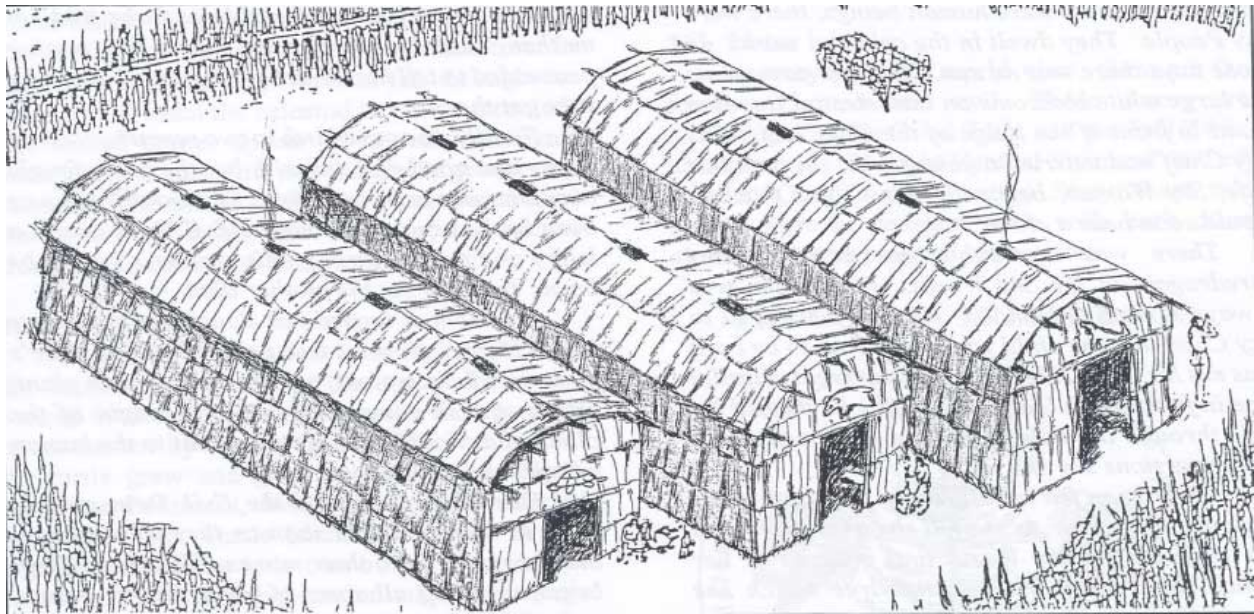




Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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Oneida Nation Cultural Symbols: In and Around the Oneida Reservation



Drawing by: Judith L. Jourdan ©

INTRODUCTION

The use of symbolism within the Iroquois culture dates back to the time of Creation. Among the Iroquois, the power of their symbolism is profound because they used the symbols as a means to feed their minds and to guide their actions. Like the stars and stripes and the symbols on the back of a dollar bill to Americans, so are there many sites in and around the Oneida Reservation that depict symbols of Oneida.

THE IROQUOIS CREATION STORY

Every group of people has its own story of creation, an explanation of how the earth and human beings came to exist. The Haudenosaunee people, later renamed the Iroquois by early French explorers, are no different. Being a nation of oral tradition, the following story and variations of it have been passed down from generation to generation. Today Iroquois people can be found all over the eastern, northeastern and the Midwestern United

States. Many of them continue the ancient ways, preserving the language and ceremonies.

The creation story, as well as other stories about Haudensaunee life, is still told to the children. From this story can be derived many of the symbols that are seen in and around the Oneida Reservation today and in many of the publications produced by the Oneida's and other Iroquois nations. The creation story and its many variations are a common theme for all of the Iroquois nations.

THE IROQUOIS CREATION STORY

Long before there were human beings, there were Sky People. They dwelt in the celestial world. In those days there was no sun. All light came from the large white blossoms on the celestial tree that stood in front of the lodge of the Sky Chief. This Sky Chief had married a young wife. In time this wife, Sky Woman, began to show signs that she would soon bear a child.

There was a troublesome being, called Firedragon, in the Sky World. Firedragon was always spreading rumors. Now he whispered to Sky Chief that the child who was about to be born was not his. Sky Chief uprooted the great celestial tree in front of his lodge. Some say he pushed his wife through the hole where the tree once stood. Other versions say she fell.

Sky Woman fell rapidly down toward the vast dark waters below. As she fell she tried to cling to the edge of the Sky World and grasped in her hands seeds from the celestial tree which she brought with her to this world.

The world beneath her was nothing but sky and water. The birds, feeling sorry for her, flew underneath and gently supported her, breaking her fall and carrying her slowly downward. At the same time, the water animals hurried to make a place for her. Turtle said that he could support her on his back.

The sea animals plunged down into the water looking for some earth. Muskrat succeeded and came up with a large handful of earth, which he placed in Turtle's back and the earth began to grow. Thus we call Mother Earth, "Turtle Island". The light from the blossoms of the fallen celestial tree shone through the hole where it had stood and became the sun.

Sky woman gave birth to a daughter. The woman and her daughter walked about the earth and she taught her daughter about the different things that grew and what they were used for.

When the daughter grew to woman hood, she was very beautiful. She walked about far from her mother and there a man appeared. She became very frightened and fainted. When she awoke, there were two arrows on her stomach, one with a sharp point and one with a dull point. As time went on, she became very uncomfortable and she told her mother what had happened. Then her mother proceeded to tell her what had happened and how they got there.

Finally, she gave birth to two remarkable twin boys – one good one and one evil, but the twins fought over who was to be born first. The Good Twin was born in the usual way, but the Evil Twin was in a hurry and pushed through his mother's side to be born. In doing so, the mother died.

Sky Woman buried her daughter and plants began to grow from various parts of the daughter's body – tobacco plant, a corn stalk, a bean plant, and a squash vine. This was the origin of the plants that would be most important to the human beings who would come later.

The Good Twin and the Evil Twin quickly grew to manhood. As soon as they were grown, they proved true to their names. The

Good Twin began creating all sorts of good things: plants, animals, medicinal herbs, rivers, and streams. The Evil Twin began to spoil his brother's work, putting rapids and boulders in the rivers, creating poisonous plants, thorns and briars, diseases, and monsters. The Good and Evil Twins fought against each other to see who would dominate in creation.

They decided they would challenge each other with games to see who would be the creator of all the things on Turtle Island. They played the peach stone game and lacrosse but tied in both games. Evil could never overcome the Good. And that is how it all began.

The following are some of the symbols derived from the Creation Story:



Arched Domes

The arched domes are a series of semi circles in a row, usually with a small curlicue on the tops of the arches. These semi circles represent the sky would where Sky Women once resided. The two curved lines or curlicues are the celestial tree. In the Creation Story, Sky Women fell through the hole created when the celestial tree was uprooted. The arched domes appear in several variations; some where the celestial tree is quite large and very elaborate. The arched domes are often seen around the border of skirts and leggings, sometimes around the band of the kustoweh.

Turtle Island

When Sky Women fell from the Sky World, she landed on the back of the turtle. There she walked in circles, packing down the earth brought to the surface by the water animals. The back of the turtle grew and grew becoming the North American Continent;

therefore it is often referred to as the Great Turtle Island. The turtle is also significant because it is one of the clans of the Iroquois. Each member nation of the Iroquois Confederacy has a number of clans to which the people belong. The Oneida have three clans; the turtle, the bear and the wolf.

Tobacco

The tobacco is the most sacred of all the plants. When “real” tobacco (pure and free of additives, commercial fertilizers, etc.) is burned, the smoke spirals skyward, taking prayers and messages directly to the Creator. It is burned at ceremonies and is presented as an offering to the Creator for requests and to give thanks.

The Three Sisters

Corns, beans, and squash, also known as the Three Sisters, represent the food spirits. In the Creation Story, when Sky Woman's daughter died in childbirth, corn, beans, and squash grew from her grave. They became the main staples in the Iroquois diet. The Iroquois believe that each plant has a female spirit. They are planted, nourished and harvested by the Iroquois women. The Three Sisters can be seen in a billboard sized painting at the entrance of the Three Sisters subdivision on West Mason Street in Green Bay. The painting is by Oneida artist, Scott Hill.

The Twins

In every person's world view, there are the forces of good and evil. These forces are represented by the Good Twin and the Evil Twin, also known as the Right Handed Twin and the Left Handed One. In the Creation Story, these two beings were at constant odds with each other almost from the point of conception.

The Oneida Tribal Logo



Another rich source for uses of cultural symbolism is the Oneida tribal logo. In 1970 this logo containing many tribal symbols was designed by Norbert Hill.

This design was used as a seal and later was added to the tribal letterhead. Previously, the tribal logo had been a shock of wheat which was approved in 1937. The wheat design was used because it was less expensive than a corn design which would have been preferred. The following is an explanation of what each of the symbols in the 1970 logo represent to the Oneida people:

The Circle

The very shape of the logo is in itself significant. Being round, it represents the cyclical world-view traditionally espoused by the Oneidas. All of the elements are depicted within a circle which represents the Circle of Life. Within the border are the words, "Sovereign Nation of the Oneida" and on the newer version, "Sovereign Oneida Nation of Wisconsin". Inherent within the culture, and based on treaty and other legal relationships, the Oneida continue to comprise a Nation with

retained rights and governmental integrity. The smaller circle within the larger circle represents our eldest brother, the Sun, and our grandmother, the Moon.

1822

At the bottom of the circle is the year 1822 which marks the Oneida's move to Wisconsin from New York. It was at that time when they signed a treaty with the Menominee Nation for the shared use and occupancy of eight million acres of land. In 1967 President Johnson signed Public Law 90-93, Docket 75 which paid the Oneida Nation 1.4 million for four million acres which was to be shared with the Stockbridge and Brothertown Indians. Docket 75 nullified the treaty made with the Menominee Nation.

The Eagle

The eagle at the top of the tree is the strongest and highest flying of all birds. He is ever watchful over the Oneida Nation and the Confederacy and warns of danger. He also is believed to carry messages to and from the Creator.

The Tree

The tree is a White Pine which represents law and peace among the nations. It is said that this tree does not change and neither does peace. In the Iroquois language there is no term to separate peace and law. It is a way of life characterized by wisdom and graciousness. The branches of the tree signify the shelter, protection and security that the people found in union under the tree of peace. Under this tree were buried all the weapons of war.

The Roots of Peace

The four roots on the turtles back spread to the four directions to remind the people that whoever would seek the peace, protection and

solace of the Confederacy, they need only trace the roots back to their source and take shelter there. If any nation should want to adopt the laws they should trace the roots to its source and discipline their minds to obey the way of life of all of the people.

The tree sits on the back of the turtle because in the Creation Story, Sky Woman fell from the sky and landed on the back of the turtle, and over time, it became what we now call the Great Turtle Island (the North American continent).

CLANS

The three clans of the Oneida Nation are the bear, the wolf and the turtle.

THE ONEIDA TRIBAL BELT

The belt represented in the tribal logo is the Oneida Tribal Belt which was created shortly after the Revolutionary War to commemorate the reunification of the Haudenosaunee, (Iroquois Confederacy) it readdresses the commitment of alliance between the nations.

The Oneida Tribal Belt, seven original treaties, and a gold pipe were entrusted to the care of Elijah Skenandoah, a Turtle Clan Chief of the Oneida Nation, who brought it to Wisconsin in the 1830's.

Sometime after his death, the belt and treaties were found in the safe in the post office on the Oneida Reservation. Today the Oneida Tribal Belt is at the Field Museum in Chicago pending a repatriation claim for its return.

BOUND ARROWS AND WAR CLUB

The six arrows bound together represent the commitment of the six nations. (The six nations are Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. The Tuscarora were the last to join the Confederacy.) One

arrow by itself can be easily broken, but by binding the arrows together, their strength is multiplied. No nation is allowed to pull their arrow from the bundle. This symbol is profound in that the U.S. Government took this same idea and used the bound arrows on the back of the dollar bill to signify the unity of the original thirteen colonies. The 1970 logo depicts a war club buried beneath the tree of peace, a further affirmation of peace.

THE PEACE PIPE

Although the Iroquois men were renowned for the quality of the clay pipes they made and they were indeed the basis for the pipes later used by the whites, it remains unclear why the long stem pipe was used in the original logo design. The early Iroquois pipes were made of clay or stone, usually with some type of figure carved onto the bowl representing humans, animals or birds. The Iroquois pipes were usually only about three to six inches in length. The "peace pipe" was more symbolic of the type used by many of the western nations.



In the late 1980's, a more simplified logo appeared. In the new logo, many of the significant symbols were eliminated. The newer logo no longer included the war club and arrows. This newer logo was created by local artist, Mary Lee Prescott as a flag design. It was

presented to the Business committee for use as a flag design but was declined. The design was later adopted by the Oneida Nation Museum board of directors as a logo for the museum. Once released, however, it began to appear in many areas but was never officially adopted by the General Tribal Council as a tribal logo.

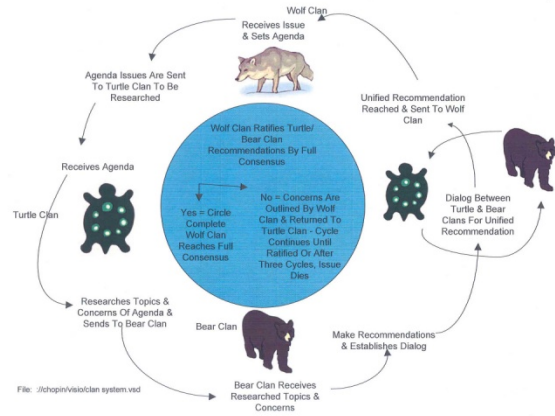


In mid-1990's, the above logo, which is an adaptation of the Mary Lee Prescott design, began to appear. The Oneida Tribal Belt was reintroduced along with the caption, "Sovereign Oneida Nation of Wisconsin", and the eagle changed to a line profile enveloping the other symbols.

It is clear through ongoing research that the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin has maintained its cultural knowledge, pride in its heritage, and an awareness of its traditional legacy of responsibility to the people. The logos, both past and present, signify that knowledge and that pride.

THE CLAN SYSTEM

Oneida Clan System



The clan system is the fundamental building block of the Iroquois people. Much like the bones that create the structure and ability to function for the human body, so are clans the structure for Iroquois society.

The most basic unit in Iroquois society is a group of relatives that can trace its lineal descent to a single woman. The eldest woman of each of these groups is generally the head. Several such groups together make up a clan. Everyone in a clan considers every other member in that clan to be a relative. Every new person born inherits the clan affiliation of its mother. Because of this unique arrangement, marriage between clan members is forbidden. Persons adopted into a clan take on the identity of the family and the responsibilities of the clan that adopted them and therefore must follow the same rules of that clan. Each member of his adopted clan becomes a relative.

Each clan has the name and symbol of a bird or animal. The three clans of the Oneida and Mohawk are the Bear, the Wolf, and the Turtle. In addition to these three clans, other Iroquois nations have the following clans as well: Snipe, Heron, Beaver, Deer, Eel, and Hawk.

TURTLE CLAN (A'nowalū)

In the Iroquois Creation Story, the earth was created on the back of a turtle. It was there that life began to grow. The Turtle Clan represents the shifting of the earth and the cycles of the moon. The people of the Turtle Clan are considered the well of information and the keepers of the land. The responsibility of the Turtle Clan is everything that has to do with the environment.

WOLF CLAN (Lati'kwaho)

The Wolf Clan represents the path finders. Their responsibility is to guide the people in living their lives in the way the Creator intended.

BEAR CLAN (Latisklewake)

The Bear Clan people are known as Medicine People, the healers. There are stories passed down about how the Bear Clan people were given the gift of medicine from an elder woman who had the knowledge of all the medicine plants here on earth.

The Great Law speaks of how all members of each clan have a relationship to each other. The laws of clanship are quite rigid. For instance, since you have a family relationship with everyone in your clan it is forbidden to marry a person of the same clan, even if one is Mohawk and their partner is Oneida. Additionally, the clans have a

relationship to each other. The Wolf Clan is considered a cousin to the Turtle Clan and an uncle to the Bear Clan. The Turtle Clan is the older brother to the Bear Clan.

Symbols of the clans can be seen everywhere throughout the Oneida Nation Reservation; on the tribal logo, the Human Resources Department orientation folder, and throughout the Oneida Tribal School. Each wing of the Elder Complex on Overland Drive is named for one of the clan. The Oneida Nation Elementary School was designed in the shape of a turtle and is recognized as a point of interest to incoming and outgoing airline passengers who travel through Austin Straubel Airport. Even the Oneida tribal license plates bear symbols of the clans.

SEVEN GENERATIONS

One of the questions often asked is, "What is meant by seven generations"? The seven generations philosophy involves long term decision making based on the impact of the past seven generations, the current generation, and the seven generations yet to come. In terms of long term planning, that means any decision made today should take into consideration how similar actions of the past have influenced our people and how it will affect our children and grandchildren for the next seven generations yet to come. Only in this way will we be sure of clean air and safe water and useable natural resources.