



# Native Men of Courage

revised edition

NATIVE TRAILBLAZERS SERIES



Vincent  
Schilling





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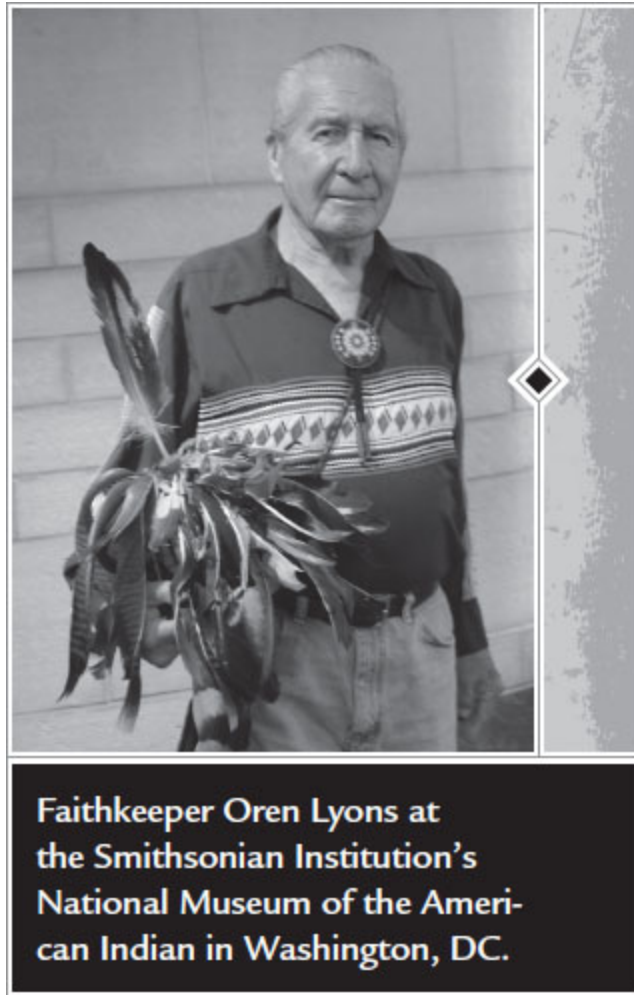
Oren Lyons

**FAITHKEEPER OF THE TURTLE CLAN OF THE  
ONONDAGA AND SENECA NATIONS OF THE  
IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY**

*When we walk upon Mother Earth, we always plant our feet carefully, because we know the faces of our future generations are looking up at us from beneath the ground. We never forget them.*

—CHIEF OREN LYONS

**V**ery few Native Americans have achieved so much for the rights of Native people as Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the turtle Clan of the onondaga and seneca Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. As faithkeeper, he is responsible for passing on and interpreting his people's traditions, legends, and prophecies. Oren took on this role in 1970, and his activism and determination to maintain the customs and traditions of his people and to represent their message to the world continues today.



Faithkeeper Oren Lyons at  
the Smithsonian Institution's  
National Museum of the American  
Indian in Washington, DC.

Oren Lyons was born in 1930 and grew up on the Onondaga Nation located in upstate New York south of Syracuse. When Oren was a child, it was called the Onondaga Reservation. His mother was a Seneca, from the Wolf Clan, and his father was Onondaga, from the Eel Clan. Because his lineage follows his mother, he is Seneca Wolf, but in 1972 he was adopted into the Onondaga Nation.

Oren's early childhood was spent playing and exploring the area of the Onondaga Nation. He doesn't remember ever seeing a white person until he was about four years old. He grew up surrounded by his relatives, and his grandmother lived right down the road. Toting water, chopping firewood, and hunting for food were part of everyday life for his family.

Oren attended school on the reservation, but he considered it something to be endured. He found it difficult to



be taught by white teachers. He didn't get along with them, and he challenged them whenever he could. After school he would let out his frustration by hunting with his shotgun or fishing to catch dinner. School life was so miserable that he finally quit in the seventh grade.

Leaving school didn't mean he could hang around with nothing to do. His father had left the family by this time, so it was Oren's responsibility to help his mother. He was now the main hunter and provided meat for his family. To help out even more, he cut and trimmed wood in the middle of winter. It was cold, hard work, but it built character and physical strength.

The strength Oren gained from hard physical labor was put to good use when he became a lacrosse player. Lacrosse, the traditional Native game similar to field hockey but played in the air using sticks with nets, is considered sacred on the Onondaga Nation and is part of the fabric of life. The game was used from early times by the Iroquois tribes to settle conflicts in a relatively peaceful way. Oren grew up playing lacrosse, and his talent was eventually recognized, but first he had to serve in the military.

In 1950 Oren was drafted to fight in the Korean War. He didn't understand how the US government could draft him, since Onondaga is one of the few Native lands that considers itself an independent nation. It's governed by traditional leaders and is not technically a part of the United States; however, the US government didn't recognize this status. After he was drafted, Oren signed up with the Army Airborne forces because he would get fifty dollars more pay each month. He was sending money home to his mother, so this extra pay was important. He was assigned to the 82nd Airborne, which specializes in parachute operations, and went to jump school in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Always the athlete, Oren turned to boxing during his time in the army. He had been boxing at home on the reservation, and boxing in the military helped Oren hone his athletic skills. Even though Oren thought army discipline was good for him, he didn't like the army and tried to escape. He was caught and sent to the brig, a military jail. He worked hard

while in jail, did the work expected of him, and anxiously awaited his release.

After Oren was discharged from the military, he went home to Onondaga and continued to box and play lacrosse. He had also taken up painting and sold paintings of boxers to local restaurants. Luckily, a coach from Syracuse University took note of Oren's athletic ability and asked him to play goalkeeper for the university lacrosse team. Oren had never graduated from high school, but he thought he might have gotten a GED, the equivalent of a high school diploma, while in the army. That degree would allow him to apply to the university; however, the army was never able to locate his records. In order to get the university to admit Oren, the lacrosse coach convinced the admissions department to enroll him on the basis of the artistic talent he displayed in those paintings of boxers.

During his time at the university, Oren developed his talents as an artist and painter. Although he suffered through English and other required courses, he earned all A's in his art classes. Oren studied hard and eventually made the dean's list, an honor reserved for students who make high grades. In his junior year, he was also awarded the Orange Key award for being the top scholastic athlete at the university.



**Former lacrosse teammates National Lacrosse Hall of Fame inductee Jim Brown and Oren Lyons at the 2015 World Indoor Lacrosse Championships.**

During his time at Syracuse, he was part of the university's undefeated 1957 lacrosse team. In that season the team triumphed against the lacrosse team of the US Military Academy at West Point, which up to that point had been undefeated. Also on the lacrosse team during those years was Jim Brown, who went on to become a fullback in the NFL and set records that few other football players have broken. Both Oren and Jim became college sports All-Americans for their exceptional athletic abilities.

After graduating with a degree in fine arts, Oren traveled to New York City to find a job but soon learned that there were many artists looking for work there. He was staying at the YMCA when a man from the New York City Lacrosse Club tracked him down and asked him to play. Getting involved in

the club opened up a chance for Oren to play lacrosse and meet people who shared his interest in the sport.

Oren eventually landed a job drawing for a greeting card company. The job didn't pay much, only forty-five dollars a week, but it provided a great training ground for learning the illustration business. The job also allowed him to do drawings for other companies in his spare time. He created a number of sports illustrations and began to make a name for himself. Eventually he moved to New Jersey and played lacrosse for a team there. He had a good job and a good income and was able to play lacrosse, but he still felt he was living and raising his children in a foreign country.

It was about that time in 1967 that he was contacted by the Onondaga Nation Clan Mothers. A clan mother is very important in the Haudenosaunee culture. She will make important decisions affecting the people of the tribe and has a duty to ensure that their traditional way of life continues. When a clan mother talks to you, you listen, and that's just what Oren did. By 1970 he had returned to the Onondaga Nation and was made faithkeeper.

One of the first instructions he was given by the tribe was to create a museum of the Onondaga Nation. Oren enrolled in a master's degree program in history and museum technology at the State University of New York's graduate program at Cooperstown, one of the top programs for training museum directors in the country. Once he finished that program, he had the academic credentials to become a professor teaching Native studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

During this time, Oren was also involved in the Red Power movement. Native American activists created both this movement and the American Indian Movement to expose the plight of Native Americans, return land to tribes, and help foster a sense of pride among Native Americans. During the 1960s and '70s, Native Americans continued to suffer many of the injustices they had experienced since the first European settlers arrived on the continent. They had the highest unemployment rate and the lowest average income of any other group in the United States and also suffered from poor health.

In an effort to boost Native pride, Oren helped to create a Unity Caravan of leaders from many Indian nations, who traveled together in as many as twenty-five cars. The caravan traveled around the United States four times in four years, telling people about the importance of keeping their traditions. Many Native leaders of today remember hearing the message of the Unity Caravan, and they still talk about how much it influenced them to work to preserve Native language and customs.

In 1972 Oren was instrumental at the Trail of Broken Treaties protest. Native organizations from all over the country joined together on the West Coast to travel to Washington, DC, to meet with government leaders. They wanted more people to be aware of the difficulties that Native Americans faced on a daily basis, such as poor housing and a low standard of living. Also, the US government had a long history of breaking many of the treaties it had made with Native tribes over the years and taking back rights it had given tribes to govern themselves. Many Native people felt they had little say about the laws under which they lived and how they were treated, and this left them feeling powerless.

That November, the largest gathering of Native Americans ever assembled in the nation's capital tried to meet with government officials to voice their grievances, but those officials refused to meet with them. Frustrated by this lack of respect, some of the protestors occupied the building that housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the agency of the US government that manages Native lands. Oren led a group of peace delegates from the Iroquois to help negotiate a settlement. As a result of this occupation, federal officials agreed to meet with the protestors and listen to their concerns.





The year 1977 was an important one for Oren and his work to protect Native people. He helped represent the Iroquois at an important meeting that occurred between Native leaders and international officials in Switzerland. They were invited to speak at a conference sponsored by the United Nations about discrimination against Indigenous people all over the world. This was the first time that Native people were asked to speak about human rights abuses they had suffered and continued to endure, including destruction of the natural resources on their lands by outside governments. As a result of the work of Oren and others, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations was established by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1982 to monitor and protect the human rights of Native peoples. Also in 1977, Oren helped to found the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth. This group continues to meet today to promote

Native voices in culture and politics. A year later, he headed up an Iroquois delegation to the first World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, where the nations of the world were urged to recognize the rights of Native peoples.

Oren continued to be a trailblazer and inspire people through the game of lacrosse. In the early '80s, he and Tuscarora leader Wes Patterson put together a lacrosse team made up of players from several Iroquois tribes. They felt that fielding a team that was good enough to play competitively would instill pride and fight juvenile delinquency and the hopelessness felt by so many Native youth at the time. Oren and Wes also felt that if Native high school students had a chance to play on a winning lacrosse team, they might be able to get athletic scholarships that would pay for their college tuition.

Oren had unique skills that made him the perfect person to coach a Native lacrosse team that would be expected to go up against all-white teams. He understood the ways in which Native athletes were different from white athletes. They battled hard and with lots of pride, but winning wasn't as important to them as being able to play a good game. Oren was quoted once as saying, "Our lacrosse athletes are held in high regard. Almost all the kids play, and they have a natural aspiration to make a nation's team. But if they don't make it, it's not a negative. That's the way it always has been." The players didn't take criticism easily and found it difficult to be disciplined in front of others. But Oren had spent years being successful in the white man's world, and he understood how to blend Native ways with the structure and discipline needed to match the competitiveness of non-Native teams.

In 1983 supporters managed to raise almost \$20,000 to fund a team, called the Iroquois Nationals, and send them to an event called Lacrosse International. The Iroquois team went up against the national championship team from Syracuse University. The Syracuse team had three Iroquois members, and one of them was the brother of a player for the Nationals.

In the summer of 1984, the team traveled to Los Angeles to play in the Jim Thorpe Memorial Pow-Wow and Native Games. The Native Games, which were played prior to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, were established to recognize Native athlete and Olympic medalist Jim Thorpe. The team went on to play exhibition games in England. When they went, they traveled on their Haudenosaunee passports, which the Iroquois Confederacy had issued in 1977 for international travel as a way to establish the independence of the Iroquois nation that Oren and other Native leaders had wanted for many years.

Eventually, they were invited to join the Federation of International Lacrosse, playing in their first world championship in 1990. When the team plays for the federation now, they do so just like the teams of any other independent country and are allowed to play under their own flag.

Oren Lyons continues to be recognized for his important work promoting Native rights through his work in politics, education, and lacrosse. He was named Man of the Year in Lacrosse by the NCAA in 1989 and was inducted into the National Lacrosse Hall of Fame in 1993. He still plays the game and travels with the Iroquois Nationals to their games.



Oren Lyons at the 2015 World Indoor Lacrosse Championships holds the Iroquois wampum belt he presented to Stan Cockerton, president of the Federation of International Lacrosse.

Late in 1992, he addressed the United Nations General Assembly, opening up the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, which renewed a pledge made by countries across the world to support self-determination, justice, freedom, and peace for both Native and non-Native people. In 1990 Oren took part in negotiations between the country of Canada, the state of New York, and the Mohawk Indian Nation when Mohawk lands and burial grounds were threatened because a Canadian town wanted to expand a golf course.

In 1998 he helped edit the book *Exiled in the Land of the Free*. It documents how much the Iroquois Confederacy influenced the Founding Fathers of the US government and shaped their thinking about how a government should be run. The Iroquois had already embraced ideas of individual freedom and representation and had successfully created a

union of tribes years before the states came together under a single government.

Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga and Seneca Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, Oren Lyons continues today to work for common land, common water, and freedom for Indigenous people worldwide.

Oren was the subject of a PBS television documentary produced and hosted by Bill Moyers called *Oren Lyons: The Faithkeeper*. In the documentary, he discussed how humans do not fully appreciate the meaning or sacredness of time and the spirituality of nature. When asked by Moyers what each generation must learn, Oren responded, “What Indians are about, I think, first of all is community. They’re about mutual support. They’re about sharing. They’re about understanding what’s common land, common air, common water, common and for all. They’re about freedom.”

Oren Lyons has created a legacy of wisdom about caring for the planet and each other. In the PBS documentary *Oren Lyons: The Faithkeeper*, Oren was asked what he thought each generation must learn, and he responded, “What Indians are about, I think, first of all is community. They’re about mutual support. They’re about sharing. They’re about understanding what’s common land, common air, common water, common and for all. They’re about freedom.”



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