



Dr. Theodore Kazimiroff
Cornelius Amory Pugsley Local Medal Award, 1968

Dr. Theodore Kazimiroff (1914-1980) received the Pugsley Medal in 1968. By profession, Kazimiroff was a dentist who practiced in the Bronx. He graduated from Manhattan College in 1936 and from the New York University College of Dentistry in 1940. He subsequently taught at the college of dentistry for 36 years. While his profession was dentistry, his avocation and true calling was as self-appointed preserver of our past and for much of his life he dedicated himself to protecting places of historical and ecological significance in the Bronx.

He was well-informed in many scientific disciplines, but was especially noted for his expertise in zoology, botany, anthropology and local history. He excavated, collected and cataloged a museum full of artifacts, books, maps and documents that was vast. The Indian portion of the collection alone comprised over 200,000 articles. In addition, there were innumerable colonial and Revolutionary War artifacts. The entire collection was well over a million pieces.

Kazimiroff's zeal for archaeological discovery went back to his youth. As a young boy, he frequently walked from his house in Throggs Neck to the woody Hills of Hunter and Twin Islands. The area fascinated him because it contained all of the flora and fauna he had read about in his Boy Scout manuals. He spent whole days there, drinking fresh spring water and eating wild fruits and berries. Unbeknown to him, his adventures were observed by another who in October 1924 presented himself to Kazimiroff saying: "Good day. I am Joe. I know you very much. You watch all living things, but you do not harm them. Why?"

The old man was named-Joe Two Trees. He was a leathery-faced Indian who lived in the park. The old man, soft-voiced and well-spoken, had come from the West where his forefathers, originally Algonquin, had been pushed by white settlers many years before. They became friends, this oddly matched pair, and Two Trees told his story to the young boy. This meeting with Joe Two Trees and Two Trees' life experiences were later recorded by Kazimiroff's son in a widely read and acclaimed book. *The Last Algonquin*, based on the stories that Two Trees told to his father. His son was often asked what drove his father to invest so much energy in preserving the past. He responded:

I've given that question a great deal of thought. The only real answer that has ever come to me is that all the digging didn't really start with a shovel at all. It started with an encounter. I think he was worried that a very old Algonquin gentleman might otherwise be forever forgotten.

The interactions with Two Trees and the teaching he provided instilled in Kazimiroff a vibrant interest in the history and lore of their common homeland. He later reflected:

Here was a man who had created an ecological balance in his surroundings long before ecology became a fashionable word. The maximum use of all things, within a framework of no waste, was something Joe did as his ancestors had for thousands of years. He lived this way, apparently for no other reason than that it made good sense.

He only had Two Trees' companionship for a short while, but it altered his life in such a fashion that the outdoors became his haven, the preservation of mementos from the past his sacred duty.

In the swamps and marshes of Pelham Bay Park, Hunter Island, Riverdale, along the Bronx River in the New York Botanical Gardens and at many spots along the shore of Long Island Sound, Kazimiroff found wild

fruits and fauna. He became expert at spotting an Indian camp site or burial pit beside a skyscraper or in the open spaces anywhere in the five boroughs. He learned to watch newspaper real estate pages and news columns for tips on where the bulldozers were about to begin foundation excavation. These almost always yielded collection items. His finds at the United Nations site and at city housing projects enriched his shelves. When the digging machines bit into the soil for the Whitestone Bridge anchorages he hit upon enormous Indian burial pits. At the site of a 100-hut Algonquin Village he unearthed complete skeletons.

His son later recalled that he had an extensive network of construction workers who served as “scouts.” “He must have had half the building and highway construction crews in New York City scouting for him. Whenever they dug into anything historically interested, such as shells, charcoal, bones or old foundations, they'd call Dr. Kazimiroff.”

His home at Bainbridge Avenue and 201st Street was a storehouse for these artifacts. During the summer and fall months, he took pride in feeding his family from the city's wild asparagus and other native root growths. The family gathered wild beach plumb, strawberries, raspberries, apples, pears, grapes, butternuts, walnuts, hazel nuts and hickory nuts—all in New York City.

In 1955, Kazimiroff founded the Bronx Historical Society and in the 1960s he led a drive that saved the Varian House on Bainbridge Avenue from being torn down for an apartment building. With the city's support, the house, which dates to Revolutionary times, was moved to public land across the street. It became a museum and the historical society's headquarters. He served as the society's first president, organized the society's first walking tour, designed its first exhibits, and gave the society's first lecture. He was the “Official Bronx Historian,” a position he held from 1953 until his death in 1980.

He was known for being a fascinating lecturer, and he was the chief mover behind the preservation of the wilderness areas of Pelham Bay Park, which became the Thomas Pell Wildlife Sanctuary and the Hunters Island Marine Zoology and Geology Sanctuary in the park. Perhaps the biggest disappointment of his life was the failure of his struggle against what he called “the monstrous rape of Pelham Bay Park” -- the dumping there of what the city euphemistically called “landfill,” but what was simply garbage.

Kazimiroff was a fellow and consultant of the New York Zoological Society and the New York Botanical Gardens, and a frequent lecturer on such subjects as the ecology of the Bronx River and the history of the borough. He was a consultant also for the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of American Indians.

One of Kazimiroff's friends who participated with him in many of his projects was a professor of anthropology at Columbia University. He reflected:

The best description I can think of for Ted Kazimiroff Sr. whom I knew for at least forty-five years, is that of an over-engined dynamo...Ted was an ecologist before the word became popular, and a conservationist well before it became fashionable and newsworthy to be one...Were it not for Ted Kazimiroff, archaeologists of today would not have even a fraction of the data on the New York City area that now exists because he had the skill and determination to salvage it...Ted's profession as a dentist brought him into contact with many personalities from all walks of life and his friends are legion. But I think Ted missed his calling. With his natural talent for field research and as a teacher, he should have been on the faculty of one of our universities.

In 1981, soon after his death, the New York City council renamed a stretch of Southern Blvd., in his name. In 1986, the city parks department officially opened The Kazimiroff Nature Trail in Pelham Bay Park.