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An Environmental History of Oneida Life at Duck Creek

Then and Now

by Carol Cornelius and Loretta Metoxen

IN 1997, AN ONEIDA TEENAGER OVERHEARD two older men talking about fishing in Duck Creek. He said to them, "Wow, you actually know someone who can remember fishing in Duck Creek?"

But back in 1822, when the Oneida people who moved to Wisconsin settled in the Duck Creek area, they found a region alive with vital natural resources including timber, the clean water and fishing potential of Duck Creek, and a wide variety of birds, animals, and plants.[1] The Oneidas found a plentiful supply of berries — blackberries, blackcaps, blueberries, wild highbush cranberries, and raspberries. One Oneida, Jefferson Baird, noted, "They saw also all kinds of birds — partridge, bobwhite and pigeons. They did not delay in returning to tell how cheaply they could live at Duck Creek."[2] Gathering edible plants such as pigweed, dandelion, cowslip, and milkweed was a common activity that supplemented the hunting, fishing, and corn-agriculture diet.

Many of our ancestors have talked about the good times in the 1800s when the Oneida reservation was whole and there was an abundance of fish, game, berries, nuts, and medicine. Recently, Oneida elder Earl Jordan, who has lived on the Oneida reservation all of his life, recalled the conditions of the environment when he was a child. Back then, he remembered, they hunted and fished a great deal: "We ate 'em: northern, suckers, bass, sunfish, blue gills, and perch...." Jordan also described hunting fox, badger, weasel, raccoon, and mink for its hide.[3] Many Oneida families grew white corn and beans, Jordan noted, kept milk cows — he hated milking — and raised pigs. They fished and hunted rabbits and squirrels as well as wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, and Hungarian partridge.[4] They also relied for subsistence on nut trees — hazelnuts, butternuts, and hickory nuts — and on berry picking — elderberries, chokeberries, blackberries, raspberries, and June berries.

The Oneidas understood the interaction and reciprocity of all these things with the main waterway of Duck Creek. They depended on the vast forest that surrounded them. Their pigs grew fat from the acorns of the red and white oak. They built their houses from the pine and wove baskets from the black ash. They prepared hoop poles by the thousands for barrel making in social affairs with the participation of all family members — or even entire neighborhoods. The Oneidas harvested huge quantities of maple syrup and sugar from various "sugar bushes," again using family gatherings where everyone had a certain responsibility. Subsistence farming and gathering from the environment provided the Oneidas with the means to sustain their community, and they thanked the Creator every day for all of these things.

From 1860 to 1970, however, the natural environment began to deteriorate. As the natural resources dwindled due to logging, dams, and pollution, the Oneida peoples' way of life also changed. Before the Dawes Allotment Act was implemented on the Oneida reservation, timber barons and lumber merchants strove relentlessly to get their hands on the Oneidas' superior white pine timber, motivated by the need for building material for the rapidly expanding state population and for the rebuilding after the Chicago and Peshtigo fires. Prior to the Dawes Act, only the Indian agent could contract for the sale of timber, and the proceeds would go into the United States Treasury to be used at the discretion of the same agent for the benefit of the Oneida Nation.

But after allotment, individual allottees could and did make arrangements of various kinds with the sawmills, both on and off the reservation. The timber and the individual allotments soon fell into the hands of farmers, often European immigrants, seeking cheap farmland. The farmers finished clearing most of the land, using much of the hardwoods for heating purposes and selling the remainder for saw logs or to the newly established paper mills.

Between 1900 and 1925, the entire ecosystem of the Oneida reservation was severely altered from what it had been one hundred years earlier, when the Oneidas had first arrived along Duck Creek. Now fencing was common, and every farmer pastured cattle and horses adjacent to Duck Creek or its tributaries. These domestic animals ate the young wild berry plants,

including the blackberry and red and black raspberry bushes, and they roamed the entire territory of their confinement, trampling the young shoots of the blueberry bushes and hazelnut trees. There ceased to be any underbrush in the pastured areas, which caused a major shift in the wild animal habitat that had existed there for centuries. Now, with the earth lacking tree roots to retain water, the water table dropped significantly. Free-flowing springs diminished or ceased to flow altogether. The black ash trees that had grown on the banks of Duck Creek started to disappear. Consequently, families no longer drew income from homemade Oneida black ash baskets. Butternut trees became virtually nonexistent.

Perhaps one of the most significant losses was the deer. Oneida people no longer saw deer on the Oneida reservation in the 1940s through the 1960s, though deer had been a basic food staple well into the early 1900s. Moreover, the farmers at that time were not aware of steps to prevent erosion, nor were they cognizant of any damages from animal manure reaching the streams through pasturing or through runoff from the manure-fertilized fields. With the demand for increased production, especially during World War II, commercial fertilizers came into heavy use, as did chemical pesticides. Neither farmers nor their advisers in the United States Department of Agriculture were cautious about the immediate or long-range effects either in commercial fertilizer application or in the use of chemical pesticides. The streams filled with loam, clay sediment, and chemical pollution. Where once there had been a variety of edible fish there was now a complete absence. The bird and animal populations dependent on such fish also decreased and disappeared.

No longer could Oneidas go onto neighboring farms owned by non-Indians (formerly part of the reservation until the allotment era) to collect medicinal plants that grew wild in the fields, as Earl Jordan lamented. Jordan was also disturbed by the runoff pollution caused by fertilizers used on golf courses and farms in the area, and he, too, witnessed the sharp decline of fish from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the water was no longer clear and fertilizer would run off into the ditch and drain into the creek.[5]

In 1980, the Oneida Nation enacted the Shoreline Protection Ordinance as a proactive, responsible approach to clean up and restore Duck Creek to a healthy condition.[6] Although nontribal farmers owned and

operated most of the lands adjacent to Duck Creek and its tributaries, the Oneida Nation took steps to work cooperatively with them for everyone's benefit.

Since then, Jordan has noted some improvement:

> [Around 1990] it got better. Today there's trout and salmon in the creek when there never used to be. People hunt rabbits now. There would be a lot of trout but the Pamperin Park dam stops the fish. Hunting is good. The coyote is coming back [indicating that small animals are plentiful]. The water is way better than it used to be. I can see the bottom now through the ice.[7]

Now the Oneida Nation has an environmental department that continuously monitors and tests the waters of Duck Creek. There is additional reason to hope as well. During the past twenty years the deer population has returned and flourished because of the improving environment. In 1998, eagles returned to nest on the Oneida reservation.

Notes

1. The following stories in the WPA Oneida Language and Folklore Project (OLFP) (1938–1942) describe the Duck Creek environment: Oscar Archiquette, Z-15; Ida Baird, J-30; Andrew Beechtree, A-44; Mrs. Nelson B. Cornelius, D-90; Lavina Elm, G-33; Tom Elm, G-50, S-20; LaFront King, F-4; Jessie Peters, D-83, S-23; John A. Skenandore, J-34; Sara Summers, S-41; Martin Williams, S-30, Oneida Nation of Indians of Wisconsin (ONIW), Oneida Cultural Heritage Department (OCHD), Oneida, WI.

2. Jefferson Baird story, D-29, WPA OLFP, ONIW, OCHD, Oneida, WI.

3. Earl Jordan, interview by Loretta Metoxen and Carol Cornelius, December 26, 1997, Oneida, WI.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. ONIW, Oneida Business Committee, Shoreline Protection Ordinance (1980), copy on file in ONIW, OCHD, Oneida, WI.

7. Earl Jordan, interview by Metoxen and Cornelius.