



Florence Nicolar Shay

(1884-1960)

Penobscot Basketmaker & Tribal Advocate

Material from More than Petticoats: Remarkable Maine Women

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Florence sat in the work room adjoining her kitchen, weaving a basket of brown ash splints and sweet grass. Nestled on her lap was the basket's base, which she'd shaped around a wooden mold, smoothed down by generations of use. She wove quickly and steadily. Hers were practiced hands. She was 74, and she'd been making baskets since girlhood, a skill and artform—as well a tool for economic survival--passed down from her mother and her mother's mother.

It was mid-January, 1958. While she worked, Florence listened to her favorite Saturday radio broadcast of classical music. A Chopin sonata was playing. Only three o'clock and already sunlight had turned to slanting gold. In just a week she and Leo would celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. For a moment her fingers grew still as she gazed out the window at the Penobscot River, which surrounded Indian Island, part of the Penobscot reservation where she'd spent most of her life. Always the river beckoned—pathway, source of food and livelihood, spiritual heartbeat. It had been frozen since November, and on its white expanse wind had sculpted snow into peaked waves and long blue shadows, stark and elegant as eagle wings. Upriver, beyond the mills of Old Town, the sun's oblique rays glittered through the geometry of bare tree branches. She picked up an ash splint, which she'd dyed herself, the deep blue of pre-dawn. Chopin's music danced. Gold sunlight touched her white hair, the blue splint.

Florence's calm industry belied another part of her makeup, not so apparent to someone watching her weave a basket that afternoon: her boldness on behalf of the Penobscot people. "This feisty lady had had the temerity to write to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and complain that the State of Maine had taken away her right to vote,"

says historian Neil Rolde in his book, *Unsettled Past, Unsettled Future: The Story of Maine Indians*. Florence, herself, in a 15-page booklet called *History of the Penobscot Tribe*, written and self-published in 1933, described the situation with characteristic clarity and honest fire:

In 1924, during President Coolidge's administration, an act was passed by Congress conferring citizenship upon all Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States. My husband and I and our family lived in Connecticut from 1923 to 1930. During the presidential election of 1928, we registered as citizens of the United States and voted as such with no questions asked as to our right. After we returned to Maine, we, with my sister, went to the registration board of Old Town, Maine, to register as citizens in our home town, but we were met with a distinct refusal, as an obsolete law of the State of Maine forbids the registration and voting by Indians, and in that law we are classed with criminals, paupers, and morons.

After the United States entered World War II—and Maine Indians were still denied suffrage--Florence added this protest to the 1942 re-issue of her booklet: "I have four sons and I feel the government has not the right to draft my boys without giving us the right to vote... We are a segregated, alienated people and many of us are beginning to feel the weight of the heel that is crushing us to nothingness..."

But Florence didn't simply write pamphlets and letters, then passively wait for a response; in spite of her personal reticence, she was an activist, following a long family tradition, lived out in her own unique way.

Florence Estelle Nicolar entered the world on August 5, 1884, at Indian Island, the youngest of three daughters born to Joseph and Elizabeth Josephs Nicolar. One sister, Emma, was already 14 when Florence was born; Lucy was two. The girls' parents were a remarkable couple. Joseph came from an impressive line of Penobscots, among them

John Neptune, a powerful chief elected Lt. Governor for life in 1816. Joseph himself was a very intelligent, educated man, who served more terms as tribal representative to the state legislature than any other Penobscot. In addition to land surveying, farming, hunting, and fishing, he wrote feature stories about Penobscot culture and history. In 1893, he wrote and published a book entitled *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*.



Joseph Nicolar

Florence's mother, Elizabeth Nicolar, called Lizzie, was also a powerhouse. Twenty-one years younger than Joseph, she was smart, beautiful, and skilled not only at making baskets but at promoting their sales, a gifted leader and organizer. Florence and her sisters were raised in an intellectually ambitious and political family. This strong foundation bolstered them for the years they would spend advocating for educational, economic, and social justice for their tribe.

For thousands of years, the Penobscots had roamed freely over a vast territory in the Penobscot River watershed. No boundaries, no state lines, no reservations. With three

other woodlands tribes in the Northeast-- the Passamaquoddy, Mik'maq and Maliseet-- they formed the Wabanaki confederation. The Wabanakis followed nature's seasonal rhythms. In the winter they lived in small settlements scattered throughout the region's forests. In late spring they canoed to the coast, escaping insects and enjoying summer's bounty of fish, shellfish and berries.

When Europeans arrived on Maine's shores at the start of the 1600s, life changed dramatically. In 1797, after nearly two centuries of colonial warfare over Indian lands in the region, Penobscots agreed to deed most of their territory to Massachusetts (which until 1820 included Maine) in exchange for assurance that 140 small islands in the Penobscot River between Old Town and Mattawamkeag were forever reserved for the tribe. In addition, they were to receive annual subsidies of money and goods. But these soon stopped: treaty conditions were broken, promises betrayed.

During Florence's lifetime, the seasonal rhythm of her forebears remained, motivated now by economic necessity. The fall, winter, and spring months were spent on Indian Island, where she and her sisters attended the Catholic mission primary school. Lizzie taught them how to make baskets, and they organized sweetgrass braiding parties with other Island women. The Nicolars' was a lively household, filled with music and laughter. Many Penobscots played musical instruments, so impromptu concerts were common, as well as lectures and other events held at the Church. Florence loved playing the piano and practiced the hours it took to become an excellent musician.

In the summer, along with many other Penobscots from Indian Island, the Nicolars joined the seasonal migration to the Maine coast. With them on the train, they brought the baskets they'd made during the winter, as well as fresh supplies. Different

families selected different resort communities. Florence's returned each year to Kennebunkport in southern Maine. There they set up a stand, selling baskets and making new ones. To attract more tourists, Lizzie encouraged Florence and Lucy to sing and dance. Dressed in traditional Indian outfits, they entertained potential customers. Lucy especially enjoyed this. Around August 1, when their baskets sold out, the Nicolars returned to Indian Island.

In 1894, when Florence was only ten, her father died—a deep loss for the family and the tribe. Because Lizzie and the girls now had to support themselves, astute marketing of their baskets was essential. Soon, the three began taking part in sportsmen's exhibitions in Boston, New York and Baltimore. These extravaganzas featured displays of sporting gear and wilderness equipment. Maine's exhibit promoted not only sporting goods but a way of life: "rusticating," the kind of wilderness tourism for which the state was becoming famous. The encampment included a log cabin with stuffed moose and deer, Maine guides, a small artificial lake. Noted sportswoman Cornelia "Fly Rod" Crosby would be there, demonstrating fly-fishing, and nearby, the Nicolars, making baskets and snowshoes. While Lizzie and her daughters played into white Americans' notions concerning the romantic exoticism of Indians (whom they lumped together into a single image of Plains-type western tribes), much to their credit, they did it with a clear-eyed sense of economic purpose and a desire to preserve their own distinct culture and traditions.

Florence was 13 or 14 when Lucy left for Boston to go to high school and study voice. Lucy then toured as "Princess Watahwaso" ("Bright Star"), singing, acting and lecturing about Indian cultures, while Florence remained at home. Although the leap from

the Island's mission primary to public high school on the mainland often proved rocky for the few Penobsots who tried it, Florence adapted well, and in 1906, at the age of 22, she graduated from Old Town High. Still eager for more education, she attended Shaw Business College in Bangor, 12 miles away. She was a quick study at the skills needed for secretarial work, one of few professions open to any woman at the time, let alone a Penobsot.

On January 25, 1908, Florence married Leo Shay. He was a bright and industrious fellow, also from Indian Island, and six years her junior. While living on the Island, they had seven children: Winter, born in approximately 1909 (who died of appendicitis at 16); Hattie, born in 1910 or 1911; Lawrence William, called Billy, in 1912; Martha Doris, known as Madeline or Maddy, in 1916; Lucille, a few years later; Thomas Leo in 1921. Another daughter died in infancy.



Patrick Shay, Leo Shay, and Charles Norman Shay

In spite of the couple's hard work, it was almost impossible to make a living on Indian Island or in nearby Old Town. Jobs were scarce; prejudice against hiring native people further shrank their prospects. Therefore, in 1923, the year her mother, Lizzie Nicolar, died, Florence and Leo moved to Connecticut. Florence was adamant that her children grow up with economic and educational chances unavailable on the reservation. Part of being a Penobscot mother in that era, she believed, meant training her offspring to compete in the white world, as her own mother had taught her to survive making baskets. The Shay children were raised speaking English, the language of opportunity, another way in which Florence prepared them to be self-sufficient.

In Connecticut, Florence had two more sons: Charles Norman in June of 1924 and Patrick Joseph in May, 1926. While raising a family, she did office work at Chief Two Moons Laboratory in Waterbury. Chief Two Moons, a Lakota Sioux shaman, ran a successful business selling herbal remedies in drugstores and by mail order. When the Great Depression hit, however, jobs dried up, so Florence and her family returned to Indian Island. They moved into the two-story house where she'd grown up. Her sister Lucy also came back home with her future third husband, "Chief" Bruce Poolaw, a Kiowa and fellow entertainer, 21 years younger than she, with whom she'd been traveling on the vaudeville circuit. Lucy had a house built on the riverbank, facing Old Town. A decade or so later, she and Bruce created a two-story teepee gift shop next-door.

Times were tough on the Island. Grinding poverty caused many hardships, and there were few chances for either a living wage or a sound education—troubles

compounded by the Island's isolation and the Penobscots' status as second-class citizens. Joining her sisters, Lucy and Emma, and her sister-in-law, Pauline Shay, Florence set out to help. They resuscitated the Indian Woman's Club, of which their mother had been a founder 35 years before. Its purpose: to promote "Indian welfare, education and social progress." Soon they were again affiliated with the Maine Federation of Women's Clubs, as well as with the national Federation.

The first issue the women tackled was the right to educational opportunity. Not satisfied with the quality of the Island school for her own family, Florence wanted all Penobscot children to have the option to attend Old Town's public schools. In 1931, the Maine legislature passed such a bill into law. But it came at a price. The women were "expelled" from the Island's Catholic church for challenging the status-quo. Finally, after a difficult struggle, a group of Penobscots, including Florence, was able to establish a Baptist church on the Island.

Each summer, starting in the early 1930's, Florence brought her baskets to the Maine coast, as she'd done in childhood. She and Leo set up a tent store, The Indian Camp Basket Shop, on Route One in Lincolnville Beach, between Belfast and Camden on Penobscot Bay. Helped by Leo and the children, she spent her days weaving baskets and selling them to tourists, a mainstay of the family's income. Florence's son, Billy Shay, eventually carried on the family tradition. Caron Shay, Billy's daughter, a master basketmaker herself, like her father and grandmother, observes that Florence's baskets were beautiful to look at and beautifully made, "known for their symmetry, fine craftsmanship, and lasting quality." She also created her own dyes, now a vanishing art.

As busy as Florence was raising a large family and weaving baskets, she created time to advocate for two other long-time dreams, besides better education: Indian suffrage and a bridge connecting the Island to the mainland. For generations, Penobscots had traveled back and forth to Old Town in a 14-passenger rowboat. The fare was 2-cents each way. With its brick and frame buildings, its church spires, and smokestacks, Old Town was home to paper and textile mills. Each winter Penobscots would spread a thick trail of sawdust on the ice so they could travel back and forth to work, attend school and buy supplies. Sometimes the trip was perilous: in spring before ice-out when thin spots broke through; in late fall when a sudden thaw eroded yesterday's solid track. There were accidents, drownings. During other seasons, when storms raged, the little ferry wouldn't run at all. Because of these physical dangers, added to the psychological isolation they created for Indian Island residents, Florence worked to make sure a connecting bridge was built.

For decades, the sisters spoke before the Maine State Legislature, organized committees, wrote letters, and circulated petitions. It would take until November 29, 1950—when Maine's governor officially dedicated the new bridge—for this part of their dream to become a concrete and steel embodiment of opportunity, but they endured as a family alliance, undaunted by setbacks and nay-sayers.

In her fascinating chapter about Lucy Nicolar, published in the collection *Of Place & Gender: Women in Maine History*, anthropologist Bunny McBride contrasts the different strengths Lucy and Florence brought to their shared endeavors, Lucy's extroverted style a complement to Florence's more self-contained reserve. She notes that Florence "was a quiet but firm presence, a careful thinker more likely to voice her views

with pen than tongue. Lucy referred to her as the ‘tribal scholar.’” Another of Florence’s granddaughters, Emma Nicolar, describes Florence, Lucy and Emma as “all dynamic women, married to very active and dynamic men.” Florence’s husband, Leo Shay, nicknamed “the manager,” served two terms as the Penobscots’ representative to the Maine Legislature.

When the United States entered World War II, Florence and Leo joined the war effort at Boston’s Charlestown Naval Shipyard. She worked in the office, and he built boats. Their four sons were drafted—although they still did not have the right to vote. Charles, the second to the youngest, served as a combat medic. He landed on Omaha Beach and crossed the Rhine into Germany, where he was taken prisoner-of-war. While Florence was very patriotic and felt proud of her family’s sacrifices, the political irony was not lost on her.

In the fall of 1945, when Charles came home on furlough, the family took the ferry to Old Town and again tried to vote in a small local election. It must have been an impressive sight: Florence and Leo, Pauline, Lucy and Bruce, joined by other family members. At the head of the line stood Charles Nicolar Shay: highly decorated combat veteran, former POW, in his dress uniform, studded with medals. Yet they were turned away. “Idiots don’t have any right to vote in this state,” election workers told them. Eight years later, however, in 1953, they finally won: Maine’s Indians gained the right to vote without changing their tax status. “They were so happy and proud of themselves the day they voted in Old Town,” recalls Florence’s granddaughter Emma Nicolar.

Emma fondly remembers her grandmother for more than her political activism. Food was scarce, but Florence cooked huge dinners for her extended family. Everyone

was welcome, including Emma, who often showed up at mealtime. Florence loved good china and set the table with nice cloths and glassware. She modeled gracious living for her granddaughter, as well as the hard work and motivation to earn everything she had. Well into her 70s, Florence was healthy and vigorous; she made baskets, played the piano, helped her family, and remained active on behalf of her Penobscot community. On May 24, 1960, she and Leo were setting up for the summer season at their basket shop in Lincolnville Beach, as usual, when she suddenly suffered a lung embolism and died. She was 76.

Born into a dynamic family, Florence Nicolar Shay adapted the lessons of her parents, creating a life rich in personal artistic expression as well as practical and hard-won educational, social, and political advancements for her people. Her son Charles, who married an Austrian woman and lived and worked in Europe for 40 years, returned each summer to Indian Island. He now lives in the house his Aunt Lucy built, and he opens her teepee shop in the summer. In the teepee, which he renovated extensively, are heirloom baskets his mother made. In his house are fine objects she collected, music she listened to and taught him to love. “She was revered by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren,” he says.

Granddaughter Emma shakes her head in admiration when she thinks about her grandmother and her Aunt Lucy. Knowing what few resources the women had on Indian Island, she marvels at how they found the time and the nerve to accomplish all that they did. “They were radicals,” she says, “smart enough and courageous enough to leave a history.” Thoughtful by temperament, strong by nature, deeply principled and proud of her heritage, Florence dared to demand rights for the Penobscot people. While she lived

to see many improvements, she believed there remained much still to do. Quiet Florence was the driving force in her family, recalls Emma. “When she spoke, you listened because you knew whatever she said was very important.”