

# Conrad Weiser

BY E. JOHN LONG

One hundred and thirty-five years ago George Washington, standing before the grave of his friend Conrad Weiser, made a prophecy. Of the "ambassador to the Indian tribes of North America", the man who played such an important part in bringing about the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon world in the vast wilderness beyond the Alleghenies, the first President said, "Posterity will not forget his services."

On September 1, 1928, at Womelsdorf, near Reading, Pennsylvania, Washington's prophecy was fulfilled. On this date Governor John S. Fisher of Pennsylvania, and others, dedicated a twenty-five acre memorial park containing the Weiser homestead, the Weiser family burial plot, and the graves of a few Indian chiefs who asked to be buried near their white man friend.

Conrad Weiser, in whose honor the memorial park was dedicated, is one of the unsung heroes of the troubled period, preceding the Revolution, when the English and French forces in America were engaged in a great struggle for a continent. The balance of power, it was realized by the leaders of each side, lay with the great Indian tribes, some of them fairly well organized nations and confederacies in themselves. The friendship and favor of the aboriginals was assiduously courted by gifts of firearms and rum, by marriages between white men and Indian "princesses", by promises of plunder, and by any other means or agents that were found effective.

But the Indians spoke a strange language, and their ways were not the ways of the white man. Their favors did not always go to the side which could outweigh the other in generosity. The English, while anxious to have the Indians as allies, despised them. They refused to learn their language and often made no effort to conceal the real state of their feelings toward them. The French, on the other hand, quickly adapted themselves to the Indians' customs, learned their languages, used their metaphors, and thereby gained their confidence, and, what was more important at the time, their trade and title to their lands. Rich western provinces were slipping away from the Eng-

lish colonies, and the French explorers and missionaries were rapidly opening up the Ohio and the Great Lakes regions to French trade when Conrad Weiser came into the service of Penn's Colony.

A native of Herrenberg, Germany, Conrad Weiser arrived in this country when he was fourteen years old. The family settled in Schoharie, New York State, where they made friends with Quagnant, chief of the neighboring Mohawk nation. At the invitation of Quagnant the youthful Weiser went to live with the Indians. He remained with Quagnant for eight months, learning the Iroquois languages and customs thoroughly. He endured many hardships and privations and in the end was adopted by the Mohawks as a son of that nation.

Upon his return to his father's house he became an interpreter, conducting petty matters of trade and equity, and schooling himself for more important work as a middleman between the Indians and the whites. In 1729, he brought his wife and five children to Pennsylvania, settling in the Tulpehocken valley on the land which was set aside September 1 as a memorial park.

It was as a resident of Pennsylvania that Conrad Weiser came into prominence as an interpreter and good will ambassador among the Indians. At the time he took up his residence in the valley of the Tulpehocken, the tribes of Pennsylvania and of neighboring states were in a state of internal turmoil. The Delaware tribes had lost their former prestige and the powerful Six Nations, or Iroquois, were denying the right of the Delaware tribes to sell land to the whites in parts of Pennsylvania which had been the acknowledged territory of the Delawares. The policy of the Pennsylvania government in regard to the Indians had been from the first one of placation. A strip of unused land had long remained between the most westerly frontier posts and the most eastern claims of the Indians. The land settled by the Weisers, and by other German immigrants from New York state, was in this strip and some of the settlements were not free from Indian claims.

The Iroquois, sensing their importance as part of the balance of power between the French and the English, saw that their Confederacy might, if skillfully directed, play one European power against the other, greatly to its own

advantage. While the Iroquois had not shown any open friendliness to either side, the Shawnees had removed to the Allegheny valley and placed themselves under the protection of the French. Abuses of the liquor traffic between the whites of each faction and the Indians also tended to aggravate the situation.

Governor Gordon of Pennsylvania decided, therefore, to arrange a treaty with the Six Nations. At a council held in Philadelphia on August 16, 1731, plans were made "to renew and maintain the same goodwill and friendship for the Indian Nations which the Honorable William Penn always expressed to them in his lifetime" and to prevail upon the Six Nations to hold the Shawnees in their allegiance to the English. Shikellamy, an Oneida chieftain, was sent by the Governor to invite the chiefs of the Six Nations to Philadelphia.

On his return trip to Philadelphia, with promises that the chiefs would meet the Governor the following spring, Shikellamy stopped at the home of Conrad Weiser and was impressed with his knowledge of Indian languages and ways. He prevailed upon Weiser to accompany him to Philadelphia, where he introduced him to Governor Gordon as "an adopted son of the Mohawk Nation." The private conference that followed Shikellamy's return on December 10, 1731, marked Weiser's first official connection with the Indian affairs of Pennsylvania, and the beginning of an eventful and unusual diplomatic career.

When the deputies and chiefs of the Six Nations finally arrived in Philadelphia on August 18, 1732, many problems confronted the two sides. The French had gained the friendship of the Shawnees in the Ohio valley, and other tribes were complaining bitterly about the great quantities of rum brought to them by the English traders.

Conrad Weiser at this conference acted not only as an interpreter but it was through him that Secretary James Logan obtained valuable information which aided him in drafting a treaty which was greatly to the advantage of the English. The Six Nations agreed to induce the Shawnees to return to a large tract of land on the west side of the Susquehanna near Paxtang, and to convince them that the Shawnees should not "look to the Ohio, but turn their faces to us". They agreed to send messengers to those Delaware tribesmen who had fled to the Ohio valley and to in-

vite them to come back in peace. The Six Nations assured the Colony that they had no great faith in the Governor of Canada, or in the French, who had deceived them. At the close of the conference the chiefs made a specific request that Conrad Weiser be retained as official interpreter at all future conferences, which request was readily acceded to by the Pennsylvania authorities.

It is significant to note that previous to 1731 all the negotiations with the great Iroquois tribes had been conducted at Albany. When the presence of so able an interpreter and diplomat as Weiser became known, treaty making was transferred to Pennsylvania soil. For the next seventeen years Conrad Weiser acted as official interpreter by appointment of the Pennsylvania Council, participating in almost every important negotiation with the Indians during that period. He acquired a most comprehensive knowledge of the habits, customs, idioms, and political contentions of not only the big Indian nations, but also of many of the lesser tribes of the surrounding states.

In 1748, one Colonel George Croghan, likewise a diplomat and interpreter among the Indians, brought word that some of the tribes of the Ohio and Lake Erie regions were waning in their affiliations with the French, some of the tribes openly hinting that they wished an affiliation with the English. The colonies of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland immediately made plans to take advantage of the situation. But the tribes of the west were not as well organized as were the Iroquois. Leaders could not be invited to Philadelphia to settle matters in parliamentary fashion. An ambassador must be sent to deal with them in their own country.

Conrad Weiser's training and experience immediately brought his name to the fore among those considered as messengers of good will to the tribes of the West. With many gifts and a letter of instructions from Anthony Palmer, president of the Pennsylvania Council, Weiser struck out over the mountains for Logtown, the most important trading post in the Ohio country at that time, a primitive settlement a few miles down the Ohio from the forks where the French were later to erect Fort Duquesne.

Croghan was dispatched ahead to extend an invitation to all the tribes of the district to gather to hear the messenger from the great English white fathers and to receive

the bounty which he was sending as a token of good will and peace. The number of tribesmen and the distance from which some of them came to attend the conference exceeded even the expectations of the Pennsylvania Council. For several days Indian orators recited their grievances and outlined to the good will ambassador the things which they believed were their just dues. Weiser with eloquence and tact praised the power and the good intentions of the English and depreciated the resources of the French. He contrasted their treatment of the Indians with that of the English. Wampum belts were exchanged and the foundation of a spirit of friendliness was laid which was only temporarily undermined in later years. In the distribution of blankets, clothing, weapons and trinkets Weiser displayed proper discrimination, sending the delegates home pleased and deeply impressed.

Upon his return to the east Conrad Weiser continued to act as an interpreter for some time, but with the Indians along the borders pacified by his own diplomacy there was little work of importance to negotiate with them. In 1750 he built a house in Reading and opened the first store in the settlement. In the course of a visit to his country place in Womelsdorf, July 13, 1760, he died, following a sudden and violent colic. He was the father of fifteen children, of whom seven and his widow survived him. Weiser was as much lamented by the Indians as he was by the Colonies. One Iroquois chieftain, commenting on his death, said: "We are at a loss, and sit in darkness." C. Hale Sipe, in his "The Indian Chiefs of Pennsylvania" says of Weiser, "If all white men had been as just to the Indians as was this sturdy German, the history of the advance of civilization in America undoubtedly would not contain so many bloody chapters."

The memorial park dedicated September 1 faces the William Penn Highway (U. S. route No. 22). Two pillared gateways give entrance to the plot, which contains the old stone Colonial mansion, handsomely restored, and embellished with walks and gardens, a mirror pool, and, in a more distant part of the grounds, a pavilion for tourists' observation. On the grounds, also, are three monuments, one dedicated to the memory of Conrad Weiser, another to the Indian chief Shikellamy, and the third to the heroes and pioneers of the Tulpehocken valley.