

# **An Indian Boy's Story**

Daniel La France

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I was born in Gouverneur Village, N. Y., in April, 1879, during one of the periodical wanderings of my family, and my first recollection is concerning a house in Toronto, Canada, in which I was living with my father and mother, brother and grandmother. I could not have been much more than three years old at the time.

My father was a pure-blooded Indian of the Mohawk tribe of the Six Nations, and our home was in the St. Regis reservation in Franklin County, N. Y., but we were frequently away from that place because my father was an Indian medicine man, who made frequent journeys, taking his family with him and selling his pills and physics in various towns along the border line between Canada and the United States.

This house in Toronto was winter quarters for us. In the summer time we lived in a tent. We had the upper part of the house, while some gypsies lived in the lower part.

All sorts of people came to consult the "Indian doctor," and the gypsies sent them upstairs to us, and mother received them, and then retired into another room with my brother and myself. She did not know anything about my father's medicines, and seemed to hate to touch them. When my father was out mother was frequently asked to sell the medicines, but she would not, telling the patients that they must wait until the doctor came home. She was not pure-blooded Indian, her father being a French Canadian, while her mother, my grandmother, was a pure-blooded Indian, who lived with us.

What made it all the more strange that mother would have nothing to do with the medicines was the fact that grandmother was, herself, a doctor of a different sort than my father. Her remedies were probably the same but in cruder form. I could have learned much if I had paid attention to her, because as I grew older she took me about in the woods when she went there to gather herbs, and she told me what roots and leaves to collect, and how to dry and prepare them and how to make the extracts and what sicknesses they were good for. But I was soon tired of such matters, and would stray off by myself picking the berries — raspberry and blackberry, strawberry and blueberry — in their seasons, and hunting the birds and little animals with my bow and arrows. So I learned very little from all this lore.

My father was rather a striking figure. His hair was long and black, and he wore a long Prince Albert coat while in the winter quarters, and Indian costume, fringed and beaded, while in the tent. His medicines were put up in pill boxes and labeled bottles, and were the results of knowledge that had been handed down through many generations in our tribe.

My brother and I also wore long hair, and were strange enough in appearance to attract attention from the white people about us, but mother kept us away from them as much as possible.

My father was not only a doctor, but also a trapper, fisherman, farmer and basket maker.

The reservation in Franklin County is a very beautiful place, fronting on the main St. Lawrence River. Tributaries of the St. Lawrence wander through it, and its woods still preserve their wild beauty. On this reservation we had our permanent home in a log house surrounded by land, on which we planted corn, potatoes and such other

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vegetables as suited our fancies. The house was more than fifty years old.

The woods provided my father and grandmother with their herbs and roots, and they gathered there the materials for basket making. There were also as late as 1880 some beavers, muskrats and minks to be trapped, and pickerel, salmon and white perch to be caught in the streams. These last sources of revenue for the Indians no longer exist; the beavers, minks and muskrats are extinct, while the mills of the ever encroaching white man have filled the streams with sawdust and banished the fish.

We were generally on the reservation in early spring, planting, fishing, basket making, gathering herbs and making medicine, and then in the fall, when our little crop was brought in, we would depart on our tour of the white man's towns and cities, camping in a tent on the outskirts of some place, selling our wares, which included bead work that mother and grandmother were clever at making, and moving on as the fancy took us until cold weather came, when my father would generally build a little log house in some wood, plastering the chinks with moss and clay, and there we would abide, warm amid ice and snow, till it was time to go to the reservation again.

One might imagine that with such a great variety of occupations we would soon become rich — especially as we raised much of our own food and seldom had any rent to pay — but this was not the case. I do not know how much my father charged for his treatment of sick people, but his prices were probably moderate, and as to our trade in baskets, furs and bead work, we were not any better business people than Indians generally.

Nevertheless, it was a happy life that we led, and lack of money troubled us little. We were healthy and our wants were few.

Father did not always take his family with him on his expeditions, and as I grew older I passed a good deal of time on the reservation. Here, tho the people farmed and dressed somewhat after the fashion of the white man, they still kept up their ancient tribal ceremonies, laws and customs, and preserved their language. The general government was in the hands of twelve chiefs, elected for life on account of supposed merit and ability.

There were four Indian day schools on the reservation, all taught by young white women. I sometimes went to one of these, but learned practically nothing. The teachers did not understand our language, and we knew nothing of theirs so much progress was not possible.

Our lessons consisted of learning to repeat all the English words in the books that were given us. Thus, after a time, some of us, myself included, became able to pronounce all the words in the Fifth and Sixth readers, and took great pride in the exercise. But we did not know what any of the words meant.

Our arithmetic stopped at simple numeration, and the only other exercise we had was in writing, which, with us, resolved itself into a contest of speed without regard to the form of letters.

The Indian parents were disgusted with the schools, and did not urge their children to attend, and when the boys and girls did go of their own free will it was more for sociability and curiosity than from a desire to learn. Many of the boys and girls were so large that the teachers could not preserve discipline, and we spent much of our time in the school in drawing pictures of each other and the teacher, and in exchanging in our own language such remarks as led to a great deal of fighting when we regained the open air. Often boys went home with their clothing torn off them in these fights.

Under the circumstances, it is not strange that the attendance at these schools was poor and irregular, and that on many days the teachers sat alone in the schoolhouses because there were no scholars. Since that time a great change has taken place, and there are now good schools on the reservation.

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I was an official of one of the schools, to the extent that I chopped wood for it, but I did not often attend its sessions, and when I was thirteen years of age, and had been nominally a pupil of the school for six years, I was still so ignorant of English that I only knew one sentence, which was common property among us alleged pupils:

"Please, ma'am, can I go out?" pronounced: "Peezumgannigowout!"

When I was thirteen a great change occurred, for the honey-tongued agent of a new Government contract Indian school appeared on the reservation, drumming up boys and girls for his institution. He made a great impression by going from house to house and describing, through an interpreter, all the glories and luxuries of the new place, the good food and teaching, the fine uniforms, the playground and its sports and toys.

All that a wild Indian boy had to do, according to the agent, was to attend this school for a year or two, and he was sure to emerge therefrom with all the knowledge and skill of the white man.

My father was away from the reservation at the time of the agent's arrival, but mother and grandmother heard him with growing wonder and interest, as I did myself, and we all finally decided that I ought to go to this wonderful school and become a great man — perhaps at last a chief of our tribe. Mother said that it was good for Indians to be educated, as white men were "so tricky with papers."

I had, up to this time, been leading a very happy life, helping with the planting, trapping, fishing, basket making and playing all the games of my tribe — which is famous at lacrosse — but the desire to travel and see new things and the hope of finding an easy way to much knowledge in the wonderful school outweighed my regard for my home and its joys, and so I was one of the twelve boys who in 1892 left our reservation to go to the Government contract school for Indians, situated in a large Pennsylvania city and known as the — — — Institute.

Till I arrived at the school I had never heard that there were any other Indians in the country other than those of our reservation, and I did not know that our tribe was called Mohawk. My people called themselves "Ga-nien-ge-ha-ga," meaning "People of the Beacon Stone," and Indians generally they termed "On-give-hon-we," meaning "Real-men" or "Primitive People."

My surprise, therefore, was great when I found myself surrounded in the school yard by strange Indian boys belonging to tribes of which I had never heard, and when it was said that my people were only the "civilized Mohawks," I at first thought that "Mohawk" was a nickname and fought any boy who called me by it.

I had left home for the school with a great deal of hope, having said to my mother: "Do not worry. I shall soon return to you a better boy and with a good education!" Little did I dream that that was the last time I would ever see her kind face. She died two years later, and I was not allowed to go to her funeral.

The journey to Philadelphia had been very enjoyable and interesting. It was my first ride on the "great steel horse," as the Indians called the railway train, but my frame of mind changed as soon as my new home was reached.

The first thing that happened to me and to all other freshly caught young redskins when we arrived at the institution was a bath of a particularly disconcerting sort. We were used to baths of the swimming variety, for on the reservation we boys spent a good deal of our time in the water, but this first bath at the institution was different. For one thing, it was accompanied by plenty of soap, and for another thing, it was preceded by a haircut that is better described as a crop.

The little newcomer, thus cropped and delivered over to the untender mercies of larger Indian boys of tribes different from his own, who laughingly attacked his bare skin with very hot water and very hard scrubbing brushes, was likely to emerge from the encounter with a clean skin but perturbed mind. When, in addition, he was

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prevented from expressing his feelings in the only language he knew, what wonder if some rules of the school were broken.

After the astonishing bath the newcomer was freshly clothed from head to foot, while the raiment in which he came from the reservation was burned or buried. Thereafter he was released by the torturers, and could be seen sidling about the corridors like a lonely crab, silent, sulky, immaculately clean and most disconsolate.

After my bath and reclothing and after having had my name taken down in the records I was assigned to a dormitory, and began my regular school life, much to my dissatisfaction. The recording of my name was accompanied by a change which, though it might seem trifling to the teachers, was very important to me. My name among my own people was "Ah-nen-la-de-ni," which in English means "Turning crowd" or "Turns the crowd," but my family had had the name "La France" bestowed on them by the French some generations before my birth, and at the institution my Indian name was discarded, and I was informed that I was henceforth to be known as Daniel La France.

It made me feel as if I had lost myself. I had been proud of myself and my possibilities as "Turns the crowd," for in spite of their civilized surroundings the Indians of our reservation in my time still looked back to the old warlike days when the Mohawks were great people, but Daniel La France was to me a stranger and a nobody with no possibilities. It seemed as if my prospect of a chiefship had vanished. I was very homesick for a long time.

The dormitory to which I was assigned had twenty beds in it, and was under a captain, who was one of the advanced scholars. It was his duty to teach and enforce the rules of the place in this room, and to report to the white authorities all breaches of discipline.

Out in the school yard there was the same sort of supervision. Whether at work or play, we were constantly watched, and there were those in authority over us. This displeased us Mohawks, who were warriors at fourteen years of age.

After the almost complete freedom of reservation life the cramped quarters and the dull routine of the school were maddening to all us strangers. There were endless rules for us to study and abide by, and hardest of all was the rule against speaking to each other in our own language. We must speak English or remain silent, and those who knew no English were forced to be dumb or else break the rules in secret. This last we did quite frequently, and were punished, when detected, by being made to stand in the "public hall" for a long time or to march about the yard while the other boys were at play.

There were about 115 boys at this school, and three miles from us was a similar Government school for Indian girls, which had nearly as many inmates.

The system when I first went to this school contemplated every Indian boy learning a trade as well as getting a grammar school education. Accordingly we went to school in the morning and to work in the afternoon, or the other way about.

There were shoemakers, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, farmers, printers, all sorts of mechanics among us. I was set to learn the tailoring trade, and stuck at it for two and a half years, making such progress that I was about to be taught cutting when I began to cough, and it was said that outdoor work would be better for me. Accordingly I went, during the vacation of 1895, up into Bucks County, Pa., and worked on a farm with benefit to my health, tho I was not a very successful farmer — the methods of the people who employed me were quite different from those of our reservation.

Tho I was homesick soon after coming to the Institute I afterward recovered so completely that I did not care to go back to the reservation at vacation time, tho at first I was offered the opportunity. I spent my vacations

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working for Quaker farmers. All the money I earned at this and other occupations was turned in to the Institute bank credited to my account, and I drew from thence money for my expenses and for special occasions like Christmas and the Fourth of July.

When I returned from Bucks County in 1895 I found that some of the boys of my class were attending the public school outside the institution, and on application I was allowed to join them, and finally graduated there from the grammar department, tho held back by the fact that I was spending half my time in some workshop. I never went back to tailoring, except to finish a few suits that were left when the Institute shop closed, but I worked for a time at printing and afterward at making cooking apparatuses.

After I had finished with the grammar school I got a situation in the office of a lawyer while still residing in the institution. I also took a course of stenography and typewriting at the Philadelphia Young Men's Christian Association. So practically I was only a boarder at the Institute during the latter part of my eight years' stay there.

Nevertheless, I was valuable to the authorities there for certain purposes, and when I wanted to leave and go to Carlisle school, which I had heard was very good, I could not obtain permission.

This Institute, as I have said, was a contract Government school for teaching Indians. The great exertions made by the agent, who visited our reservation in the first place, were caused by the fact that a certain number of Indian children had to be obtained before the school could be opened. I do not think that the Indian parents signed any papers, but we boys and girls were supposed to remain at the school for five years. After that, as I understand it, we were free from any obligation.

The reason why I and others like me were kept at the school was that we served as show scholars — as results of the system and evidences of the good work the Institute was doing.

When I first went to the school the superintendent was a clergyman, honest and well meaning, and during the first five years thereafter while he remained in charge the general administration was honest, but when he went away the school entered upon a period of changing administrations and general demoralization. New superintendents succeeded each other at short intervals, and some of them were violent and cruel, while all seemed to us boys more or less dishonest. Boys who had been inmates of the school for eight years were shown to visitors as results of two years' tuition, and shoes and other articles bought in Philadelphia stores were hung up on the walls at public exhibition or concert and exhibited as the work of us boys. I was good for various show purposes. I could sing and play a musical instrument, and I wrote essays which were thought to be very good. The authorities also were fond of displaying me as one who had come to the school a few years before unable to speak a word of English.

Some of my verses that visitors admired were as follows:

### THE INDIAN'S CONCEPTION.

When first the white man's ships appeared  
To Redmen of this wooded strand,  
The Redmen gazed, and vastly feared,  
That they could not those "birds" withstand;  
As they mistook the ships for birds.  
And this ill omen came quite true —  
For later came more; hungrier birds.

### SLEEP SONG FOR THE PAPOOSE.

Look, little papoose, your cradle's unbound,  
It's strappings let loose for you to be bound.  
Refrain: — Oh little papoose!  
On cradle-board bound; My swinging papoose,  
Your slumber be sound. Tawn little papoose,  
your mother is in: She's roasting the goose,  
on the sharp wooden pin. Ref. Bound little papoose,  
your father is out; He's hunting the moose  
that makes you grow stout. Ref. Brawn little papoose,  
great hunter shall be; And trap the

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great moose behind the pine tree. Ref.

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–1785–

My little papoose, swing, swing from the bough. Grow! then you'll get loose — put plumes on your brow! Ref. So little papoose, dream, dream as you sleep; While friendly old spruce shall watch o'er you keep. Ref. Now, little papoose, swing on to your rest. My red browed papoose, swing east and swing west. Ref.

Over the superintendent of the Institute there was a Board of Lady Managers with a Lady Directress, and these visited us occasionally, but there was no use laying any complaint before them. They were arbitrary and almost unapproachable. Matters went from bad to worse, and when the Spanish–American War broke out, and my employer, the lawyer, resolved to go to it in the Red Cross service, and offered to take me with him I greatly desired to go, but was not allowed. I suppose that the lawyer could easily have obtained my liberty, but did not wish to antagonize the Lady Managers, who considered any criticism of the institution as an attack on their own infallibility.

While waiting for a new situation after the young lawyer had gone away, I heard of the opportunities there were for young men who could become good nurses, and of the place where such training could be secured. I desired to go there, and presented this ambition to the superintendent, who at first encouraged me to the extent of giving a fair recommendation. But when the matter was laid before the Head Directress in the shape of an application for admission ready to be sent by me to the authorities of the Nurses' Training School she flatly refused it consideration without giving any good reason for so doing.

She, however, made the mistake of returning the application to me, and it was amended later and sent to the Training School in Manhattan. It went out through a secret channel, as all the regular mail of the institution's inmates, whether outgoing or incoming, was opened and examined in the office of the superintendent.

A few days before the 4th of July, 1899, the answer to my application arrived in the form of notice to report at the school for the entrance examination. This communication found me in the school jail, where I had been placed for the first time in all my life at the institution.

I had been charged with throwing a nightgown out of the dormitory window, and truly it was my nightgown that was found in the school yard, for it had my number upon it. But I never threw it out of the window. I believe that one of the official underlings did that in order to found upon it a charge against me, for the school authorities had discovered that I and other boys of the institution had gone to members of the Indian Rights Association and had made complaint of conditions in the school, and that an investigation was coming. They, therefore, desired to disgrace and punish me as one of the leaders of those who were exposing them.

I heard about the letter from the Training School, and was very anxious to get away, but my liberation in time to attend that entrance examination seemed impossible. The days passed, and when the 4th of July arrived I was still in the school jail, which was the rear part of a stable.

At one o'clock my meal of bread and water was brought to me by the guard detailed to look after my safe keeping. After he had delivered this to me he went outside, leaving the door open, but standing there. The only window of that stable was very small, very high on the wall and was protected by iron bars — but here was the door left open.

I fled, and singularly enough the guard had his back turned and was contemplating nature with great assiduity. As soon as I got out of the inclosure I dashed after and caught a trolley car, and a few hours later I was in New York.



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That was the last I saw of the Institute and it soon afterward went out of existence, but I heard that as a result of the demand for an investigation the Superintendent of Indian Schools had descended on it upon a given day and found everything beautiful — for her visit had been announced. But she returned again the next day, when it was supposed that she had left the city, and then things were not beautiful at all, and much that we had told about was proven.

I had \$15 in the Lincoln Institute bank when I ran away, but I knew that was past crying for and I depended on \$3 that I had in my pocket and with which I got a railroad ticket to New York.

I was assisted in my escape and afterward by a steadfast friend and had comparatively plain sailing, as I passed the entrance examination easily and was admitted to the Training School on probation.

The Institute people wrote and wrote after me, but could not get me back or cause the Training School to turn me out, and they soon had their own troubles to attend to. The school was closed in 1900 as the Government cut off all appropriations.

When I first entered the Training School on probation I was assigned to the general surgical ward and there took my first lessons in the duties of a nurse, being taught how to receive a patient — whether walking or carried — how to undress him and put him in bed, to make a list of his property, to make a neat bundle of his clothes, to enter his name and particulars about him in the records, and how to properly discharge patients, returning their property and clothes, and all about bed making, straightening out the ward, making bandages and scores of other details. I studied all books on nursing and attended all the lectures. Bed making, as I soon found, was an art in itself and a most important art, and so in regard to other details, all of which may look trivial to an outsider, but which count in sanitation.

This new life was very much to my liking. I was free, for one thing, and was working for myself with good hope of accomplishing something.

Our evenings were our own after our work was done, and tho we had to return to the nurses' quarters at 10.30 o'clock at the latest, that was not a hardship and we could enjoy some of the pleasures of the city. While in the Training School I received my board and \$10 a month pay, a very decided gain over the Institute. Besides, the food and quarters were far better.

After I had been for twelve months in the Training School I was allowed to go to our reservation for a ten days' vacation. It was the first time in nine years that I had seen my old home and I found things much changed. My mother and grandmother were dead, and there had died also a little sister whom I had never seen. My father was alive and still wandering as of old. Many of my playmates had scattered and I felt like a stranger. But it was very pleasant to renew acquaintance with the places and objects that had been familiar in my childhood — the woods, the streams, the bridge — that used to look so big and was now so small to me — the swimming hole, and with the friends who remained.

I found that our people had progressed. The past and its traditions were losing their hold on them and white man's ways were gaining.

During the visit I lived at the house of my brother, who is ten years older than me and is a farmer and manufacturer of snow shoes and lacrosse sticks. The ten days passed all too quickly.

Since that time I have paid one other and much longer visit to the reservation and have quite renewed touch with my own people, who are always glad to see me and who express much astonishment at the proficiency I show in my native tongue. Most of the boys who are away from the reservation for three or four years forget our language, but, as I have said, there were some of us at the Institute who practiced in secret.

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What I saw in the reservation convinced me that our people are not yet ready for citizenship and that they desire and should be allowed to retain their reservation. They are greatly obliged to those who have aided them in defeating the Vreeland bill. The whole community is changing and when the change advances a little further it will be time to open the reservation gates and let in all the world.

Of course, so far as the old Indians are concerned, they will not and cannot change. They have given up the idea that the Mohawks will ever again be a great people, but they cannot alter their habits and it only remains for them to pass away. They want to end their days in comfort and peace, like the cat by the fireside — that is all.

To the white man these old people may not seem important, but to us young Indians they are very important. The family tie is strong among Indians. White people are aggravated because so many young Indians, after their schooling, go back to their reservations and are soon seen dressed and living just like the others. But they must do that if they desire to keep in touch with the others.

Supposing the young Indian who has been to school did not return to his father's house, but stayed out among the white men. The old folks would say "He won't look at us now. He thinks himself above us." And all parents who observed this would add: "We won't send our children to school. They would never come back to us."

The young Indians are right to go back to the reservation and right to dress and act like the others, to cherish the old folks and make their way easy, and not to forget their tribe. It is a mistake to think that they soon lose all that they have learned in the school. Compare the school Indians with those who have not been at school and a very marked difference is found. You find on their farms improved methods and in their houses pianos, which their wives, who have also been at school, can play. All these boys and girls who have been to school are as missionaries to the reservation.

The schools are doing a great deal of good to the Indians and are changing them fast, and there is another force at work occupied with another change. On all the reservations the pure blooded Indians are becoming rarer and rarer, and the half and quarter breeds more and more common — technically they're Indians. Thus tho the tribe is increasing, the real Indians are decreasing. They are becoming more and more white. On our reserve now you can see boys and girls with light hair and blue eyes, children of white fathers and Indian mothers. They have the rosy cheeks of English children, but they cannot speak a word of English.

After returning to the Training School I completed the two years' course and afterward took a special course in massage treatment for paralysis.

I have since been employed principally in private practice. I like the work and the pay, tho the former is very exacting. The nurse must be very clean and very regular in his habits; he must be firm and yet good-tempered — able to command the patient when necessary. He must maintain a cheerful attitude of mind and demeanor toward a patient, who is often most abusive and ill tempered. He must please the doctor, the patient's family, and to as great an extent as possible the patient himself. He must be watchful without appearing to watch. He must be strong and healthy. Nursing is tiresome and confining. Nevertheless I console myself with the remunerations, financial and educational, and with the thought that my present occupation, assisting in saving lives, is an advance on that of scalp taking ancestors.

I have been asked as to prejudice against Indians among white people. There is some, but I don't think it amounts to much. Perhaps there were some in my Training School class who objected to being associated with an Indian. I never perceived it, and I don't think I have suffered anywhere from prejudice.

I have suffered many times from being mistaken for a Japanese.

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Some people when they find I am an Indian seek me out and have much to say to me, but it is generally merely for curiosity and I do not encourage them. On the other hand, I have good, stedfast, old-time friends among white people.

When I first began to learn I thought that when I knew English and could read and write it would be enough. But the further I have climbed the higher the hills in front of me have grown. A few years ago the point I have reached would have seemed very high. Now it seems low, and I am studying much in my spare time. I don't know what the result will be.

Some ask me whether or not I will ever return to my tribe. How can I tell? The call from the woods and fields is very clear and moving, especially in these pleasant summer days.