



Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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Duck Creek: A Way of Life!

Cultural Uses of Waters of the Oneida Reservation

“Everything is along the Duck Creek edge,” states Loretta Metoxen, Tribal Historian.

This document examines the relationship of Oneida people with Duck Creek across three time periods:

- 1) The condition of the natural resources upon our arrival in 1822 and the early years,
- 2) The degradation/changes to the natural environment over time due to logging, dams, and pollution from commercial farming (1860's-1970's), and
- 3) The gradual improvement of the natural environment since 1970's when measures were taken to save the environment.

Looking at the cultural uses of water on the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin reservation requires a broader perspective which examines the intertwined nature of history, culture, economy, health, and social aspects of the Oneida way of life.

The Oneida Thanksgiving Address which is said to open and close all cultural ceremonies, meeting, and community events, offers a thanksgiving to the Creator for all his gifts to us including: Mother Earth, the small plants and grasses, medicines, Indian tobacco, the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), animals, trees, water, winds, birds, Grandfathers the thunders, Grandmothers Moon, Our Elder Brother (the sun), stars, the four messengers, and the Creator. The Thanksgiving for the waters says:

“...Water they give us strength also a good life. Water gives us strength to live. Let's put our minds together to give thanks. So be it in our minds”

There are many descriptions of the natural world and how the Oneida people utilized the resources of the natural world to sustain their way of life. Many Elders in their 70's and 80's speak of their own lives back into the late 1800's and they tell of their parents memories back to the mid 1800's. Their stories were recorded in the 1930s under a Works Progress Administration (WPA) program. Quotes from their stories are provided throughout this document to allow us to hear the voices of our Elders.

ONEIDA IN 1822

In 1822 the Oneida people who moved to Wisconsin settled in the Duck Creek area which was alive with natural resources necessary to sustain a good way of life. These natural resources included the clean water of Duck Creek, timber, animals, fish, and plants. When it was rumored that the Oneidas were moving to Wisconsin, three men were selected to see the place where they were going to settle. They were He-bathes-them, What-are-you-doing, and Big Aaron.

When they arrived here they traveled around in the woods, they came to a river and were surprised to see so many ducks there, so they named it Duck Creek, they traveled along this river and saw a lot of fish. They killed a bear in just the short time that they hunted. That was their meat while they were here.

They also found blackberries, raspberries, blackcaps, cranberries, and blueberries, also wild high-bush cranberries. They found it a nice place to move to. They found it a nice place to move to. They also saw all kinds of birds, partridge, bob-white and pigeons. They did not delay in returning to tell, how cheaply they could live at Duck Creek.

(WPA: D-29 Jefferson Baird)

The Reservation was a tract of beautiful farm land about 10 by 12 miles square, all appropriated in severalty by the various families and taken up by farms of 100 or 300 acres in extent. Except where here and there the farms were cleared and crops of corn or grain grew, the Reservation was covered with woods; the sinuous Duck Creek wound its way through valleys—there were numerous trout streams. The roads were narrow and winding. Three long ridges ran through the Reservation.

(Ta Luh Ya Wa Gu: 9)

Long ago when my grandfather and his wife moved from New York to what is now Oneida Reservation... (There) used to be all kinds of game and fish at that time...

(WPA: T10 Sara Sommers)

Long time ago, I went to get some water from the creek...I was the first one again to see the fish I speared for (?) head, and my husband also speared him too. We had hard time to pull him out of the creek, the fish was so big. My husband measured the fish; the fish was about three feet long. It was just about that time Levi and Jonas came along; they were also going fishing for trout. That used to been a lots of them in the creek.

(WPA: G33 Lavina Elm)

The Oneidas always went fishing. They were anxious for spring to come as they know where many fish are and they are getting ready to go fishing.

(WPA: F4 LaFront King)

When they first got here the Oneidas, or shall I say the Oneida Tribe of Indians, all kinds of animals were here, and so these are some of their names: deer, wolf, raccoon, bobcat, lynx, badger, muskrat, skunk, beaver, otter, grey squirrel, gopher, jack rabbit and tail rabbit.

[There were] different kinds of fish such as: trout, red horse fish, pickerel, walleed pike, sucker, rock bass, and shiners.

[The] different kinds of birds were: prairie chicken, partridge, pigeon, crow, snipes, crane, owl, whippoorwill, big owl, hawk, chicken, woodcock, red bird, oriole, canary, sea gull, meadow lark, blue jay, woodpecker, and robin red breast.

The types of snakes: rattle snake, pine snake, ground snake, and garter snake.

Some of the insects namely: worms, potato bug, ants, spider, bed bugs, lightening bugs, grasshoppers, bees, butterfly, mosquito, crickets, and angle worms.

(WPA: Z-15 Oscar Archiquette)

Martin Williams heard a story about a bear killing a pig and tells us, When I was a young man, I remember there was more woods...It was good meat (the pig) I suppose because they were loose and ate so much acorns and they were fed at home in the evenings.

(WPA: S30 Martin Williams)

PLANTS/MEDICINE

The Oneida people knew a great deal about using plants for preventive medicine and for healing, such as strawberry drink for vitamin C. Strawberry drink is made with water, maple syrup and strawberries. This drink is shared by the people at the strawberry ceremony to give thanks that once again we can gather wild strawberries.

There is a prophecy that one day the earth will be so polluted that we will no longer see the wild strawberries. It is our responsibility to see that doesn't happen.

We Oneida's have medicine that can't be beat, it is real Oneida Medicine. As much as I remember in years back this medicine was mixed with ten different parts. But now days the few that still make it only use seven parts. The reason why they are not using ten parts is because the different plants are so scarce. They call this (Injury Medicine) no matter which, on or external injury, this medicine will help you as long as you are able to drink it. ...There have been lots of Oneida's saved by the use of this medicine where the white doctors have failed and given up...

(WPA: J34 John A. Skenandore)

FOODS

Gathering plants for food, such as pigweed, dandelion, cowslip, and milkweed were common activities which supplemented the hunting, fishing, and corn agriculture diet. Andrew Beechtree provided his philosophy on our way of life:

The other day I was to see this William House. I was looking for a story. I asked him how he looked at this—what some people say, 'we have become civilized.' That is, we are baptized and now we have adopted the white man's customs. So William replied and said,

'what I think about it personally, I believe that what has happened is most unfortunate for us. While we were not baptized, our Creator had many ways to letting us know things that was for our good. He gave us many medicines. He put the animals there for us to eat. There were many fishes living in the stream. Everywhere were things with which for us to make fire. There was nothing lacking...'

(WPA: A44 Andrew Beechtree)

Ida Baird's description from her childhood illustrates the utilization of nature's gifts for food:

As far as I can remember when I was a child we were well off and we didn't know what relief was in those days. It was one's own fault if he or she was very hard up because there was plenty of everything that we lived on. In the 'fall if one would help themselves even very little they would have plenty to eat.

Weather

conditions were good for planting any kind of crops. There was no expense to raise pigs because in the fall when the nuts were ripe and fell, the pigs would feed on these and when they are fattened on nuts they make a very good meat.

When winter

came we had barrels of pork and if we wanted other meat there were plenty of wild game to be hunted and every spring we had barrels of salted fish...the only time an Oneida would be hunting was when he needed meat to eat and when our met first enters the woods he would see and kill game at once then bring back only enough so that none would spoil. But when he went fishing there seemed to be no limit because it was only in the spring that the fish was good and we salted all they brought.

...There was also plenty of firewood. We had good timber on our land, we had wood and logs, we made sugar from maple trees. We did this in the spring and we made syrup as well as sugar so as I said before one need only help themselves a little and they had plenty.

(WPA: J30 Ida Baird to John A. Skenandore)

FISHING

Tom Elm tells a story about a "Big Fish".

One time when I was a young man sixteen years of age, I went fishing and when I got to the creek there used to be a saw mill near the creek. There were planks laid across the creek near the mill. I went and stood on these planks and I saw a great big fish standing still just below me.

I caught him with my spear. It was a big messcalance (muskellunge?) I had a hard time to put him on the shore. He nearly got the best of me. But when I managed to get him on the bank, measured him he was five feet and eleven inches long. I came home and hooked him on my shoulders and still his tail was dragging on the ground. He weighed nearly one hundred pounds and almost made a barrel full when I salted him down.

(WPA: S20 Tom Elm to Stadler King)

The old timers "stored up" food for the winter:

No doubt if you went into any ones (old timers) home, there would be bundles of dried pumpkin hanging here and there; also they would have several hundred both

dried and salted fish. They used to dry apples and blackberries. By that they used to have a lot of food stored up when cold weather set in, in the fall of the year.

(WPA: D90 Mrs. Nelson B. Cornelius to Dennison Hill)

The community and family gather to fish as told by Jessie Peters:

The older people have taken a particular notice that the sucker fishing was on in the spring when the different kinds of frogs were uttering their characteristic cries. Our grandparents, those of them that (had a) horse, would drive down to the fishing grounds, where Amos Baird used to live. Originally that had been their fishing grounds at that time. Some of them would have their wives along and also would invite those that had no horses. These most generally, waded in the water and done the fishing.



The women folks would have fires made here and there, also would be cooking fish and preparing sucker head soup, along the banks. Now and then they would eat. Sometimes the fish would not run until morning. But they were so ambitious in fishing that they most generally stayed fishing all night.

At times there were so many fish that they would catch them by hand and throw them out as fast as they desired to. While fishing, sometimes it would snow. But that would not discourage them, they would stay anyway until day light.

In the morning the horse would be hitched up. Most generally they would catch fish enough to fill their wagon box full. And this would be divided amongst them...

(WPA: D83 Jessie Peters) (See map of gathering places where people fished along Duck Creek before and after the dams were built.)

TREES

---It used to be lots of pine trees along the road that now goes to Duck Creek. It was on this place that they had their celebration---

(WPA: G50 Tom Elm. One Hundred Anniversary singing of Independence of the Colonies)

Simon Swamp talks about the trees that were here when he was young and the barrel factory which would buy hoops and logs. He mentions the following trees:

He used to buy logs such as oh.n'eta (pine) wah.ta (maple) galih.du (red oak) hoho.z'ela (basswood) >na. (birch) hodog^.ha (white oak) g^dlu (white ash) and haw^hani.gwal (soft maple) and gan^d^sa (spruce)...

(WPA: S41 Simon Swamp)

SUMMARY

Always our ancestors 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 for them to use. They understood the interaction and reciprocity of all these things with the main waterway they called Duck Creek. They recalled their dependence upon the cast forest which surrounded them. They built their houses from the pine and wove baskets from the black ash. The hoop poles they prepared by the thousands for barrel making was a social affair with all family members or even entire

neighborhoods participating. Their pigs grew fat from the acorns of the red and white oak.

Huge quantities of maple syrup and sugar were harvested in the various "sugar bushes", again by family gatherings where everyone there had a certain responsibility. Subsistence farming and gathering from the environment were a natural way of life for Oneida people.

They thanked the Creator every day for all of these things. (See: 1) An Oneida Nature Glossary, and 2) Smiths 1929 listing of plants with Oneida names for these plants in the Oneida language.)

CHANGES 1860-1970

During the time period from 1860-1970 significant changes to the natural environment had a direct impact on the Oneida people. As the natural resources dwindled due to logging, dams, and pollution, the Oneida people's way of life changed.

TIMBER/LOGGING

Before the Dawes Allotment Act was implemented on the Oneida Reservation in 1891, timber barons and lumber merchants attempted relentlessly to get their hands on all the superior white pine timber of the Oneidas. The need for building material for the rapidly expanding state population and for the rebuilding of Chicago and Peshtigo, which were burned in 1871, was an ever present motivator to acquire Indian timber. Only the Indian agent could contract for the sale of timber and the proceeds would go into the U.S. Treasury to be used at the discretion of the same agent for the benefit of the Oneida Nation.

After allotment, individual allottees could and did make arrangements of various kinds with the sawmills both off and on the Reservation. The timber and the individual allotments were soon gone into the hands of European immigrants who were farmers looking for cheap foam land. They finished clearing most of the land. Much of the hardwoods were used for heating purposes and the remainder was sold for saw logs or to the newly established paper mills.

At this time (1900 to 1925), the entire ecosystem of the Oneida Reservation was severely altered from one hundred years previous when the Oneida People first arrived at their new homes along Duck Creek. Fencing

soon occurred and every farmer pastured his cattle and horses contingent to Duck Creek or its tributaries. These domestic animals confined to certain areas ate the young wild berry plants, including the red and black raspberry bushes and the blackberry and they roamed the entire territory of their limitations, trampling the young shoots of the blueberry and hazelnut. There ceased to be any underbrush in the pastured areas causing a major shift in the wild animal habitat that had existed there for centuries before. The water table was significantly affected because of the lack of tree roots to retain water. Free flowing springs diminished in flow or ceased to flow altogether.

The black ash trees grow on the banks of Duck Creek and are essential for basket making. With the changes in Duck Creek there was a significant decline in the black ash tree, therefore baskets which had been made and sold as a part of family income, were no longer made. Butternut trees have become virtually nonexistent.

Perhaps one of the most significant losses was the deer. Oneida people growing up in the 1940s up to 1960s did not see deer on the Oneida reservation. Deer had been a basic food staple well into the early 1900s.

DAMS

"...since the white people were allowed to hunt on our land the game has vanished...They were selfish and wasted most of it just to see if they could kill the most or they killed game just for pleasure of hunting and not that they needed food...at the present time the white people have taken everything from us, even have built dams to prevent the fish going where we did our fishing, there is no way for the fish to go through so we go without."

(WPA: J30 Ida Baird to John A. Skenandore)

"Sometimes as the spring seasons continually come and go, I consider how plentiful fish were years ago. But in those days we never knew of anyone trying to deprive us from our privilege of going fishing---At times there were so many fish that they would catch them by hand and throw them out as fast as they desired to---Now in order for us to have a taste of fish, we have to steal our way in fishing---our river is dammed off so there is a doubt as to

when there will be any fish again, where we used to fish long time ago"

(WPA: D83 Jessie Peters to Dennison Hill)

"There is so much changes to be seen here since I went away from here, especially in that there is no game left to hunt and that was my best pass time and I always liked to eat rabbit meat. Also, long ago a bunch of us used to go fishing and there were so much fish that we were able to catch them with our hands. Now there are dams put up and the fish could not come up stream where we used to fish. That's why it seems that I can't get used to living here in Oneida again. So because all the men who were about my age are so rapidly passing away. Sometimes I feel that it would be best if I passed away too so I could be with my associates."

(WPA: S23 Jessie Peters)

POLLUTION

After the allotment (1891) and loss of lands, non-Indians use of chemicals in commercial farming greatly damaged the environment.

The farmers, at that time, were not aware of steps to take to prevent erosion, not where they cognizant of any damages that may have taken place because of animal manure reaching the streams by pasturing or by runoff from the fields they were fertilizing. Commercial fertilizers came into heavy use with the demand for increased production, especially during WW II. Chemical pesticides were also introduced about that same time to further increase production. Neither farmer, not their advisors in the U.S. Department of Agriculture were cautious about the long range effects or the immediate negative side effects in either commercial fertilizer application of the use of chemical pesticides.

The streams filled with loam and clay sediment and received the chemical pollution generated mostly by the oil companies. Where once there had been a variety of good eating food fish, there was now a complete absence. The bird and animal populations dependent upon such fish would also decrease and disappear.

Earl Jordan, who has lived on the Oneida Reservation all of his life, has lived through the tree stages covered in this document. He discussed the conditions of the environment when he was child.

Earl listed the fish they used to catch a long time ago and said, "we ate' em: northern, suckers, bass, sunfish, blue gills, and perch..." Earl talked about hunting mink for the hide, fox, badger, weasel, raccoon, and since about 1966 there are deer and coyote here. He said there never used to be trout.

Earl Jordan and Loretta Metoxen talked about what Oneida was like when they were young: (both were about 65 at the time of the interview)

The families grew white corn and beans. They had milk cows (he hated milking) and pigs. They fished and hunted. In the winter they hunted rabbits and squirrels. There were wild turkeys, Hungarian partridge, and ruffed grouse. They talked about nut tree—hazelnuts, butternut, and hickory. The berries they described included elderberries, choke cherries, blackberries, raspberries and June berry trees. Wormwood was medicine that grows on a farm owned by non-Oneidas, and Oneida can't go there to gather it.

Earl cited the pollution as caused by run off fertilizer from the golf course and farmer fields. He saw the quantity of fish decrease by the 1950s. He said the water was no longer clear. The fertilizer would run off into the ditch and drain into the creek.

(Earl Jordan interview)

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE ENVIRONMENT-1970's

The Department of Agriculture (DOA) eliminated some damaging pesticides entirely. The DOA has given updated instructions to farmers on how to minimize commercial fertilizer application and maximize crop production simultaneously. The savings that occur from these methods are a great advantage to the farmer.

Special holding pits have been designed for manure retention and the proper handling of manure application is regulated to prevent runoff to waterways. New methods of planting crops that will minimally disturb the top soils are termed tillage and this method is used as older farm machinery wears out and must be replaced.

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 status. Although most

of the lands adjacent to Duck Creek and its tributaries are still owned and operated by non-Tribal farmers, the Oneida Nation has taken steps to work cooperatively with them for our mutual benefits.

Earl Jordan, who has hunted and fished on the Oneida Reservation for over fifty years, tells us, "About 8 or 9 years ago, (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."

(Earl Jordan interview 12/26/97)

It has only been during the last 20 years that the deer population has returned and flourished due to the improving environment. The Oneida Nation has an environmental department that continuously monitors and tests the waters of Duck Creek. In 1998, eagles returned to nest on the Oneida reservation.

SUMMARY

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?" You see, fishing in Duck Creek is not part of his world because the water has been so polluted.

Fishing at Pamperin Park has continued to be a political struggle for fishing rights and reservation boundary issues. A recent court case confirmed Oneida boundaries and the right to fish. Each spring a fishing ceremony has been held at Pamperin Park to acknowledge the fish and our right to fish there.

Our hope is that one day the waters will be pure enough so that all the varieties of fish will return and going fishing as a family will once again be an Oneida family tradition. One day, fishing will no longer be a memory, but will be an actual event.

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- Map: Oneida Reservation-Duck Creek and Tributaries:
 - places with access for fishing before the dams were built 1822-1930 (circles)
 - places to fish after the dams were built in the 1930s (Pamperin Park)(one X)
- Ta Luh Ya Wa Gu: Holy Apostles Church Mission to the Oneidas 1822-1972 Photo: Panorama from Old Ridge Road-about 1900
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 - J30 Ida Baird to John A. Skenandore
 - A44 Andrew Beechtree 9-21-1939
 - D90 Mrs. Nelson B Cornelius to Dennison Hill
 - G33 Lavina Elm to Guy Elm
 - G50 Tom Elm to Guy Elm
 - S20 Tom Elm to Stadler King
 - F4 LaFront King
 - D83 Jessie Peters to Dennison Hill
 - S23 Jessie Peters to Stadler King
 - J34 John. A. Skenandore
 - T10 Sara Sommers to Tillie Baird
 - S41 Simon Swamp to Stadler King
 - S30 Martin Williams to Stadler King