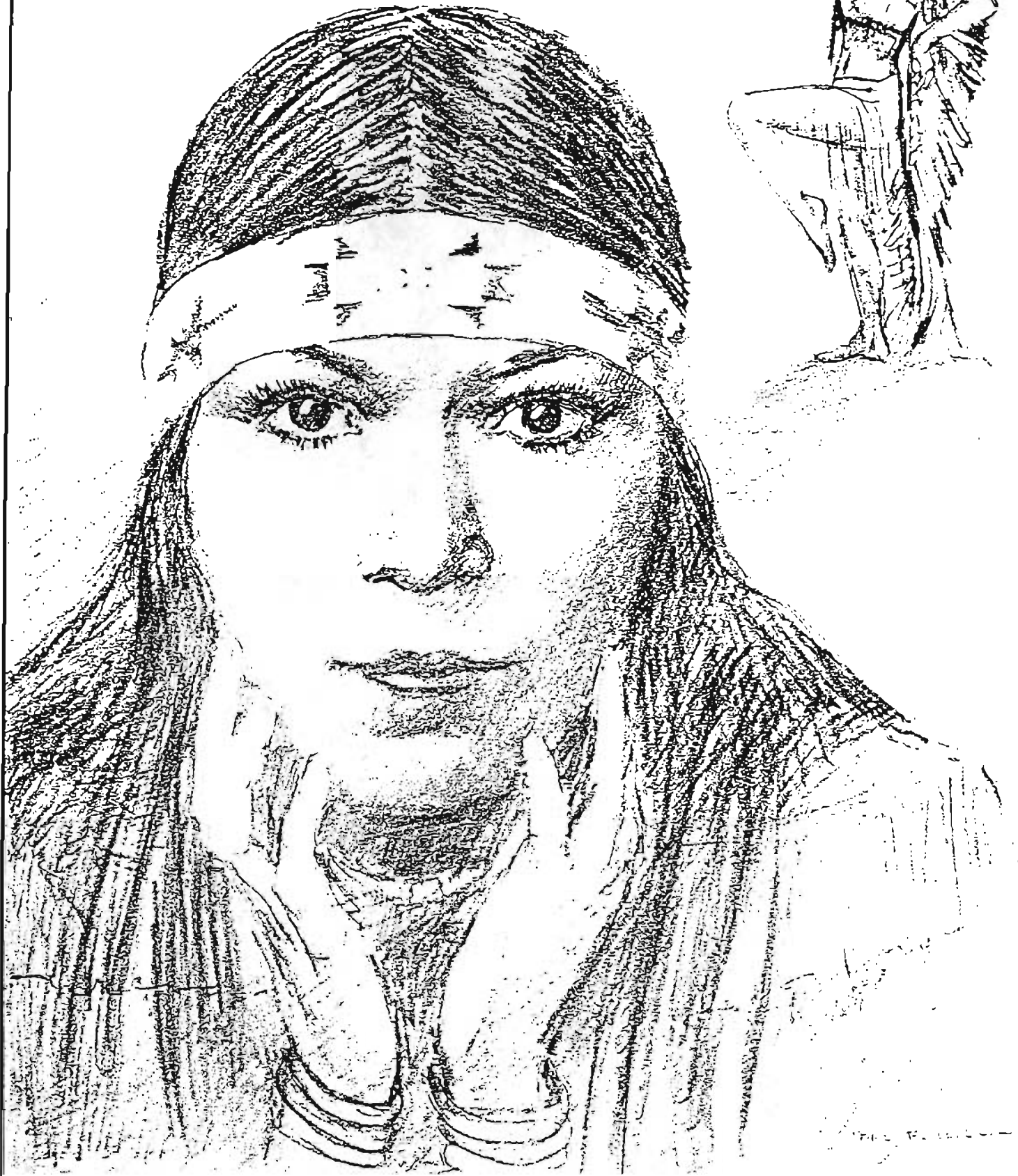


MOLLY SPOTTED ELK

1903 - 1977



Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud

"Molly Spotted Elk"



In the spotlight on stage the dark-haired dancer twirled, bells tinkling on her ankles and feathers in her hair, as the cheering began and the orchestra drumbeats rose--like thunder from far mountains echoed in chants around bright fires by lakesides, long ago. Suddenly, silence: then applause, bursting like a thundercloud, as the dark-haired dancer bowed; but her eyes seemed far, far away. So "Princess Molly Spotted Elk," born Mary Alice Nelson on Indian Island, Maine took stages by storm across two continents some sixty years ago. Actress, author, poet, dancer, student--and perhaps the first Maine Indian to play a major role in a silent movie--Mary Alice lived many lives and performed for both commoners and kings.

"She was a remarkable person in any light," says the former director of the Penobscot Nation Museum, "and led, I think, one of the most amazing unknown lives of any modern American women."

One of life's free spirits, she paid a sad price for living. A world traveler, her story began and ended where her heart always lived, on Indian Island.

Born on Indian Island, near Old Town, on November 17, 1903, Mary Alice (in Penobscot, "Molly Dellis") was the first child of Philomena Solis Nelson, a Maliseet, and Horace Nelson, a future governor of the Penobscot Nation. Her family had a rich heritage: Molly's mother was one of the best basket makers of her day, her father was the first Penobscot to attend Dartmouth College, and a grandfather had been chief of the Canadian Maliseet Tribe.

Molly's mother died young, and to Molly fell the duty of raising her seven younger brothers and sisters. All were unique individuals. Her sister, Eunice, was later the first Penobscot to earn a Ph.D. Molly, most of all, took to learning traditional dances at age 13 to support her family and asking tribal elders about the wide world. Her family always smiled at the saying "curiosity killed the cat" which was tailor-made for Molly.

Her ambition matched her beauty, and after graduating from Old Town High School, Molly attended the University of Pennsylvania for two years, studying anthropology by day and scrubbing floors at night. Her interests were as wide as the world--archaeology, geology, ethnology, and all things Aztec, Mayan, and American Indian. As an eager undergraduate, she contributed to Dr. Frank Gouldsmith Speck's still-classic study of her tribe, *Penobscot Man: The Life of a Forest Tribe in Maine*.

When her money gave out, undaunted, Molly turned to her beloved native dancing for a living, crisscrossing the country during Prohibition days in the vaudeville troupe of the famous Tex ("Hello, suckers!") Guignan. Stunts soon followed at the Schubert Theater and the Provincetown Players, where Eugene O'Neill's early plays were produced. Performing now as "Molly Spotted Elk," she wrote her own music, made her own costumes, and was a sensation everywhere--even dancing topless sometimes, her family remembers, "A happy and completely free spirit."

In 1928, her friendship with a Hollywood producer won Molly Spotted Elk the lead in a Paramount movie, "The Silent Enemy." Inspired by an actual New York Museum of Natural History expedition and filmed in northern Ontario, using an all-Indian cast and authentic Indian costumes, tools, and customs, the film followed an Ojibway Indian tribe's struggle against a silent enemy--hunger--before the coming of the white man. For over a year Molly endured the Canadian cold and weather playing the central role of "Neewa," the tribal chief's daughter.

Released in 1930, "The Silent Enemy" was one of Paramount's very last silent films. Perhaps because it broke stereotypes--or was out of step with the Jazz Age--it was not a success, and "Silent Enemy" vanished into Paramount's vaults to lie forgotten for 40 years.

With it went Molly Spotted Elk's career as a star. Family tradition says one of the producers was in love with her, but nothing came of it; in her twenties, independent as a midsummer Maine breeze, Molly was off again to new horizons.

Hollywood's loss was Europe's gain. In 1931, Molly sailed for France as the American Indian representative in the ballet corps of the International Colonial Exposition. Following her recital of native dances at Fontainebleau's Conservatory of Music, she struck out across the continent, where the Penobscot governor's daughter danced before old World royalty, including King Alphonso of Spain.

Back again briefly in America, Molly appeared as an extra in several Hollywood classics--including "Last of the Mohicans" (1936), "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (Warner Brothers, 1936), "The Good Earth" (MGM, 1937), and "Lost Horizon" (Columbia, 1936)--but her heart remained in Europe.

Settling in Paris' colorful artist's colony, Molly relished the role of a vibrant American emigre. She studied at the Sorbonne, dug in dusty archives for documents about France's first contact with the Penobscots, taught ballet--and caught the eye of journalist John Stephen Frederic Archambaud.

"He was just crazy about American cowboys and Indians" remembers their daughter, Jean. "He begged for an opportunity to interview her. Well, they met--and they married."

Jean Archambaud Moore was the only child of their "very spiritual and sadly short" marriage. When World War II burst over Europe, Archambaud, a political journalist for *Le Paris Soir*, was Red Cross Relief Director near Bordeaux, and an outspoken anti-Nazi. After France fell to the Nazis in 1940, he vanished, and Molly and her 6-year-old daughter fled on foot over the Pyrenees Mountains into Portugal.

"We walked, we ran, we rode ambulances," Jean recalls. "A Newsman picked us up once, and my mother always claimed it was Howard K. Smith. Adventure always followed her, even in adversity."

On their crossing to the United States, their ship cabin was ransacked and searched. Even after the war ended Molly never could find any final word about her husband's fate.

Sorrow followed her home to Indian Island, where she arrived in July 1940, and spent the rest of her life. Molly's only grandson, John, named in memory of her husband, inherited much of her adventurous spirit. In 1973, he bravely carried medicine between the armed camps when the FBI and the American Indian Movement (AIM) squared off during the Indian occupation of Wounded Knee, Nebraska, the site of the 1891 United State Army massacre that ended the Plains Indian Wars.

In 1974, he returned to Lincoln, Nebraska, to serve as a witness in the Federal trials that followed and was killed under mysterious circumstances. His death, too, was never resolved.

"He lived with Molly, and she loved him dearly," recalls Jean. "To this day, nothing

adds up right."

An artist to the end, in her old age Molly crafted Indian dolls in traditional dress, some of which are now in the Smithsonian. She wrote constantly--children's stories based on Penobscot legends, a translation of Penobscot into English and French--and saved reams of diaries, notes, and a lifetime of letters. None of it was ever published, and much of her knowledge was unfortunately lost with her death.

Molly Spotted Elk, the dark-eyed dancer who once delighted audiences around the world, died on Indian Island February 21, 1977, at the age of 73.

Only a few brief interviews from her performing life have come to light since, and often they hold hints of sadness. She dearly loved dancing, Molly told one Portland reporter when in her thirties, but stage work was simply a living, and her true loves were elsewhere--"But, I believe an actress' private life should be her own." An accomplished artist, fluent in French, speaking Spanish, German, Penobscot, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy, it was difficult for Molly to travel with the artists of the world but return to a homeland where she was considered a second-class citizen because she was a woman and an Indian.

Perhaps, over the years the prologue to her favorite film, "Silent Enemy," took on an added poignance: "Everything you will see here is real," said her screen father, "And everything as it has always been."

In recent years a copy of "The Silent Enemy" was rescued from deterioration in Paramount's vaults and has enjoyed a revival in anthropology classes at Vassar and other American colleges.

Penobscot youth may now see a copy of the film at the Penobscot Nation Museum on Indian Island. "I was caught up in the experience of seeing my mother--so young again," her daughter Jean smiles. "She sought learning all her life, and now it's a teaching tool. I think she'd like that."

In 1986, Molly became a charter member of the Native American Hall of Honor in Page, Arizona, there joining Louis Sockalexis and Joseph Attean to present the proud Penobscot Nation.

"Molly Spotted Elk's life made a full circle," reads her charter certificate. "It was a trail of tears."

A Chronology for Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud "Molly Spotted Elk"

- 1903 Born November 17 on Indian Island, eldest child of Horace Nelson, a future Penobscot Governor, and Philomena Solis Nelson, a celebrated basket maker. In Penobscot her given name is "Molly Dellis." After her mother's early death, Molly raises her seven brothers and sisters; studies native dancing to support her family.
- ca. 1920-1922 Studies anthropology and native cultures at the University of Pennsylvania, scrubbing floors at night.
- ca. 1923-1927 Dances in vaudeville and touring troupes across the United States and Canada.
- 1928-1929 On location in Ontario for over a year, stars as "Neewa" in Paramount silent movie classic "The Silent Enemy," (released 1930).
- 1931 Sails for France as American Indian representative in ballet corps of the International Colonial Exposition.
- ca. 1935-1936 Appears in such Hollywood classics as "Last of the Mohicans," "The Good Earth," and "Lost Horizon."
- ca. 1936 Returns to France; studies at the Sorbonne, and dances at the Fontainebleau Conservatory of music.
- 1940 After France fall to the Nazis, flees on foot over the Pyrenees with her young daughter. Arrives at Old Town in July.
- 1974 Molly's beloved grandson dies under mysterious circumstances during the Federal trials at Wounded Knee, Nebraska.
- 1977 Molly dies February 21 on Indian Island, at the age of 73.
- 1986 Molly Spotted Elk honored as charter inductee of the Native American Hall of Honor in Page, Arizona.

**Activities to Accompany the Biography
of
Molly Spotted Elk**

Activity I:

Mapping Spotted Elk's Times and Places:

- A. Using the appropriate maps, locate and plot the significant places of Molly Spotted Elk's life as shown on the chronology.
- B. Students choose an event or interest of Molly Spotted Elk's on which to do personal research. The reports could be oral and/or compiled for a class book.
- C. Class newspaper that includes news of her times. Columns could be contributed by other historical Maine folk. Students write letters to the editor on issues of the times.

Activity II:

Using information from Penobscot Man: The Life of a Forest Tribe in Maine, and other appropriate resources listed in biography, research customs of Molly Spotted Elk's tribe. How did these customs affect her life?

Students should read and reflect upon the poetry of Molly Spotted Elk to further understand her roots.

Activity III:

Visit the Penobscot Nation Museum on Indian Island. Students might write to the Museum to request speakers for the classrooms. Topics of students' choice could be requested.

Activity IV:

Last of the Mohicans might be viewed and/or read.

Teachers and students should examine the stereotypic portrayals of Native Americans in field and literature. Teachers will need to provide an objective backdrop of Indians as a people against which students may form their judgments.

Through drama, essay, poetry, visual arts, or other student choice, students should demonstrate their conclusions from this activity.

Activity V:

Teacher and students investigate the Federal trials at Wounded Knee and the history of Native Americans' relationship to this area. Large and small group discussions. Students should be encouraged to take the perspective of the Native Americans as they make their oral reports.

Activity VI:

A comparative study of Penobscot, Maliseet, and Passamaquaddy tribes.

Focus questions: How have these tribes banded together to protect their land claims and hunting, fishing, and timber rights?

Students might debate the 1970 land claims issue and court rulings.

Resources for
Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud
"Molly Spotted Elk"

Unfortunately no full biography of Molly Spotted Elk exists, although several useful articles about her life have recently appeared. The following sources are valuable:

1. The Penobscot Nation Museum, Community Building, Indian Island, Old Town, Maine 04468, (Tel: 207-827-7776). A small collection of material assembled for Molly's induction into the first Native American Hall of Honor in 1986.
2. The Wabanakis of Maine and the Maritimes: A Resource Book about the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Micmac, and Abenaki Indians, with lesson plans for grades 4 through 8 (1989, The American Friends Service Committee). Published by: The Maine Indian Program, P.O. Box 1096, Bath, Maine 04530.
3. In Her Own Image by Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt (1977, The Feminist Press, Old Westbury, New York). Book and teaching guide exploring achievements of women and artists in a variety of western societies and historical periods.
4. Remember The Ladies! A Handbook of Women In American History by Robin Franklin and Tasha Lebow Wolf (1980, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). Highlights of women's lives from the Colonial Period to the present.

(Note: both items 3 and 4 are available from the Maine Department of Education Affirmative Action Office, Augusta, Maine 04333, Tel: 289-4482.)

Articles:

1. "Maine's Indians: Can Their Culture Survive?" Maine Sunday Telegram, October 2, 1988, pps. 1A, 18-19A. Three related articles about the modern Penobscot Nation. First installment of the thoughtful three-part series.
2. "Remembering Their Heroes: Penobscots Cherish the Memories of Three Remarkable People" Maine Sunday Telegram, October 12, 1986, pps. 1-3D. Profile of Molly Spotted Elk and two other Penobscot inducted into the Native American Hall of Honor in Arizona.

Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud
"Molly Spotted Elk"
(1903-1977)
of Indian Island, Maine

"A pale Maine moon, murmuring pines, and an Indian maiden dancing under the glittering stars. It might have been a scene of early America hundreds of years ago. But the setting was laid at Indian Island, Old Town, less than 20 years ago. The dancer was Molly Nelson, young daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Horace Nelson, appearing this week at B.F. Keith's Theatre as princess Spotted Elk....all seats \$.50.

--- Typical press agent release,
Portland Press Herald, ca 1937

"She was like a wonderful, graceful bird....completely and finely free spirit...."

--- Molly's daughter, Jean, 1986

"That you must seek the mountain and the snow
And grasp those worlds that gleam afar,
So that a child may glimpse a star
And learn of you, of heights, so she may go
Out to the rim of life's wide open sea,
Singing...."

--- Fragment of poetry by
Molly Spotted Elk