



# **In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History**

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## **Episode 16: Fred Loft (Onondeyoh), First Nations Political Visionary**

Fred Ogilvie Loft (known in Mohawk as Onondeyoh, meaning “beautiful mountain”), was born on the Grand River Six Nations Territory in 1861. His parents spoke English fluently, so he grew up with the language as well as his native Mohawk. The Lofts, members of the Anglican Church, valued Euro-Canadian education. Fred grew up on his parents’ 200-acre (80-hectare) farm, “Forest Home.” He attended a nearby First Nations primary school until the age of 12, before spending an unhappy year in 1874 at the Mohawk Institute in Brantford. His older brother William attended the same school for three years and ran away three times.

After only one year there, younger brother Fred left forever. At the Indian residential school his familiar world disappeared completely. Years later he bitterly remembered that he “was hungry all the time, did not get enough to eat.” There were other challenges: “In winter the rooms and beds were so cold that it took half the night before I got warm enough to fall asleep.” At home, Fred showed great independence, a quality the boarding school’s rigid discipline attempted to suppress. At the family farm, for

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example, he loved to train horses that had never been ridden, and years later he recalled, “It is a wonder I am alive, for I’ve nearly been killed by my awful recklessness several times.”

His father and mother, who always allowed him a great deal of freedom, supported his decision not to return to the Mohawk Institute, but Fred still wanted a full education. To finish elementary school, he walked from the family’s farm every day, a round trip of nearly 15 kilometres, to a school in neighbouring Caledonia, just east of the Six Nations Territory. While attending high school in the town, Fred Loft did odd jobs to pay for his board and lodging. His success in high school instilled self-confidence, and any prejudice he encountered did not discourage him. Discrimination was rife in non-Indigenous communities around the Six Nations Territory. Loft took any insults in his stride. Neophyte chiefs among the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) were taught that they must develop a skin “seven thumbs thick” to endure disappointment and malicious comments.

After the young Mohawk finished high school, he worked for several years in the forests of northern Michigan, rising in status from lumberjack to timber inspector, until ill health forced him to leave the bush. Upon his recovery, Fred Loft received a full scholarship to study at the Ontario Business College in Belleville, Ontario. On graduating, not finding a job as a bookkeeper, he briefly worked as a journalist with the *Brantford Expositor*. Fred Loft’s staunch Liberal Party credentials and business background next helped him obtain a provincial civil service position. In 1887 the Liberal government in Toronto appointed him as an accountant in the bursar’s office of the Asylum for the Insane, a position he held for the next three decades. The 37-year-old civil servant married in Chicago in 1898. He and his wife, Affa Northcote Geare, a Canadian of British descent, 11 years younger, had a family of three daughters, two of whom lived to adulthood.

A tall, physically impressive man, Fred Loft dressed conservatively in navy blue or dark grey suits. He sang, and as both he and his wife played the piano, they organized musical parties at their home. Loft had important connections in the city. Ministers, doctors, lawyers, and heads of organizations counted the Lofts as friends. Fred Loft had met, for example, Sir Adam Beck, the father of Ontario Hydro, who gave him a photo of himself which Fred and Affa hung in their home. Through their shared interest in First Nations issues, he knew David Boyle, the curator of the Ontario Provincial Museum, who considered Loft “a highly intelligent gentleman, of good appearance, good address, and good common sense.” For some time, the Lofts lived on Jarvis Street near George T. Denison, Toronto’s senior police magistrate, who described his neighbour in 1906 as “a respectable gentleman of fairly good education, and much better qualified for the franchise than 95 per cent of those who have it.”

The church-going Lofts led a busy, upper-middle-class life. They had season tickets to two theatres and frequented Orpen’s racetrack—Fred was an avid horseman. He took part in Masonic affairs through St. George’s Lodge and was keen on billiards. Joined on occasion by her husband as a speaker, Affa was active in the American Women’s Club of Toronto, the United Empire Loyalists’ Association of Canada, and the Women’s Art Association of Canada. The Lofts sent their daughters to the Model School, one of the most respected elementary schools in the city. Enjoying writing, the Mohawk civil servant contributed several articles on Indigenous topics to Toronto publications, and he gave talks. Every Sunday, he attended church. Six Nations friends, such as the famous Iroquois runner Tom Longboat, were dinner guests and houseguests at the Lofts when passing through Toronto.

Whenever possible, Fred Loft returned to the Six Nations to visit his elderly mother, a widow since his father’s death in 1895. On Sundays he regularly attended neighbouring Christ Church in

Cayuga. Well over two-thirds of a century later, Ella Monture Claus, then a young parishioner, recalled Fred Loft at church service: he stood “so straight,” and looked “so dignified.” Fred Loft, his wife, and their daughters wore beautiful clothes. “They were very elegant people.” Fred’s niece, Bernice Loft Winslow, his brother William’s daughter, remembered how her uncle loved to practise his Mohawk after the church service. The young woman noticed that he had lost some of his fluency living in the city. Occasionally, he put Mohawk words in the wrong places.

For whatever extras the family wanted, the Lofts depended on Affa’s business activity. She bought and sold houses, rented to roomers, and owned stock. Their frequent changes of address in Toronto give the impression that the Lofts were drifters, but not at all; they moved because of Affa’s engagement in local real-estate.

Fred Loft’s legal status under the Indian Act made him a ward of the Crown, on the same level as the residents of his place of work, the Hospital for the Insane. In 1906, Loft applied to enfranchise, to become a British citizen. After all, he had married a non-Indian, worked away from the Six Nations Territory, and had lived for nearly two decades in Toronto. Yet once he learned that the Six Nations Council wished him to remain a member, he withdrew his application.

With the Council’s encouragement, Loft now altered his career plans. On 28 January 1907, he wrote Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier: “There is perhaps nothing I have desired in my life more than becoming if possible, the Superintendent of the Six Nations of Brant; should it be considered by your Government that one of themselves would be capable of performing the duties of the office.” One week later, the Six Nations Council formally endorsed Fred Loft’s application for the top civil service job in the Grand River community. But Fred had no chance of obtaining the appointment. The Indian Department had no desire whatsoever to see the Mohawk bookkeeper delve into the mismanagement of the

Six Nations' finances—and lands. Loft had deep knowledge of the injustices. A decade later, in early 1917, the Six Nations Council again attempted to have Onondayoh appointed their superintendent, and again their request was denied.

After war was declared in early August 1914, Fred Loft, the Six Nations volunteer with seven years active militia service, visited reservations throughout Ontario to encourage First Nations recruitment. To qualify for overseas duty, he reduced his age on his enlistment form by 11 years, from 56 to 45. Without any difficulty he passed his medical without suspicion of his real age. Onondayoh stood just over 5'11" and weighed a trim 170 pounds. All his adult life he had taken excellent physical care of himself. He never owned a car, always walked, and exercised every morning. He received a commission as a lieutenant. On 7 August 1917, while he was overseas, the Six Nations Council conferred on him a Pine Tree chieftainship, a rare honour given only to the most outstanding members of the Grand River Six Nations Confederacy. A Pine Tree chief was neither an appointed war chief nor a hereditary council member, but rather an individual recognized as a natural leader.

Although he went overseas with the 256th Railway Construction Battalion, Loft later transferred to the Canadian Forestry Corps in France. As a representative of the Six Nations Council, he had an audience with King George V at Buckingham Palace on 21 February 1918, shortly before he left England to return to Canada. The Mohawk officer told the King with great pride how his Indian foresters, in a crosscut-saw competition, cut through a log 15 inches in diameter in less than 20 seconds. He was very proud of the Six Nations of the Grand River who made an enormous contribution to the war effort. Out of a total population of approximately 4,500 in 1914, nearly 300 Grand River men volunteered for service overseas, and of these 29 died in action,

five died of wounds or illness, one became a prisoner of war, and one was reported missing in action.

A month after the end of the war, in December 1918, Fred Loft founded the League of Indians of Canada at the Council House on the Six Nations Territory. Onondayoh wanted “schooling and training equal in standards as provided for the Canadian and foreign-born children now in the country.” The League also worked to stop the seizure of First Nations lands for returned soldiers (the Soldiers Settlement Scheme), the threat of forced enfranchisement, and the federal government’s neglect of treaty rights. As Loft argued in his circular letter of 26 November 1919 to First Nations groups across Canada, they needed to “free themselves from the domination of officialdom.”

To develop a self-supporting national First Nations organization, each band was asked to pay annually a five-dollar fee, plus five cents for each band member. The league held summer meetings at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in 1919; Elphinstone, Manitoba, in 1920; Thunderchild Reserve, Saskatchewan, in 1921 and 1922; and on the Samson Reserve at Hobbema, Alberta, in 1922. There was also a convention at Parry Sound on Georgian Bay on Lake Huron in June 1921.

The progressive agenda of the League of Indians of Canada enjoyed wide appeal in Indigenous Prairie Canada. This support immediately alarmed the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, as it was a direct challenge to his authority. As well as Indigenous individuals, several Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy came forward to assist the League’s work. According to one newspaper account, the summer convention at Hobbema in Alberta in 1922 attracted 1,500 First Nations supporters from Alberta and Saskatchewan. Reverend Robert Steinhauer, an interpreter for the Loyal Methodist Chiefs in southern Ontario in 1886 (see Episode 12), and now an ordained Methodist minister for more than a quarter of a century, became



the League's chief interpreter at Hobbema, translating from Cree to English and from English to Cree. The Cree Anglican minister Edward Ahenakew agreed, in 1921, to establish the Saskatchewan branch of the League and to serve as its vice-president. Father Patrice Beaudry of Edison, Alberta, a Métis Roman Catholic priest, served as the League's vice president in Alberta. Father Jean-Louis Le Vern, the principal of the Roman Catholic residential school for the Peigans (Piikuni) in southern Alberta, forwarded donations to Loft made by Peigans in support of the League. Le Vern had become so close to the Peigans, whose language he spoke fluently, that he had a Blackfoot accent when he spoke his mother tongue, French.

Pierre-Albert Picard of Wendake volunteered to be the League's liaison, from 1920 to 1922, with the French-speaking First Nations in Quebec. Picard was a former grand chief and had worked as a draftsman for the Quebec government. A vivid picture of the League of Indians of Canada in its prime emerges from the League president's surviving correspondence with Picard. Fred Loft frankly shared his concerns about Scott after he met him in his office, during his visit to Ottawa to present his views on Bill 14, the proposal to introduce compulsory enfranchisement. The Mohawk found the austere bureaucrat free of even the most basic social graces: "He simply was mum as a post." His behaviour, he added, was "very unbecoming in view of his position."

The president of the League of Indians of Canada had a realistic impression of the parliamentarians' lack of knowledge of Indigenous Canada. During the House of Commons committee hearings he attended in mid-April 1920, Fred Loft commented that perhaps not even 50 per cent of the MPs were familiar with the First Nations' actual domestic and economic conditions. Support for his observation came from an unexpected quarter, Ernest Lapointe, a prominent Liberal francophone leader. He revised Loft's estimate and suggested that "not ten per cent" did. The 40-

year-old Quebec MP's intervention was much appreciated by supporters of the League of Indians of Canada. Six feet tall with massive shoulders, the French-Canadian politician towered over his colleagues, and he spoke his second language extremely well. Upon first being elected to the House of Commons 15 years earlier, Lapointe immediately began to learn English, and he became very good at it. After the Liberals came to power and he joined the federal Cabinet serving as Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's Quebec lieutenant, Lapointe appointed Aldéric Gros Louis, a Huron from Wendake, as his chauffeur. The trusted employee later became his confidential messenger.

As president of the League of Indians of Canada, Fred Loft's greatest ally without question was his typewriter, on which he kept up his voluminous correspondence. The *Toronto Mail* later recalled in his obituary: "Before and after he organized the League of Indians in Canada, he travelled for years almost continuously fixing up a trapper's dispute, appealing to officials at Ottawa for justice to his clients, after the war helping the Indian veterans who were entitled to pensions." The newly created organization faced daunting challenges, as status Indians constituted only one per cent of the total Canadian population of approximately nine million. The First Nations themselves had strong regional and language differences, and they lacked the necessary financial resources to set up a strong organization. As president and secretary-treasurer, in short, as the holder of all executive offices himself, Fred Loft attempted to deal with every kind of complaint that reached his Toronto home from First Nations communities across the country. Constantly, he sent letters to officials on behalf of individuals and bands, largely at his own expense.

Duncan Campbell Scott regarded the president of the League of Indians of Canada as a dangerous subversive. Early in 1921, negative remarks about the Department of Indian Affairs appeared in the *Toronto Star Weekly*, the weekend edition of the *Toronto*



*Star*. The widely circulating newspaper quoted the Mohawk chief on 28 August 1920 as saying, “If anything is responsible for the backwardness of the Indians to-day, it is the domineering, dictating, vetoing method of the Indian Department. The position and treatment of the Indian to-day is as if he were an imbecile.” Scott now ordered his agents to avoid all contact with Loft. The deputy minister refused to allow the payment of delegates’ travel expenses from band funds. He put Loft under surveillance. Scott was appalled to learn in early 1922 that Father Le Vern had forwarded to the League of Indians of Canada donations from several Peigans. For this, Scott told Charles Stewart, the new superintendent general of Indian Affairs, that he intended “to report Father Lavern [*sic*] to the head of his Order.”

Scott worked energetically to have Fred Loft’s Indian status removed to “enfranchise” him. In early 1920 over 30 Indian spokespersons were invited to attend House of Commons hearings of Bill 14, the amendment to the Indian Act that proposed compulsory enfranchisement. In his remarks in mid-April, Loft spoke against Bill 14. He accepted some form of integration as an ultimate goal but he asked, how could the federal authorities consider such a policy, when the level of education in English was so low? Despite vigorous First Nations’ opposition to compulsory enfranchisement, Bill 14 passed on 25 June 1920, and compulsory enfranchisement became part of the Indian Act.

Early the following January, Duncan Campbell Scott instructed John D. McLean to compose a letter to “Mr F.O. Loft.” Accordingly, the assistant deputy superintendent general wrote to Loft on 26 January, “Dear Sir: I have to inform you that the Department is considering the question of your enfranchisement under the recent amendments to the Indian Act. As you are doubtless aware, the amendments about referred to were intended to cover cases of Indians who, by educational qualifications, ability and responsibility, have become quite capable of taking their place

in the community, on an equal footing with other citizens. It is considered that you possess these requirements in an eminent degree.”

A month later, Scott wrote Senator James Lougheed from Calgary, the new minister of the interior and superintendent general of Indian Affairs. To discredit Loft, Scott termed him “a shallow, talkative individual.” He continued his diatribe, writing, “He is one of the few Indians who are endeavouring to live off their brethren by organizing an Indian society and collecting fees from them.” Then came the final insult: “He volunteered for the war and looked very well in a uniform, but he was cunning enough to evade any active service.” Totally erroneous: Fred Loft had signed up and gone overseas as an officer, but on account of his age, once it became known, was barred from active combat. Scott himself had not volunteered. In the end, Loft escaped enfranchisement as the Conservatives lost the federal election later that same year, and the new Liberal government of Mackenzie King adopted a more conciliatory stance and repealed compulsory enfranchisement.

In 1921 Duncan Campbell Scott also faced Deskaheh, a new, truly radical Six Nations opponent. The moderate president of the League of Indians of Canada knew well that the Mohawks had been allies of the British Crown in the American Revolution but recognized that the Six Nations were now “subjects” of His Majesty the King, “in no degree differing from the acknowledged and accepted status of other Indians of Canada.” In contrast to Fred Loft, the Cayuga chief Deskaheh (or Levi General) sought international recognition of the Six Nations of the Grand River as a nation state. Deskaheh travelled to the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, where he embarrassed Scott and Canadian government officials by denouncing Canada’s oppressive treatment of the “Red Man.”

The Government of Canada’s most devastating intervention against the First Nations came in the spring of 1927. Ten days

before a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons ruled unanimously that there was no Indian Title to British Columbia, a new amendment to the Indian Act became law: Section 141 made it illegal to solicit funds from Indians for the pursuit of claims against the government, without the permission of the Department of Indian Affairs. The offence was punishable by fine or imprisonment. This amendment had far-reaching consequences, and it remained in effect until the next general revision of the Indian Act, which would be in 1951.

Without question, Duncan Campbell Scott's unremitting opposition to the League of Indians of Canada hampered its growth in the mid-1920s. Apart from the branches in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the League's membership declined. Fred Loft's minimal resources, particularly after he retired from the Ontario civil service in 1926, further accentuated its near demise. The fact that his wife's poor health in the late 1920s obliged the Lofts to move to Chicago for four years (1926-30) made it difficult for Chief Loft to maintain his contacts with League members. Loft also had lost the invaluable assistance in Quebec of Pierre-Albert Picard who, in the mid-1920s, became the Indian agent at Wendake. Edward Ahenakew left after receiving a directive from his Anglican bishop to cease his activities with the League.

Only once did Fred Loft return to Saskatchewan. Several bands in the Prince Albert area had subscribed \$100 to pay his expenses to attend a meeting at the James Smith Reserve on 6 and 7 June 1928, where he emphasized the need to see the treaties observed, and spoke "very strongly" against the Indian boarding schools. The Indian Department's W. Murison attended. The inspector of Indian agencies in Western Canada noted the Mohawk's moderation: "Chief Loft, in closing the meeting, said that the Indians were treated better in Canada than anywhere else, that they should be thankful to be under British rule. It was different in the United States." According to the report by Corporal James Wood of the

RCMP, who was also present, “He was most careful in not committing himself in stirring up trouble, simply promising to do his best to bring the Indians’ grievances to the notice of the Government in a lawful and rational manner.”

After his return to Toronto in 1930, Onondayoh attempted to resume the League’s work in Ontario. He still had an undying faith in British justice. Now, on the eve of turning 70, he proposed to travel to London, England, to appeal to the Privy Council, the supreme court of the British Empire, to secure recognition of the rights of Indians to hunt, trap, and fish without the restrictions of provincial game laws. He estimated the trip would cost \$4,000, and through circulars requested contributions. Many chiefs ignored his appeal, some delivered his letter to the Indian agent, and only a tiny number sent anything. Ironically, on this issue of hunting rights, Duncan Campbell Scott agreed, and he aggressively pushed the provinces in the early 1930s to relax their game laws. His decision was based on economic, not humanitarian, reasoning. Scott wanted the First Nations in isolated areas to continue their traditional livelihoods and not depend on expensive government relief for support.

Fred Loft had become Duncan Campbell Scott’s perceived enemy, and despite the communality of interests on treaty hunting rights, this could not bring them together. Loft’s independent voice must be silenced. As soliciting funds under Section 141, the 1927 amendment of the Indian Act, made the collection of funds for Indian claims illegal, Scott considered laying criminal charges against Loft for attempting to raise money for Indian Title issues. He placed him under surveillance, but once Scott learned the cost of bringing witnesses from Western Canada, his enthusiasm for prosecution declined. Second, once he learned in 1931 that Loft’s appeal for financial support had failed, Scott dropped the idea of prosecuting him. By late 1932, the Mohawk leader’s health had deteriorated greatly. Fred Loft died in Toronto in 1934.

By this time the League of Indians, apart from its branches in Alberta and Saskatchewan, had effectively become defunct. Other leaders nonetheless later took up Fred Loft's cause of a nationwide First Nations political organization, most recently the National Indian Brotherhood, formed in 1968, and its successor, the Assembly of First Nations, chartered in 1985. The First Nations owe a great deal to Onondayoh / Fred Loft, an early twentieth-century political visionary.

## Bibliography

This episode is based to a great extent on my entry "Frederick Loft" in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* ([http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/loft\\_frederick\\_ogilvie\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/loft_frederick_ogilvie_16E.html)) and my references to him in my *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today* (Toronto, 2021, pages 132-146). See also: Peter Kulchyski, "'A considerable unrest': F. O. Loft and the League of Indians," *Native Studies Rev.* (Saskatoon), 4 (1988): 95-117. R. R. H. Lueger, "History of Indian Associations in Canada (1870-1970)" (M.A. thesis, Carleton Univ., Ottawa, 1977). J. L. Taylor, *Canadian Indian policy during the inter-war years, 1918-1939* (Ottawa, 1984). E. B. Titley, *A narrow vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver, 1986). Useful information on the Loft family and the Six Nations of the Grand River is contained in Bernice Loft Winslow's *Iroquois Fires. The Six Nations Lyrics and Lore of Dawendine* (Ottawa, 1995). For a quick review of the life of Deskaheh or Levi General see my entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/deskaheh\\_15E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/deskaheh_15E.html).