

Cultural Remembrance

What comes to mind as an immediate response to Greg Staats' *Reciprocity* video program is the interweaving of cultural history within community and family. Aspects of leaving and returning, grief and loss mingle with joy and celebration. I consider the heartache of distant Mohawk family members leaving the security of the Mohawk Valley and resettling along the banks of the Grand River after the turmoil of the American Revolutionary War. Their meager possessions and the Queen Anne Communion Silver¹ were among the limited material goods making the perilous journey. No doubt their Christian faith gave them solace in the same way the Condolence Ceremony² of Longhouse believers elevates the mind after the death of loved ones.

When the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784 set the six miles deep boundaries of the Six Nations' new homeland, our ancestors took the Crown's assurances as truth. They did not realize that sixty years later their defined territory along the Grand River would shrink to a mere fraction of the original grant. Resettling a second time in Tuscarora Township after 1841 meant rebuilding homes, farms, churches, and longhouses. This reduced homeland and subsequent refuge is the setting for the music and images within Greg's four videos.

Settlement in Tuscarora Township proceeded according to religious affiliation. Along the eastern and northern regions of the township boundary were the families and kin groups of the Longhouse followers. At the western boundary, the Mohawk families, originally from the upper village in Mohawk Valley, established family homesteads around the Mohawk church, St. Paul's' Anglican (Kanyengeh). The Staats family built their home along Sour Springs Road. Our great-grandfather found employment as the constable for the Confederacy Chiefs' Council, the traditional form of Six Nations governance. One of his sons enlisted with the 114th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during World War 1. He was one of more than three hundred Six Nation men who served the King as loyal allies during this conflict.

The returning soldiers had tasted a new kind of freedom away from the influence of church and home. In fact, many of these warriors began to earnestly petition for a change to the community's official government. In 1924 these hopes were realized when the Canadian government issued an Order-in-Council to replace the traditional hereditary system with an elected model based on one man, one vote. The Six Nations of the Grand River was irrevocably fractured along political and religious lines.

This action is still felt today as community members deal with larger issues such as land rights. As power and control were transferred to the elected Six Nations Band Council, the moral authority remains with the Confederacy Chiefs. Families were conflicted over what system to support. Others remained steadfastly aligned with one system or the other.



Staats family artifacts featured in the *Reciprocity* exhibition.

The cultural integrity of the community was further eroded and changed through the educational system. Students whose first language was an Iroquoian language were forced to speak English in on-reserve schools. The residential school, known as the Mohawk Institute or Mush Hole, compelled students to worship at the Mohawk Chapel and speak English. These institutions were major factors in the loss of our traditional languages. Despite the fact that most of our family relatives did not attend the Mohawk Institute, our grandparents and parents insisted that we would benefit from speaking only English. Our generation has lost a major component of our heritage.

Even though we did not speak Mohawk or Tuscarora, our grandparents often sang Indian hymns and prayed in the language in church and at home. These Indian hymns, translated from English hymns by community members, were passed on through hand-written hymnals. Choirs and quartets often sang hymns during church services at the Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist churches on Six Nations. Funerals were frequently a time for Mohawk hymn singing because grieving family members would specifically request a favourite hymn to be sung. These moving, *a capella* hymns brought recollections of loved ones' voices in song, and acted as soothing and uplifting release for the bereaved. In many ways a Mohawk hymn and its practitioners performed a small condolence through prayer and song. Mohawk Christians and their hymns firmly extended these funeral rites along a continuum by uplifting the mourners from a position of grief to one where they are clear-minded.

Despite having only an elementary education, record keeping was a frequent pastime for our paternal grandfather. He recorded weather conditions, significant family and community events, visits by relatives and friends, and even detailed the price of items purchased from local stores. "Spirit level purchased" appears in his handwriting during the playing of *what remains*. All these activities of daily living were written in small, black notebooks. Probably his most significant act of record keeping was preserving the Mohawk hymns sung by the Wright Family Quartet and the Porter Brothers with his reel-to-reel tape recorder. In a way he acted as one of the many linguists and ethnologists

1964

Mr Albert Wright
 passed away
 Sun 6:05 PM Nov 15/64
 at the S. W. Hospital Chawchen
 S. Sr

Mon AM. Nov. 16/64
 1 truck load of stone dust
 delivered here by Natin Truck
 S. Sr

Funeral at Medina Church
 for Albert Wright
 Wed. Nov 18/64. at 2 PM
 Rather cool day Temperature about
 36 or 38 deg.
 Rev Melch Henry
 Pall Bearers
 Tree man Sowden Gs. Williams
 Simon & Milton Wright S. Staats Sr.
 John Curley

First snow fall. Ground
 Covered white
 Thu. Nov. 19. /64
 S. Sr

Sun PM. Nov 22 /64
 Went to Burlington
 Rev. M. Henry had service
 m Mrs Norman Wright
 m Mrs Ted Wright & Daughter. Ber.
 Chancy John
 m Mrs Kenneth McNaughton
 & Son. Mrs. M. Henry
 m Mrs Simon Wright
 m Mrs Bob Williams
 m Mrs S. Staats Sr
 Min & her husband

Eddy Hall brother of the late
 Tom & Elizabeth Hill died sudden
 in Brantford Thu Dec 3/64

Leonard Staats' Journal, 1964

who have studied the people and culture at Six Nations.³ The major difference was the control of the information and its subsequent use, which rested firmly within the family. I often wonder what he wanted to preserve with the recordings. My belief is that he knew the inherent value of these Mohawk hymns. The lyrics held a truly Mohawk interpretation of the Christian message. Combined with the emotion of the singers these hymns connect my present reality with our ancestors.

The works transmit the richness of the Mohawk tradition of hymn singing from my past. The clear message I take from *red oak condolence* and *wave* is an admonishment to focus on Mohawk Christians who expressed their mix of linguistic continuity within a twentieth-century context.

In the true spirit of Iroquois *reciprocity*,⁴ my grandfather took the sharing of Mohawk hymns singers, recorded their voices, and preserved the integrity of the our family's link with the Mohawk language. In turn, Greg Staats brings forward the sound recordings, melded with the personal mnemonic visuals of trees and found text, as a gift to all who witness.

Sheila Staats

Notes

1 The Queen Anne Communion Silver was presented to the Mohawks in 1711 and was used in the first Chapel of the Mohawks built at Fort Hunter, New York, in 1712. The Communion Silver was divided between the Six Nations and Tyendinaga Mohawks following their resettlement in Ontario after 1784.

2 Jose Barreiro, "Chief Jacob Thomas and the Condolence Cane," *Northeast Indian Quarterly* (Winter 1990): 77-85.

3 Sally Weaver and Annemarie Shimony are just two of the anthropologists who studied the people and cultural practices at Six Nations of the Grand River.

4 My recollections of a first-year anthropology course, Trent University, 1972.

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