



Episode Seven | TRANSCRIPT

Lucy Nicolar Poolaw | 1882 - 1969



HOSTED BY:

League of Women Voters of Maine
Featuring Dr. Darren Ranco

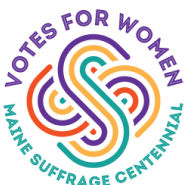


MARKER LOCATION:

1 Down Street
Indian Island, Maine

lwvme.org/SuffrageTrail

- 0:18 You're listening to the "Road to the 19th Amendment" podcast, and we're telling the story of Maine's suffragists and bringing this history the recognition it deserves. This project is made possible by the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative, chaired by Ellen Alderman, led by Anne Gass, and with support from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation and other donors like you.
- 0:48 This episode covers the life of Lucy Nicolar Poolaw, her story told by Doctor Darren Ranco of the Penobscot Nation.
- 1:02 My name is Darren Ranco. I'm a citizen of the Penobscot Nation. I'm chair of the Native American Programs and professor of anthropology at the University of Maine. And yeah, I got involved in this project, basically just telling the story of the person who's a Penobscot person who fought really hard for our voting rights. And so Lucy Nicolar is just one of those really special people from my tribe, who is such an inspiration for so many of us and both native and non-native people. So, I think just telling her story and her role in our voting rights.
- 1:54 I love telling the story of Lucy, partly because she was born, you know, in the 1880s on Indian Island, which is the home of the Penobscot Nation. She is the daughter of Joseph Nicolar, who was a tribal leader and author. He wrote this book called *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, one very few Penobscot authored things to appear in the 19th century. And her mother was Elizabeth Joseph.
- 2:24 She started out her life in this family traveling to Kennebunkport and selling baskets. A lot of Penobscot families have this sort of summer selling baskets and engaging the tourists trade in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century. And she did that with her family as well as performing and singing for tourists dressing up in recognizable



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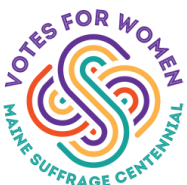
- 3:04 Indian news. And then she really leaned into her performance later in her teens where she started performing at public events, like sportsman shows, and other things, as well. So she started her life out as a performer, and there's a lot of stories of her traveling as a performer. She actually recorded songs; she had a really lovely voice. You can hear some of her songs on some of the Victor recordings under the name Princess Watahwaso. I should say — so Lucy Nicolar and then later Lucy Nicola Poolaw — her stage name was Princess Watahwaso, and she predates another really famous Penobscot artist who did, and singer, who did similar things as Lucy, and her name was Molly Spotted Elk, originally her name Molly Nelson.
- 3:50 [Music playing of Four Penobscot Tribal Songs, sung by Princess Watahwaso. Victor matrix B-21018. *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. [Link to this recording.](#)]
- 4:17 And so yeah, it really leaned into a whole career as a performer, entertainer. But through that, you know, traveled the world. And I think she, like other folks from tribal communities who had those opportunities, brought back with them certain kinds of skills and experiences that led them to become very active, kind of, leaders and activists around our rights in this...this transformation, you know. Happens mostly after World War Two in Maine for our tribes here where these people, who had traveled the world sometimes as entertainers sometimes as veterans, brought back with them certain skills and connections that led them to be kind of leaders and activists in their own way.
- 5:05 When Lucy returns, I mean, she starts returning I mean, she's always returning to the community in the tribe, but in by the late 40s, early 50s, she's living full time back here, the Penobscot reservation. She also has her husband who is also an entertainer, Bruce Poolaw, who's from Oklahoma. Originally he's Kiowa. So he's from a different tribe, but they were both in these various kinds of entertainment...industry and making their livelihoods that way. She brings him back, they actually kind of reengage in the tourist trade that she had done as a young girl and teenager.
- 5:47 And they build this kind of wooden teepee right on the on the Nicolar property right...the very first, it's like one of the first buildings on Indian Island when you come off the bridge on the left there — it's still there. And she...that sort of — she starts to do this tourist trade with Bruce Poolaw. They do some performances, but mostly it's like, you



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- 6:10 know, a shop and that sort of thing. But I think she and Bruce Poolaw, along with some other folks in the tribe, really saw the most obvious thing, but there's a lot of things that she did in her life in terms of it being an activist.
- 6:25 The two things that she really targeted were education, for Penobscot people, and voting for Penobscot peopl. She was involved in other things in terms of land rights, that sort of thing. But those are the two that she's really known for, in terms of education, really paving the way for Penobscot children to go to the public schools in Old Town after they did some schooling run by the church on Indian Island. So she, she helped facilitate that — that was a lot of work. She and her sister did this work together.
- 6:55 And then and then the voting rights issues. This was in the state constitution from 1820. Indians are not allowed to vote. It's actually called the clause and the electors part of the constitution says indians not taxed could not vote. And by the 20th century, that meant indians living on indian reservations could not vote in any state, federal, any any sort of election.
- 7:24 This becomes kind of an embarrassment for the state of Maine throughout the 1940s and early 50s, especially as you see what's happening in the Jim Crow south in the fight for voting rights there. And this becomes a really important part of activism, in, it required because it's in the Constitution, it required a constitutional convention and a change in the state constitution to include indians. As she and a bunch of others worked to changing that constitution, the state constitution to include indians as electors in any place across the state.
- 8:00 And that constitutional change, after at least a decade of work, happened in 1955. And there's a really famous picture of her as the first Penobscot voting that circulates pretty widely that...her — she's the first one to vote in any election as a as a reservation indian in the state of Maine. And actually, she's voting into a box that we all vote in now, still, in our elections, and today is actually primary day for for tribal elections. Hopefully, I get to go to that later.
- 8:37 But yeah, we still vote into that box. The picture itself is actually not on Indian Island. We didn't have a polling place on the reservation at the time. It's actually in Old Town, so everyone had to get to Old Town and vote at their polling place. So you see these stern looking



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older women seeing her her voting for the first time in this picture with her husband, Bruce Poolaw in the background, and it's a really, it's a, I think, for most of us, that she fought so hard, and she's the first to vote. And as a, as a woman, I think, you know, that there's a long tradition of our women fighting in for in various ways for our rights. And it made sense that, you know, the schooling situation, the, the, the voting situation is something she fought so hard for. And she was able to enact [that].

9:28

Just as a little bit of a coda to that, in fact, at the time, while we could do statewide elections, so governor, any of the statewide elections, the Constitution, fix that as well as all the federal elections, not until then the 1960s. And at least [not until] another decade did we actually get full enfranchisement as Penobscot, or any reservation indians, with being placed in our own sort of districts for House and Senate. So we didn't have actual representation in the state legislature that could vote, we have these non-voting representatives from the tribes that are there, had been off and on for the last 170 years or 80 years, but that we didn't get this full enfranchisement, in terms of voting for the representatives to the state legislature, until 1967.

10:21

So, you know, she lived to see that finally completed as well. And then I believe she, she lived to be pretty old. I think she died in the in the late 70s, early 80s. [Editor's note: Lucy Poolaw died in 1969.] So she just had this huge impact. And I think her family is a really important family of activists, thinkers. You know, her family, you know, in the contemporary day, Charles Shay is a World War Two veteran — that's her family. And he represents this sort of experience of being a World War Two veteran and also coming back.

10:57

And I think a lot of those folks are really important to our tribe today. But the marker will be right near the site of that teepee and that, the Lucy and Bruce Poolaw teepee location, which still exists, so it'll be right on the very first...marker you see on the reservation will be this marker. Just to the left as you come off the bridge. And I should say that she and her family also fought to actually have a bridge to Indian Island. Before 1951, you had...there was only a ferry, but with Old Town, that we had — in terms of — so that's when my dad, for example, as a kid, that's how he got so the reservation was the ferry and so, you know, there are times in the late fall and spring that the ice would prevent sort of passage, you know if it wasn't firm enough.

11:50

So, yeah, it — the marker will be one of the very first things that people see as they come onto the reservation.



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Bio.

Lucy Nicolar Poolaw | 1882 - 1969

Lucy Nicolar was born in Indian Island, Maine, a citizen of the Penobscot nation and the daughter of Joseph Nicolar and Elizabeth Joseph.

Every summer, her family traveled to the resort town of Kennebunkport to sell baskets, and Lucy and her sister performed in Indian dress for the tourists. In her late teens she started performing at public events such as sportsman's shows. These early experiences led to a long and successful career in the arts, performing on stage in traditional Indian dress, mixing classical music and opera with Native American songs, and recording with Victor Records. Lucy's stage name was "Princess Watawaso."

Following her retirement as a full-time entertainer, Lucy returned to Maine with her husband, Kiowa Nation citizen Bruce Poolaw. They opened Chief Poolaw's TeePee on Indian Island in 1947, a store that featured Penobscot artwork. This is where her marker is located.

Lucy's considerable achievements in the arts were matched by her activism on the part of the Penobscot people. Along with her sisters, Florence and Emma, she campaigned for Native voting rights. Though most American women won the right to vote through the 19th Amendment, Maine didn't extend voting

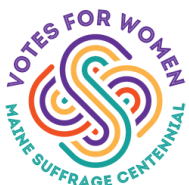
rights to Indigenous peoples until 1954. Yet as the State didn't create voting districts for the reservations, Native peoples here weren't fully enfranchised until 1967.

With her sisters, Lucy also fought for better educational opportunities for the Penobscot people, and lobbied the State of Maine to build a bridge to Indian Island in order to improve its accessibility.

In recognition of her advocacy, Lucy was chosen to be the first Native American on a Maine reservation to cast a vote.

In 1988 Lucy's nephew, Charles Norman Shay, obtained and renovated the teepee store to cast a vote (depicted in the photo on the opposite page, and this is where the roadside marker celebrating Lucy has been installed.

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