

The Indian Legend of Moroni

by Richard Hensley
Indian Ministry Council of the Americas

It is known by stories from the Old Ones and legends of many different tribes that once there were mighty nations or civilizations upon the land. The people then were strong and had an abundance of crops for their families. Peace reigned supreme and general prosperity prevailed.

Among the Ancient Ones were holy men who taught the ways of their religion and preserved a record of the Great Spirit and His leadership of the earlier, mighty people. This very old record was passed down from the Spiritual Ones to a particular medicine man who walked close to the Creator. Sometimes this precious document was entrusted to the favored son of a chief and thereby ensured that it would be continued to be used as a guide for the people in the event of the chiefs death. It is said that there never was such a blessed people upon the face of the Earth.

But after many years of abundance, threatening divisions began to appear among them. Some individuals began to feel they were better somehow than their brothers and sisters. They nourished pride in their hearts and turned from the old ways. Others began to war with different clans, until soon this great civilization began to break up into fractious tribes. These things happened because the people no longer listened to the Ancient Ones and the Holy Men. Eventually, the inter-tribal conflicts escalated into great wars, and the people scattered in all directions. At this point, the Creator looked down on His creatures and was sorry in His heart that they forgot the ways he conveyed to them through their prophets.

Now there came a mighty warrior who still walked in the paths of the old religion. He preserved the sacred, written record of his people's history and the great prophecies they long ago received. The Creator told this warrior, whose name was Moroni, to hide the holy document within Mother Earth until such time as the Creator would bring them forth again.

The wars grew even more terrible, dividing the people over and over. A few of the Ancient Ones survived to keep alive the old religion that had once brought such peace and plenty. But even these sages no longer possessed the written records, so all they could do to preserve the past was to tell stories of former times. In an attempt to revive the religion of the Great Spirit. In the process of oral transmission, he became known by various names --- Woconda, Wonca Tolka and so forth. Many of these old stories have been passed down by the grandfathers to our children. In the sacred record hidden by that mighty warrior, Moroni, were many important prophecies. One told of the White man coming over the great waters and taking from the Indian that which was his

the land. It described how the White man would make war and afflict those who lived here for so long.

Among the most beautiful of the prophecies told that the Son of the Creator would come down from the Great Spirit and walk among His native people. The holy men who witnessed this happening wrote the words which the Son of the Creator gave them. This was how they received their religion, which helped them to grow in peace and love for each other. The prophesy goes on to tell how they would one day leave behind their religion given them by Morning Star Visitor, or the Creator's Son. As a consequence, they would fall into bloody wars among themselves, brother against brother, tribe against tribe. The

Creator, looking down on their strife, saw all these wars and the coming of the White man in many boats from faraway lands to hurt the native people. Soon, they were in bondage.

The White men did not understand their ways and had no respect for his Mother Earth. He said the Great Spirit loved only the white man's ways, and the Indians, as they were called, had to be like the white man; to forget their own culture and ways. He told lies and cheated the Indian, even though the White man's own god told him these things were wrong. Soon, the buffalo and other game which the Creator had provided were hardly to be found anywhere. The Great Spirit looked down and was sad because of the crimes committed by the Whites on His native people. He said, "It is time for the sacred record to come now from out of Mother Earth, that the children of men may know the true religion and respect the land and the animals. And that this land belongs to my native people."

He said to His Son, "The record must first go to the White man, that he may know of the correct religion, repent of his evil ways and help the native people have their land to live as true brothers and sisters. Yes, the true record will go first to the White man, to give him his chance to repent and change his ways. If he does not, I will bring a great destruction upon him. I have made many promises to my native people and the sacred record will go back to them, that they will know again of their true religion. Then wars will cease and peace come upon the land and the sacred circle will be made complete again. All the tribes will come together to complete it. The land will go back to the native people who will know their true religion. "The White, Black, Red and Yellow peoples of the Earth will learn the true religion and peace will come. When these days take place, the Son of the Great Spirit will walk once again on the Earth, as He promised to **return.**"

INDIAN MINISTRY COUNCIL
of the Americas 821 Linz Avenue
Blue Springs, MO 64014

Editorial From Ancient American

"The legend of Moroni published on page 7 is among the most controversial oral traditions ever preserved in Native American folk memory. Skeptics in the professional archaeological community and even some tribal peoples have condemned it as a transparent fraud concocted by Anglo Mormons or Indian converts to Mormonism to legitimize their religion with a contrived story. Even some Mormon clergy expressed embarrassment for what they regarded as a perhaps well-meant but nonetheless harmful hoax that tended to discredit, rather than enhance their historical roots in prehistoric America.

These negative reactions to the contrary, several tribal elders among various south western and middle-southern peoples claim to be familiar with the legend. Details may even fundamentally differ from one tribe's version to another, as do various pronunciations of the name of the central figure. But at least in its essential outline, the myth of Moroni (or Mornoi, as he was sometimes called) has taken root in the folkish consciousness of mostly older men, but sometimes women charged with preserving the spoken records of their peoples.

The Indian legend of Moroni is certainly not a late-20th Century concoction. It was first published by C.F. Waterton in his *Collection of Indiana* (his term for Native American culture as a whole, not the Middle Western state), in 1897 (Chicago:

Regnery House). Waterton's brief comment was to the effect that he assumed the tale of Moroni was the direct result of Mormon influences, although he confessed he was unable to learn precisely when or where it insinuated itself.

Waterton was nevertheless impressed that it had become deeply entwined in the mythic tradition, even by his day, at the turn of the last century.

The author of an article discussing Moroni's legend in *The Smithsonian Magazine* during the early 1970s assumed it could only have entered Native American mythology through contacts with Mormon missionaries. The chief thrust of the article was to demonstrate how profoundly a story may impact the

oral heritage of a people in a very short time, thereby deceiving investigators into imagining that every myth must be hoary with great age. But even the *Smithsonian* researcher was unable to prove that the story was in fact a modern invention, a fraudulent attempt to provide Native American foundation for ulterior religious purposes. He even stated that those tribal elders who claimed the story of Moroni did indeed predate the coming of modern Europeans had been deceived by their own teachers.

Especially in the face of such criticism, the controversial account was less spoken of, or, at any rate, passed on with increasing discretion. Indeed, some 20th Century Indians, in their fierce hatred for everything White, particularly despised and disowned any mention of Moroni. That he should be remembered and discussed at all seems remarkable.

For publishing this debated and debatable account, the editors of *Ancient American* will undoubtedly be criticized by at least a few readers. But our guiding principle since the first issue has been to strive for a true understanding of American prehistory by following the evidence wherever it may lead us. We do not come to this publication with

a number of preconceived, pet theories into which all evidence must be made to conform. On the contrary, we seek to develop and modify our theories as the evidence dictates.

If the Indian legend of Moroni is a hoax, as its skeptics have always contended, then we must dismiss it as nothing more than religious propaganda. But if it contains even the merest echo of our pre-Columbian past, we must embrace it and defend it as an important part of the proof we seek.

The problem could have been complicated by mixture.

Native American versions of the story may have elements of both original folkish memories and modern Mormonism. In other words, the genuine tribal accounts of Moroni were influenced through contact with modern missionaries, who had their own version. The resultant mixture of at least fundamentally similar stories fused details from both sources. If so, then the task of sorting out the pre-19th Century myth of Moroni will not be easy, if only because they shared much in common from the moment they were introduced to each other.

Ancient American is a popular archaeology publication, not a religious magazine. Its purpose is not to champion any religion over another.

Our interest in the Indian legend of Moroni is solely historical. By publishing it we are not trying to prove anything on behalf of anyone's religious preferences. We invite our readers to examine it in the same spirit of scientific inquiry. And we sincerely welcome their opinions, let all theories fall where they may! "

Editors

Oliver Cowdery's Speech to the Delaware Chief and Council In February 1831 (Across The Kansas River)

"Aged Chief and Venerable Council of the Delaware nation; we are glad of this opportunity to address you as our red brethren and friends. We have traveled a long distance from towards the rising sun to bring you glad news; we have traveled the wilderness, crossed the deep and wide rivers, and waded the deep snows, and in the face of the storms of winter, to communicate to you great knowledge which has lately come to our ears and hearts; and which will do the red man good as well as the pale face.

"Once the red men were many; they occupied the country from sea to sea—from the rising to the setting sun; the whole land was theirs; the Great Spirit gave it to them, and no pale face dwelt among them. But now they are few in numbers; their possessions are small, and the pale face are many.

"Thousands of moons ago, when the red men's forefathers dwelt in peace and possessed this whole land, the great spirit talked with them, and revealed His law and His will, and much knowledge to their wise men and prophets. This they wrote in a Book; together with their history, and the things which should befall their children in the latter days.

"This Book was written on plates of Gold, and handed down from father to son for many ages and generations .

" It was then that the people prospered, and were strong and mighty; they cultivated the earth; built buildings and cities, and abounded in all good things, as the pale faces now do.

"But they became wicked; they killed one another and shed much blood ; they killed their prophets and wise men, and sought to destroy the Book. The Great Spirit became angry, and would speak to them no more; they had no more good and wise dreams; no more visions; no more angels sent among them by the Great Spirit; and the Lord commanded Mormon and Moroni, their last wise men and prophets, to hide the Book in the earth, that it might be preserved in safety, and be found and made known in the latter to the pale faces who should possess the land; that they might again make it known in the latter day to the red man; in order to restore them to them the knowledge of the will of the Great Spirit and to His favor. And if the red man would then receive this Book and learn of the things written in it, and do according thereunto, they should be restored to all their rights and privileges; should cease to fight and kill one another ; should become one people ; cultivate the earth in peace, in common with the pale faces, who were willing to believe the same Book, and be good men and live in peace.

"The should the red men become great, and have plenty to eat and good clothes to wear, and should be in favor with the Great Spirit and be his children, while he would be their Great Father, and talk with them again, who should teach them many things

"This Book, which contained these things, was hid in the earth by Moroni, in a hill called by him Cumorah, which is now in the State of New York, near the village of Palmyra, Ontario County.

"In that neighborhood there lived a young man named Joseph Smith, who prayed to the Great Spirit much, in order that he might know the truth; and the Great Spirit sent an angel to him, and told where the Book was hid by Moroni; and commanded him to go and get it . He accordingly went to the place , and dug in the earth, and found the Book written on golden plates.

"But it was written in the language of the forefathers of the red man; therefore this young man, being pale face could not understand it; but the angel showed him and gave him knowledge of the language , and how interpret the Book. So he interpreted it into the language of the pale faces, and wrote it on paper , and caused it to printed and published thousands of copies among them; and then us to the red men to bring some copies of it to them, and to tell them this news. So we have now come from him, and here is a copy of the Book, which we now present to our red friend , the chief of the Delawares and which we hope he will cause to be read and known among the tribe; it will do them good." (Recorded by Parley P. Pratt and included in his Autobiography p. 54.)