

# Oronhyatekha and the Independent Order of Foresters

By

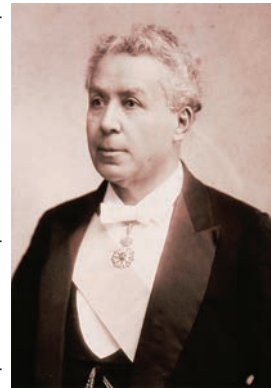
Dr. David Harrison and Fred Lomax

As with the other fraternal Friendly Societies of the nineteenth century such as the Druids and the Oddfellows, the Foresters had two main separate orders; the Ancient Order of Foresters, on the whole being situated in England and the Independent Order of Foresters mainly being situated in America and Canada. Both of these societies attracted working men, they had the same fraternal and beneficial benefits as the Oddfellows and Druids, and they both expanded rapidly in the changing industrial climate of the late nineteenth century.

The IOF has a three level governing structure; as Freemasonry have Lodges, the Foresters have local Courts. Like the Freemasons of Lodges, the IOF members vote to elect their own Court officers who meet on a regular basis to handle the business and the running of the Court. At the second level there are the High Courts, which provide the leadership and direction to assist local Courts in their activities. High Court officers are elected representatives of the Courts within their jurisdiction. At the top of the IOF is the Supreme Court. This body governs the IOF and convenes every four years to elect the Supreme Chief Ranger and other Supreme Court officers. As a Friendly Society, the IOF is operated solely for the benefit of its members and their families, providing cover for sickness and burial.<sup>1</sup>

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the undisputed leader and the person credited with the incredible success of the IOF was a Mohawk from Brantford, Canada called Oronhyatekha. Born in 1841, Oronhyatekha, which means “Burning Sky,” came to prominence among his people after giving a spirited speech to the visiting Prince of Wales; he was supposedly invited to study in England at the famous Oxford University by the Prince, an invitation that he accepted.

It was his time at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford which led to the establishment of the Oronhyatekha Society at the College; a society which now consists



Oronhyatekha

of a group of select undergraduates going out and getting drunk while dressed in typical Native American clothing.

On returning to Canada, he married the great-granddaughter of famed Mohawk Freemason, Joseph Brant,<sup>2</sup> and studied at the University of Toronto, gaining a medical degree and subsequently opening a practice. His importance growing, he was elected as President



A procession of the Foresters.

of the Grand Council of Canadian Chiefs in 1874. He ultimately became involved in the Independent Order of Foresters, joining in 1878 and working against the racial prejudices of the period and became the Supreme Chief Ranger of the IOF in 1881, transforming the order into one of the most wealthy and successful of the fraternal financial institutions. His philanthropic work included founding a

museum and an orphanage, and he also became a Freemason, becoming Worshipful Master of Richardson Lodge No. 136 GRC in Stouffville, Ontario in 1894.<sup>3</sup>

During the period of Oronhyatekha's leadership, he passionately promoted the order, and it was claimed that the IOF distributed more than \$20 million in social-welfare benefits and insurance monies to over 100,000 recipients, making the IOF a leading fraternal and financial society which specialized in assisting the poorer sections of society.<sup>4</sup> Oronhyatekha's philanthropic work, his revitalization of the IOF, and his work as a Freemason reveals a man who endeavored to overcome racial prejudices and someone who wanted to change the world around him for the better. He died in 1907.



Banner of the Foresters

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Ancient Order of Foresters official website: <http://www.forestersfriendlysociety.co.uk/about-us/history> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2013] and the Independent Order of Foresters official website: <http://www.foresters.com/UK-EN/About/Pages/our-history.aspx> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2013]

<sup>2</sup> See David Harrison, *Transformation of Freemasonry*, (Bury St. Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2010), pp.186-8.

<sup>3</sup> See the history and past Officers of Richardson Lodge No. 136 GRC on the official website: <http://www.richardsonlodge.ca/officers.htm> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2013]

<sup>4</sup> See the Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online: [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id\\_nbr=6976](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id_nbr=6976) [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2012]

The article is taken from the forthcoming book by Dr. David Harrison and Fred Lomax. Harrison's previous works include *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (temporarily out of print), *The Transformation of Freemasonry*, and *The Liverpool Masonic Rebellion*. Fred Lomax has previously published "Fred's Five Minute Talks" and both are regular contributors to *The SQUARE MAGAZINE*. All are available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other book outlets. They can be contacted at [dharrison1968@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dharrison1968@yahoo.co.uk) and [fredlomax@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:fredlomax@blueyonder.co.uk) respectively.

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