

Land Where The Partridge Drums

A History of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

In the Shadow of Serpents: Trials and Tribulations of the Early 1800's

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CORRECTION: In the second to the last paragraph of last week's installment, I wrote that Colonel Louis Cook and his compatriots Thomas Williams and William Gray were "more than willing to part with even more territory in exchange for political power on the American side of Akwesasne." As I edited the text for this week's installment, I realized that I had made a major mistake: Cook and Gray were dead when this happened! Instead of quitclaiming 9,000,050 acres of Mohawk territory, as that paragraph suggests, Colonel Cook only quitclaimed 9,000,000! William Gray, because he was only the interpreter, never quitclaimed anything. I apologize for this appalling lapse of historical veracity. D.B.

Mohawk elders still tell the *Prophecy of the Silver and Gold Serpents*, in which two young hunters bring home a pair of odd-looking snakes (some say lizards) they find glistening in the sun on the banks of the sea. Most of the people in the village become enamored with them, much to the dismay of an elder, and they build a small pen to keep them in. The silver and gold serpents are ravenously hungry and the people soon forsake their own needs to make sure the mysterious creatures are fed. In no time at all the creatures outgrow their stockade and begin to eat the villagers themselves, then they move on, one going north, the other south. By the time they return they are as large as mountains and have left trails of death and destruction in their wake.

Many people believe this prophecy to be a warning of what happened when European colonists came to America. For the Mohawks, this would seem to be the case. As we have seen in the first two chapters of this work, the Mohawks and our Haudenosaunee brothers have always been caught between at least two colonial powers: first it was the Dutch and the French, then the English and the French, then the Americans and the English, and finally the Americans and Canadians. Although these "serpents" were different, their effects on us were identical. Once mesmerized by the glitter of their outward appearances, a few of our people went against the will of their elders and helped the foreign powers gain a foothold in America, a mistake that left the entire continent open for conquest.

The analogy of serpents is a fitting one. It allows us to trace the movements of the colonial powers on the continent. As we have seen, the French serpent, bloodied and defeated in the French and Indian Wars, was neutralized and restrained in Quebec while England gave birth to (and was ultimately driven northward by) its offspring, the United States, in the American Revolution.

This chapter continues the story of the serpents with the "rematch" between England and her serpent offspring, the United States, in the War of 1812. It also chronicles the "reawakening" of the French serpent and its resumption of hostilities against the English serpent in the Patriote Rebellion of the 1830's. As it was in previous conflicts, our own Mohawk people were more or less forced to heed the call of war on both occasions. By doing so they forgot the lessons of those who came before and "fed the serpents" in their own time. Just as before, Mohawk unity on what course of action to take was impossible to maintain.

"Slums in the Wilderness"

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the last decade of the 1700's brought a gloomy decline for Akwesasne and the other nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The American Revolution saw

their population nearly halved and their political power split. Leadership on a national level was impossible to maintain due to the rise of factionalism and corruption of chiefs. As a result, a series of treaties were signed with the Americans that abandoned the Haudenosaunee's western Indian allies to American aggression and left the Haudenosaunee who remained in New York with fragments of the land they once held.

Akwesasne found itself literally cut in half by the international border agreed upon by the Americans and British after the American Revolution. Both authorities assured natives that their cross-border travel would continue unimpeded. In time, however, Akwesasne's geographic bisection became symbolic of the way the Haudenosaunee nations in Canada and the United States would be treated by their "host" nations. The policy of divide and conquer left each nation susceptible to internal meddling and political espionage. In Akwesasne's case, the partisan Louis Cook's actions stand out as the most divisive.

In the aftermath of the Confederacy's decline, the reservations became what one historian has dubbed "slums in the wilderness," fraught with incessant alcoholism, accusations of witchcraft, breakdown of the family structure, and disease. The ancient customs of their hunting and trading ancestors were found to be incompatible with the crowded and unstable reservation life imposed upon them by the "protective" United States federal government. (Wallace 1969:184-208)

It was in this precarious environment that a new religion, actually the old religion in a modified form, was born among the Haudenosaunee.

An Account of the Emergence of a Mohawk Prophet on the Six Nations Reserve

...In the autumn of 1798 a young Mohawk Indian of Grand River, fell into a kind of *trance* for 24 hours or more, who had dreamed a dream and had many visions in which he had a particular interview and conference with *Thauloonghyauwangoo* which signifies *Upholder of the Skies or Heavens*, who from time immemorial or before the formation of the Island, or America, existed, and who placed it upon the back of a great tortoise, chief of the *Turtle tribe*. In the conference which this young Indian had with the Upholder of the Skies, the latter made grievous complaints of the base and ungrateful neglect of the Five Nations (the Seneca excepted) in withholding the homage due to him and the offering he was wont to receive from their fathers, as an acknowledgement for his guardianship. Many were the evils which had come upon them in consequence of this neglect. Sickness, epidemic disorders, losses in war, unfruitful seasons, scanty crops—unpleasant days. The character of this young man was so unblemished and remarkable for a sedate and reflecting mind, that when he declared his vision in a serious and affecting manner, it immediately gained almost universal credit in the settlement. Brant, from political motives, found himself obliged to give his consent to a sacrifice and offering to the *Upholder of the Sky*, with this condition, that should not be considered as setting aside the christian religion. The sacrifice with all its appendages was performed—Christian and Pagan all attended, tho none but the Pagans partook of the feast. It seemed to diffuse new and general joy throughout the whole settlement.

From the Journal of Rev. Samuel Kirkland, Feb. 26, 1800, as quoted *The Valley of the Six Nations: A Collection of Documents on the Indian Lands of the Grand River* (1964).

The Code of Handsome Lake

Handsome Lake, or Skanientario, was a condoled Haudenosaunee chief of the Allegany Senecas. Like his half-brother Cornplanter, he had become an alcoholic and signed away Seneca lands to the Americans. After one particularly heavy bout of drinking in 1799, Handsome Lake collapsed and entered a coma that his relatives mistook for death. It was in this comatose state that he had the first in a series of visions that would have a lasting impact on the Haudenosaunee.

These visions were apocalyptic in nature: they foretold the imminent destruction of the Haudenosaunee if they did not turn their back on the negative influences of the non-native culture—mainly, alcohol, gambling, materialism, and other vices. This message was carried among many of the Haudenosaunee reservations and was successful in turning many people away from the destructive habits of the settlers. It also gave them the impetus to revive many of the ceremonies that were on the verge of slipping into oblivion. In this respect, the "new religion" of the followers of Handsome Lake was a resurgence of the core belief system of the "old religion."

This movement also had a lasting effect on the economic life of the Haudenosaunee. It encouraged the men to take up farming (previously the responsibility of the women) and to adopt certain aspects of the non-natives lifestyle, such as education. These things could serve the interests of the people by making them self-sufficient and able to deal with their non-native neighbors on an equal footing.

Handsome Lake's message was rejected by some who heard it because of its similarity to the Christian teachings regarding the "End of Times." Even today there are those who reject it because they feel Handsome Lake was strongly influenced by Quaker missionaries active among the Seneca at the time. Although the Quakers probably did teach Handsome Lake about their religion, their main purpose was not to evangelize but to help the natives adapt to their new surroundings by promoting education, modern farming techniques, and abstinence from immoral activities such as drinking and gossip. They accepted that the non-Christian religious experience was just as valid as their own teachings. This was in contrast to some of the missionary work being done in other communities that condemned traditional Haudenosaunee beliefs as Satanic and demon-inspired.

Still, the presence of Christian imagery and concepts in Handsome Lake's teachings is confusing: even Jesus Christ makes a brief appearance in one of the visions, but he urges the Indians to stay away from the religion founded in his name. This puzzling aspect of the Handsome Lake teachings is one of the reasons why it hasn't been accepted by all Haudenosaunee traditionalists, both in Handsome Lake's day and today. It has been suggested that since Handsome Lake was preaching to an audience that had already been exposed to the missionaries for generations, these concepts had already entered the consciousness of the people whom he hoped to "reclaim." He had to use concepts such as sin, judgment, and damnation to rationalize a return to the "old ways."

Handsome Lake died in 1815 and was buried beneath the longhouse at Onondaga. Although the Code of Handsome Lake, or Kariwio ("The Good Message") was not introduced to Akwesasne or the other predominantly Catholic Mohawk settlements of Kahnawake and Kanesatake until the early twentieth century, its influence would be felt by these communities with the revitalization and strengthening of their brother nations of the

Haudenosaunee Confederacy in both New York and Canada. (Wallace 1979:442-448)

In those days it was quite common for prophets to arise with similar messages for other native groups. They usually had one thing in common: they called for a revival of sacred ceremonies to guard against the destruction of their communities by assimilation and war. The Shawnee Tecumseh gained much of his support for a pan-Indian alliance by the words of his brother, the Prophet, and there was even a time when a young Mohawk man at Grand River had a vision that called for a revival of ancient ways. This served to embarrass Joseph Brant, who generally looked down his nose at the unwillingness of many of his fellow Haudenosaunee to forsake their "pagan" customs and adopt the ways of the Europeans. In this case, however, Brant's aversion to sudden prophets may have come from his own personal experiences with those who had taken advantage of native spiritual beliefs to further their own political careers. One of his old rivals, the famous Seneca orator Red Jacket, first achieved his own position of authority among the Seneca by claiming to have had dreams in which the other chiefs made him a chief—a dream commandment that the other chiefs were spiritually obligated to help him fulfill.

A Glimpse of Akwesasne Life in the Early 1800's

Lord Selkirk visited the St. Lawrence River Valley in 1804 and gave this brief description of life in Akwesasne in his diary entry of Friday, January 20:

"Crossed to St. Regis, about 200 warriors; moved from Caughnawaga by the missionaries who thought to get them farther from the rum of Montreal. They have tolerable log houses, iron stoves, glass windows and on a whole not worse lodged than the generality of laborers in Scotland and even England. Cultivate Indian corn, pound it in mortars hollowed out of trees, make moccasins. They make pitchers of elm bark. Indians have contributed for building a mill, the revenue of which they allow the priest, Roderick Macdonnell, a good soul who lives in different style from those described by Charlevoix." (Harkness 1946:80-81)

The War of 1812

The Mohawks of Akwesasne, divided by both the international border drawn through their territory and by the actions of Colonel Louis Cook and his supporters, would have little rest from conflict in the early years of the nineteenth century. Trouble continued to brew between Imperial Britain and the independent United States. This culminated in the British attack on an American vessel, the U.S.S. Chesapeake, and the capture of its crew. In 1811 the American frigate President attacked the H.M.S. Little Belt. That same year saw an unsuccessful attack by British-backed Indians under Shawnee Chief Tecumseh against American troops at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Tecumseh's uprising was an attempt to keep the Americans from pushing further westward. War was finally declared in 1812, but opinion about the war with Britain was divided among the American states. Supporters of the war who lived in the southern and western states (known as the "War Hawks") saw Britain's ongoing war with France as the golden opportunity to drive the British from North America once and for all, while detractors saw the prospect of another war as expensive and futile. (Wilder 1987:4-6)

Haudenosaunee from both sides of the border met together before the war and agreed that they would remain neutral in the conflict, since their participation in all of the past engagements between the Europeans was seen as a costly mistake in both in loss of life and territory. It was not the fear of choosing the wrong side and being treated poorly by the victors that prompted their neutrality; rather, it was their justifiable fear that they would be betrayed by their allies if they won.

These sentiments were best expressed in a speech delivered after a lengthy deliberation by the Haudenosaunee at Grand River:

"Brother - We act from a disinterested Love to our people, and to ensure their welfare and preservation, - We shall lay before you the reasons which induce us to recommend a neutrality. The gloomy Day, foretold by our ancestors, has at last arrived; - the Independence and Glory of the Five Nations has departed from us; - We find ourselves in the hands of two powerful Nations, who can crush us when they please. They are the