

Jacket of record-holding runner 'Deerfoot' Bennett given to Senecas

Lewis "Deerfoot" Bennett ran in moccasins, bare chested, with a single eagle feather in a headband, setting several world records in foot racing during the mid-1800s.

But his legacy was largely forgotten, even in his native region, in the decades that followed his death in 1896.

"I would say it's only been within the past 15 years that the Seneca community has been made aware of his athletic accomplishments, about how good of a runner he was and the medals that he was awarded," said Lori Quigley, one of his great-great-grandchildren.

It is why Quigley was delighted to learn that a jacket worn by Bennett has a new home on the Seneca Nation Allegany Territory.

It will go on display with one of his beaded headbands in the Onöhsagwë:de' Cultural Center, which houses the Seneca Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca.

"It's really great that a piece of his clothing is coming back here to us, because he brings a lot of honor and respect to our people because of his accomplishments," said Hayden Haynes, director of the center.

Bennett won his first race in 1856 at a county fair, running 5 miles in 25 minutes.

He also is known for a 20-month European tour from 1861 to 1863, when he set multiple records, running 10 miles in 51:26 and 12 miles in 1:02:02.

Bennett also held the world record for four years for the one hour run, traveling 11 miles, 790 yards.

He raced primarily in Western New York, New York City and Boston after he returned from his European tour. In 1868, he won a 5-mile race in Buffalo in 24:15, despite giving the rest of the field a quarter-mile head start.

He ran his last race at age 40 and lived on the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus Territory, where he farmed.

Bennett, a member of the Snipe clan, was 68 when he died. Several years later, his remains were moved to Forest Lawn, where he is buried next to renowned Seneca Chief and orator Red Jacket.

Bennett was inducted into the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 2011, and the Western New York Running Hall of Fame in 2019.

"Deerfoot Bennett is a legendary Seneca athlete, who astonished people around the world with his speed," Seneca Nation President Rickey Armstrong Sr. said in a statement. "We are grateful that, more than a century after his passing, the Seneca people will again have the opportunity to recognize him in this special way, as we accept this gift from our friends in Gowanda, and bring this important connection to Deerfoot home to Seneca territory."

Bennett's jacket has been at the Gowanda Area Historical Society since it was donated there in the early 1980s. Before that, it was in the possession of Sadie Bennett, Quigley's late great-aunt.

Seneca cultural center leaders approached the society when they recently learned the garment might be there. Society members checked, said it was, and offered to return it.

The jacket is made of light-colored animal hide, with long fringe and quillwork on the front.

"It's really important for us that items of such historical nature are repatriated back to the communities from where these individuals came from, and I can't think of a better place than the cultural museum to be the place to hold on to this for the community," Quigley told The Buffalo News. "Our community knows the history of Deerfoot, is proud of his history, understands the accolades that he received, but at the same time, we understand the struggles that he had as a native person."

While he ran competitively and did not carry messages, Bennett carried on the long tradition of Indigenous runners who sometimes traveled hundreds of miles per day on foot.

"The history of long distance running is something that is directly tied to our culture," Haynes said. "Messages had to be delivered from nation to nation and community to community."

The cultural center looks forward to caring for the jacket.

"It's important, in one way, that it comes here," Haynes said, "because we can now properly care for the jacket in a way that will make it last as long as possible."