



The Weekly Historical Note

By: Nicolas Reynolds
May 25th, 2009

The Origin of The Oneida Clans

The following is a condensed version of Bob Brown, Cultural Advisor to the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin, telling the Origin story of the Iroquois Clans. The recording was originally transcribed on May 8th, 1997 and was about 16 pages long. The text has been modified for clarity, flow, and length.


Some of the first instances that we talk about is the time of the creation, going back to the time of the right handed twin, or the Creator. At that time he had appointed all of the different forces and what their responsibilities were going to be and how they were going to help with everything in the creation.

After a while, the human beings were created on this Earth. As time was going on, human beings were here and there so they started creating villages. Pretty soon they started branching off from those villages and went into other areas and places. And so what was happening was there were arguments and disagreements between these people. No one could agree with things anymore. Even within families there were disagreements. Each time this happened, the elders of the villages would come together and they would sit down and try to come to some sort of resolution or some kind of answer as to how they can help their families with the things that were going on.

There was a young man that lived there who never spoke out but always attended these meetings. One day he thought to himself, maybe this will be the day that I will speak to them, and so he asked if he could speak during that time. And so he said, "Well, what we need to do is we need to divide ourselves into different families. We know that we all have different families that are here and if we divide ourselves into families, and then if we follow those kinds of ways of that family, then there are responsibilities that we could have.

And so he started giving examples of the different kinds of families that there are. You know, like different kinds of animal families, bird families, the many different kinds of trees and insects. "All of these different kinds of things there are have their responsibility, they all have a place on this Earth and if we could fashion ourselves in that way that we can follow those families and how they do things and what they do, we too can follow the same ways."

After he finished talking the elders sat there and they starting thinking about what he had said, what he was talking about. They came up with the conclusion that maybe what he





was saying was not really that far off. And so they asked him, "Is there such a way that we can do this?" The young man said, "Yeah! What we need to do is we need to go to different places and as we go to these different places then we can begin to find what is around us, what surrounds us, so we can do those things. What we need to do is we need to prepare ourselves to travel." All the people that had gathered their agreed that they would prepare themselves and they would leave early the next morning.

That morning they all got their stuff together and began to follow a particular river that was near their village. Pretty soon they came to a place that the young man was thinking of. They stretched vines across the river and he told them to start crossing the river, and once the vine broke there would be some people across the river and some people still on this side. He said that they will then determine who the oldest woman of each family on each side and then make their campfires.

So they did as he said and started to cross the river using the vine. More than half of the people crossed the river before the vine broke. So he told the other people to make their campfires and that he would be back after a few days. He gathered up all of the people and said that we they need to do was find the oldest woman of each family. He explained that they would ask each of these woman that in the morning, when they prepared their morning meal, or did whatever it was that they needed to do in the morning, that they should take notice of anything that is unusual. The first thing that they notice that is unusual they would bring back that information to him and then they would talk about what it was that they had seen.

And so when they all went to sleep that evening and in the morning when they all got up this one older lady, she began to prepare her meal for the morning. She went to the river to get some water for her morning meal and as she was dipping in to get the water, all of a sudden she heard a noise from behind her. She stood up and she looked around her and there was this wolf that was standing there staring at her. The wolf didn't do anything, but just stood there and looked at her. She didn't say anything and the wolf quietly turned and went away. So this old lady, she went back to where the rest of them were camped.

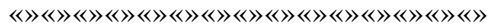
Later on that afternoon the young man asked to meet with the people and the old lady told what had happened to her. The young man said, "That will be the sign that you will belong to that particular family. So everybody of your family will be known as the people of the wolf. She agreed, and so the story goes on and talks about each of the older women from all of them that were the oldest of the families. They all saw different things either when they were preparing their meal or during the course of the day.

And so we go on and talk about the turtles, we talk about the bears and we talk about the deer and the snipe, the beaver and the hawk. These are the different kinds of clans that



our people belong to. And the eel and the heron too. And so all of these clans that we have, this was the first inception of how the clans of the Iroquois began.

Editors Note: The Three clans of the Oneida Tribe are the Wolf, Turtle, and the Bear as seen below on the official Oneida Tribes of Indians of Wisconsin Logo.



For more information on the Oneida Clans and their responsibilities, visit the website listed below:

<http://www.oneidanation.org/culture/page.aspx?id=1280>