a meritocratic system and political power was earned, not inherited or lightly granted.

*In the Flint & Feather game your Warband is created by using gifts of furs to persuade warriors to accompany your leader on an expedition. This group then stays together as a hunting or war party during the course of a campaign. Young, untested warriors or 'Striplings' play an important role in the game because they are the future warriors of the tribe. The Stripling is the young teenager out to learn from the older warriors. Capturing Striplings in the game is almost as advantageous as capturing the Great Warrior himself, as it is the responsibility of the other warriors to take care of the youths. Losing a Stripling in a tabletop skirmish is important in determining who wins the particular scenario.*

## **Conclusion**

Some scholars have attempted to minimize pre-contact native warfare as almost a sport, with armies of warriors facing off and shooting arrows at one another until one side takes a few casualties and retreats, granting victory to their opponents. I don't think this picture bears up with the facts. Archeological evidence shows us that palisaded villages existed long before Europeans arrived. A society, especially one that has to fell trees with stone tools, does not invest such energy into defense if their opponents are only a marginal threat. A palisaded village strongly argues for a population concerned with considerable threat from neighbors who might be intent upon total conquest. The historically recorded warrior culture of the Iroquoians also describes a people who are adept and well-practiced at the art of war. While it is likely that the small war-party and hit and run tactics, of which we are familiar with from the historic period, were part of the strategy and tactics of the Iroquoians, it is also highly likely that large and determined forces were, at times, fielded to achieve broader political goals.

In developing the Flint & Feather game, we have engaged in considerable research into the late pre-historic period of the Eastern Woodlands Indians. We have also endeavored to bring, in what is in my opinion, an epic and immensely colourful, but quite overlooked, period to life on the table-top. We hope you enjoy the results.

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