

# Pauline Johnson

## Family History

Emily Pauline Johnson was born on the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve near Brantford, Ontario, Canada. She was of mixed heritage. Her father was a native chief who spoke English and Mohawk. He served as a missionary translator. Pauline's mother came from England to work with the missionaries. Not everyone was happy about their marriage. When her father died Pauline was 23 years old. Her family moved into Brantford and did not have much money.

## Poet and Author

Pauline liked to read both classic English authors and books about Indigenous peoples. In her teens, Pauline began to write poems. Her poetry was mostly about the Canadian landscape, but she also made ballads about First Nations history. For example, her poem "A Cry From an Indian Wife" is about the Riel Rebellion. One of her most famous poems is "The Song My Paddle Sings". As an adult, many of her writings were published in newspapers and magazines. Later her collection of poems was printed in a book called "Flint and Feather".



## Stage Career

To support herself, Pauline became a performer, telling stories and poems in salons and theaters. Her promoter called her the Mohawk Princess. She took the stage name Tekahionwake, which was her great-grandfather's name. It means 'double wampum' or double life. She wrote and performed a two-part act. In act one, she would recite Mohawk lyrics, wearing a buckskin dress with a bear claw necklace, wampum belts, and masks. In act two, she would come out in a silk English gown and recite poetry. The audience would gasp at the change.

## Achievements and Legacy



Pauline was one Canada's first performance artists. But more importantly, she was an activist who defended Indigenous rights. Her work brought people's attention to stereotypes and the cruel treatment of the Indigenous peoples. As well, Pauline was an advocate for women. She did not agree that women should find a husband, stay home, and be dutiful. Instead, her stories show women as independent, noble, and brave.

### Quotes

"I am a Redskin, but I am something else, too - I am a woman."

"Forget that I was Pauline Johnson, but remember that I was Tekahionwake, the Mohawk that humbly aspired to be the saga singer of her people."

### Glossary

- ❖ *Wampum*: colored beads often made from shells that were woven in a pattern, to be worn in ceremonies, for decoration, or used as money
- ❖ *Indigenous Peoples*: a group that has always lived in a specific place and are native to the land

## Sources

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