



title: Molly Spotted Elk : A Penobscot in Paris
author: McBride, Bunny.
publisher: University of Oklahoma Press
isbn10 | asin: 0806129891
print isbn13: 9780806129891
ebook isbn13: 9780585168807
language: English
subject: Spotted Elk, Penobscot Indians--Biography, Dancers--United States--Biography, Dancers--France--Biography.
publication date: 1997
lcc: E99.P5S755 1997eb
ddc: 973/.04973
subject: Spotted Elk, Penobscot Indians--Biography, Dancers--United States--Biography, Dancers--France--Biography.

Molly Spotted Elk



Molly as she appeared in Texas Guinan's clubs, 1928.

Molly Spotted Elk
A Penobscot in Paris

by
Bunny McBride

Foreword by Eunice Nelson-Bauman

Postscript by Jean Archambaud Moore

University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London

*This book is dedicated to my mentor-friend
Henrietta Buckmaster, whose bold and em-
pathetic pen imparted both inspiration and
aspiration.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McBride, Bunny,
Molly Spotted Elk: a Penobscot in Paris / by Bunny
McBride; foreword by Eunice Nelson-
Bauman; postscript by Jean Archambaud Moore.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8061-2756-2 (alk. paper, hardcover)

ISBN 0-8061-2989-1 (alk. paper, paperback)

1. Spotted Elk. 2. Penobscot IndiansBiography.
3. DancersUnited StatesBiography. 4. Dancers
FranceBiography. I. Title.

E99.P5S755 1995

973'.04973-dc20

95-6891

CIP

Text design by Cathy Carney Imboden.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of
the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council
on Library Resources. ♻

Copyright © 1995 by Bunny McBride. Published by the University of
Oklahoma Press, Norman, Publishing Division of the University. All rights
reserved. Manufactured in the U.S.A.

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Contents

List of Illustrations	page vii
Foreword, by Eunice Nelson-Bauman	ix
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xix
Chapter 1. Escape	3
Chapter 2. Roots	5
Chapter 3. Changes in the Land	8
Chapter 4. Island Paths	14
Chapter 5. Road Shows and Ballyhoo	36
Chapter 6. Anthropologists and Ranchers	56
Chapter 7. Cabarets and Speakeasies	72
Chapter 8. The Silent Enemy	96
Chapter 9. New York to Paris	128
Chapter 10. A Penobscot in Paris	147
Chapter 11. City of Lights	162
Chapter 12. Paris Noir	191
Chapter 13. Birth	208
Chapter 14. A Far Cry	217
Chapter 15. Paris Revisited	249
Chapter 16. Home	268
Postscript, by Jean Archambaud Moore	288
Notes	291

Bibliography	339
Index	351

Illustrations

Molly as she appeared in Texas Guinan's clubs, 1928.	page ii
1. View of Indian Island, the Penobscot reservation, circa 1906	15
2. Molly's paternal grandparents, circa 1878	17
3. Molly's maternal grandfather, circa 1900	20
4. Molly's mother, Philomene, circa 1914	22
5. Corpus Christi festival, circa 1911	24
6. Molly's father, Horace, in his Old Town canoe, circa 1910	27
7. Molly and her sister Apid, circa 1914	31
8. The Penobscot Band, circa 1910	34
9. Indian Island girls and women dressed for pageant, circa 1917	38
10. Molly in her early vaudeville days, circa 1918	40
11. Molly and her sister Apid, Indian Pageant canoe race, circa 1921	42
12. Molly and Joe Miller, Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West Show, 1925	70
13. "The Moonflower," by Bonnie MacLeary, modeled after Molly, 1929	74
14. Molly with the Aztec Theater Dancers in San Antonio, Texas, 1926	79
15. Molly as she appeared in Texas Guinan's clubs, 1928	93
16. Molly with huskie dog during The Silent Enemy shoot, 1929	101
17. Promotional poster for The Silent Enemy, 1930	105
18. Molly's living quarters during The Silent Enemy shoot, 1929	111

19. Head cameraman Marcel Picard, shooting <i>The Silent Enemy</i> , 1929	115
20. Producer William Douglas Burden on <i>The Silent Enemy</i> set, 1929	122
21. The Indian Island home Molly purchased for her family, circa 1930	126
22. Molly, 1930 promotional photograph (portrait)	132
23. Molly in street clothes, circa 1930	139

24. Molly and U.S. Indian Band leader Chief Shunatona, performing en route to the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris	149
25. Molly and the U.S. Indian Band at the U.S. exhibit at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris	159
26. Molly's French lover-husband Jean Archambaud	169
27. Molly and Jean Archambaud on a mountain trek in France, circa 1932	175
28. Molly in Paris with her lover, French writer Jean Archambaud	181
29. Molly in East Indian dance costume, circa 1933	187
30. Jean Archambaud in Indian costume	206
31. View of Indian Island, circa 1938	218
32. Molly and her daughter Jean, circa 1937	228
33. Philomene Nelson selling her baskets, circa 1945	230
34. Molly and her sister Apid as extras in Ramona, 1936	239
35. Molly and her daughter with Jean Archambaud's family	255
36. Jean Archambaud with his and Molly's daughter, Jean, 1940	266
37. Jean Archambaud, receiving a commendation from the commandant of the armistice army in Vichy, France, 1941	277
38. Molly and other members of the Nelson family, Indian Island, 1946	279
39. Molly with her mother, daughter, and granddaughter, 1976	285

Unless otherwise noted, photographs are courtesy of Molly's daughter, Jean Archambaud Moore.

Foreword

As a child, my oldest sister Molly was told, "Curiosity killed the cat," and she immediately asked, "Whose cat?" This was one of the many family anecdotes I heard while growing up. At first, however, I did not understand what curiosity meant. I was about six years old when I finally learned, and Molly was involved in the lesson. I had accompanied her to the edge of a field behind our house where wild cherries could be found growing on trees that were only a little thicker than saplings. Molly climbed one of these, broke small branches off, and threw them down to me. As I ran back and forth to gather the branches to place them all in one pile, I caught sight of an object hanging from the branch of a nearby tree. It was shaped somewhat like a football but was flattened at both ends and appeared to be made of rough gray tissue paper. I approached the object, started patting it, and shouted, "Molly, what's this?" I never did understand how she got out of that tree so quickly, but with rapidly swelling eyes, I saw her tearing toward the house at top speed and heard her shouting, "Run!" The gray object was, of course, a hornet's nest. As my mother rubbed her gold wedding band over my numerous stings to quell the pain, she said something about "curiosity," leaving no doubt in my mind as to what that word meant.

Born twelve years before me, Molly took care of me during my childhood at least as often as my mother so much so that I called her "Mama." She was central to my young years. Yet, reading this account of her life, I realize how little I really knew

her as a woman. By the time I had matured enough to get to know her to any depth, she had become only an occasional visitor for short periods of time. And when she later resettled on our island reservation, I had moved to another corner of the world, following my own curiosities. I did not come back to the island to stay until after her death. On top of this, traditional Penobscot child-rearing patterns discouraged talking about oneself, especially talking in a way that gave any hint of boasting. I cannot recall any instance when my sister spoke to me about herself in terms of her career or her dreams, how she felt about life in general or about her life in particular.

Yet, she taught me much. It was mostly from her example and informal teachings that, in my early years, I learned to paddle a canoe properly; to know where to look for wild strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries; and to enjoy time spent in the woods, where one could find the sweet-smelling Mayflowers, Indian pipes, lady slippers, hear the songs of the sparrows, warblers, and mourning doves and catch an occasional glimpse of small wild creatures. She aroused my interest in numerous and diverse matters, including the story of Atlantis which, more than a half century later, I still pursue when new evidence of its existence surfaces. Watching her intellectual quests, I became aware of my own academic capabilities.

Her life spoke to me in other ways that are inexplicable. I once saw her dance in a local nightclub. Words fail me when I try to explain my reaction. I only know that as I watched her, my heart pounded, tears streamed down my face, and my body trembled uncontrollably. Here, in this book, I read in an excerpt from her diary that she wanted her dancing to be "passionate," and I can affirm that for me it was just that.

I rejoiced when I read of the relationship Molly had with Johnny, the Frenchman she married. What a beautiful and uncommon union it was a many-splendored and multileveled compatibility that, I'm convinced, most of us women hope for, but rarely find.

I mourned Molly's death more and longer than even that of our mother. I find no words adequate enough to express my

gratitude to the author who, through diligent and extensive research, has made available to me the story of an extraordinary woman who happened to be my sister.

EUNICE NELSON-BAUMAN
INDIAN ISLAND, OLD TOWN, MAINE

Preface

It was 1988. I was leaving Maine for yet another trip to Africa this time to East Africa to research several magazine and newspaper articles. "Why are you always going so far away when there is so much to write about here?" my husband asked. Then he mentioned, as he had several times before, the life of Molly Spotted Elk. When I returned six weeks later, he handed me an article about Molly, which had appeared in a local newspaper during my absence. A close-up photograph of her caught and held my attention. Her elegant, fine-featured face was warm, inviting. Then I was drawn to the dark eyes. To my surprise, they were wary, impenetrable. This ambiguous image haunted me for days, ultimately convincing me that my husband was right.

Where to start? Seven years of work on a native rights case with the Aroostook Band of Micmacs in northern Maine had brought me into contact not only with Micmacs, but with members of the state's three other tribes: the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet. Molly had been dead for a decade, but I had met her youngest sister, Dr. Eunice Nelson-Bauman, who lives on the Penobscot reservation on Indian Island. I phoned Eunice and talked with her about the possibility of writing an article and perhaps a book about Molly. Soon thereafter, Eunice spent a long weekend at our home in Hallowell. For me time stopped as I sat on our deck overlooking the Kennebec River, listening to her reminisce about her sister. Molly had performed in vaudeville as a teenager, studied journalism and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania,

danced topless in New York, starred in a classic docu-drama chronicling traditional Ojibway Indian life, danced for royalty in Europe, hobnobbed with well-known American literati in Paris, lectured at the Sorbonne, married a French journalist, and barely escaped the Nazi occupation of France by hiking over the Pyrenees with her young daughter. Molly's life, marked by tradition mixed with independence, professional determination, and artistic and intellectual cosmopolitanism, defied the stereotype of a woman born in the early years of this century particularly of an American Indian woman. By the time Eunice left, I knew I wanted to find out more about her sister and share my discoveries in a book.

Eunice suggested I contact Molly's daughter, Jean Archambaud Moore, who had in her keeping Molly's diaries, photographs, letters, and other memorabilia. I phoned Jean, who, at the time, lived in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and told her of my desire to write about her mother. My desire grew as I listened to this keen-witted woman talk about her mother in a deep, earthy voice. Her recollections were vivid and brilliantly told. She had been approached by others interested in writing Molly's life story, so I offered to send her samples of my work to help her decide if she felt I was the right one for the task.

A dozen days later, Jean telephoned to invite me to Tennessee. We worked together intensely for a week, from early morning until deep into the night, recording her recollections of Molly and sorting through boxes of memorabilia. Jean, indefatigable, sat hour after hour, day after day, on a wooden chair at her desk. As afternoons gave way to evenings, she would lean more heavily on her bureau, propping herself up with her elbows. That desk held the tools of her fortune-telling trade, including a crystal ball and cards. On our last evening together, I learned that she practiced her trade personally as well as professionally:

"Would you like to know why I chose you to tell my mother's story? she asked.

"Indeed, I would."

"You see this painting?" she queried, pointing above her

desk to a picture of the Indian saint Kateri Tekawithaone of several paintings of this saint for which her mother had posed.

"Yes, I've been looking at it all week."

"Well, two weeks before you first phoned me, I noticed it was crooked and straightened it out. The next day, I found it had shifted again and once more leveled it. This happened again and again. When I straightened it on the day you telephoned, I asked out loud, '*Mother*, what are you trying to tell me?!' After your call, the painting remained evenly hung. Apparently, my mother felt comfortable about entrusting you with her story."

Jean's level of trust proved to be as extraordinary as this message from her deceased mother. When I left after our first visit, I carried with me a box of precious goods Molly's diaries. Since then I have been entrusted with hundreds of family photographs and personal letters, not to mention Jean's utterly candid recollections.

Molly was extremely private, even in her diaries. This is evident not only in the content of the diaries, but also in the fact that her writing was so miniscule that I had to make enlarged photocopies of the pages in order to decipher them. Typically, Molly chronicled her daily doings. She also provided social commentary on a range of topics, from politics and racism to the emptiness of high society life. She had an anthropologist's eye and in her travels frequently recorded culturally based values, habits, and tastes that differed from her own. During her first months in France she devoted a half-dozen pages to descriptions of French cheeses and eating habits. While self-reflection, soul-searching, and personal struggle are expressed in her diaries, Molly usually used journal writing as a means of wrestling out of, rather than plunging into, the sorrows that plagued her. Her determination to be cheerful and to carry on in the face of great difficulty inspired me. But at times it left me confused about her true feelings. When I interviewed dancer Lisan Kay, one of Molly's old friends from both New York and Paris, she told me that Molly was always upbeat and never depressed. Molly fooled her and she

almost fooled me. Only after reading all (and transcribing much) of her surviving journals did I learn how to read between the lines. There I discovered the ambiguity that haunted Molly through much of her life—ambiguity toward and from dominant white society concerning her place in it.

Despite the frequent masking of emotions in Molly's diaries, I found them fully reliable in terms of facts. If she noted that an article appeared about her in a magazine or newspaper, I was able to track it down. If she mentioned giving a particular performance, I could find evidence of it in reviews and promotional material. The friendships, love relationships, and work associations referred to in her daybooks were repeatedly verified through interviews with those who knew her. In short, Molly's diaries withstood an intensive veracity test when held against oral histories and personal correspondence, as well as written and photographic records unearthed in national, local, and university archives and libraries in France and the United States.

But the diaries by no means told the full story of Molly's life. Hunting down and fitting together the missing fragments challenged me considerably and getting to Molly's soul seemed nearly impossible. For me, she was the quintessential "other." We hailed from dramatically different times and societal niches, and our personalities were strikingly different. The choices she made rarely matched my own. I remember vividly the first time I saw a pair of her size five dance moccasins. Glancing from them to my own size nine and one-half feet I thought, "I'll never be able to step into her shoes and tell her story." Nonetheless, taking my cue from her undaunted spirit, I continued my journey to the far-off land of her life. One by one, I shed the assumptions that hindered my travel. I strolled the paths and sidewalks frequented by her on Indian Island and in New York and Paris. I pored over her diaries. I devoured the impassioned love letters she received from Jean Archambaud. I stood at the foot of the stairs where she died. Finally, as I wrote my way toward the end of Molly's life and the final chapter in this book, our souls touched. The meeting, a holy happening in the

mind's eye, occurred during a walk through the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas where I live. There, I swear, Molly gave me the conclusion to this book. Or, perhaps, the conclusion gave me Molly.

BUNNY MCBRIDE

Acknowledgments

Molly's story could not have come to light without the help of her daughter, Jean Archambaud Moore, and her youngest sister, Eunice Nelson-Bauman. Both shared memories and memorabilia concerning Molly with generosity, trust, and candor. Plus, each time a new chapter rolled out of my printer, they reviewed it, and provided feedback that kept the facts on track and inspired me onward. My sincere thanks to them.

Two other women read an early draft of this book: my sister and my mother. For support that reaches far beyond these pages, I am indebted to them, and to my father.

Donald Smith, who authored the captivating biography of Molly's *Silent Enemy* costar Long Lance, read my chapter on the making of that film and offered a thoughtful critique. Moreover, he led me to two vital and equally helpful sources: Jean Burden Bostwick (the widow of W. Douglas Burden who produced the docu-drama), and Madeline Theriault (an Ojibwa who made many of the costumes for the movie and played a small role in it).

Although they do not appear in the coming pages, I want to acknowledge and express thanks to my Micmac Indian friends in northern Maine. Working beside them in their struggle for native rights and cultural survival affected my world view profoundly. In particular, I gleaned insights from the elder women whose oral histories I gathered life stories of stalwart souls who have faced countless adversities with quiet determination. In many ways they prepared me to receive Molly's story.

My background research for this book was aided greatly by

access to the library of my husband, anthropologist Harald Prins the only person I know who has read all seventy-two volumes of the *Jesuit Relations*. During our years in Maine, Harald painstakingly pored over and topically transcribed volumes of archival records relating to American Indians in the region. Of special note here are research findings he shared with me concerning the emergence of American Indians as entertainers, which provided a valuable framework in which to place Molly's vaudeville experiences. Beyond this, he celebrated the completion of each chapter by listening to me read it aloud to him and by offering essential and insightful feedback. For his perspicacity, enthusiasm, friendship, and love, I am deeply and daily grateful.

Also, sincere thanks to Alice Stanton at University of Oklahoma Press for her rare combination of professional acumen and grace. Finally, I wish to thank the staff at the Maine State Library, which, during my decade in Maine, seemed like an annex to my home office. Even after moving to Kansas I have continued to marvel at and rely upon their gracious and able assistance.