



Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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Saving Our Oneida Language

INTRODUCTION

By: Dr. Carol Cornelius

The Oneida Language Revitalization Program began in the spring of 1996 in response to a national crisis, a state of emergency, in which a survey indicated there were only 25-30 Elders left who had learned to speak Oneida as their first language.

When many of us were very young, we heard Oneida spoken all the time by our Elders. We must ensure that our little ones now hear and learn to speak Oneida. As a Nation we have an urgent need to produce speakers to continue Oneida Language.

As a result of the survey taken, a ten year plan was developed to connect Elders with trainees in a semi-immersion process which would produce speakers and teachers of the Oneida language. The goal was to hear our Oneida language spoken throughout our community.

It has been an intensive period of time since its inception and many things have transpired at Takal~~atu~~ (the Language House) but the trainees have come a long way and are now conducting language classes for the community.

THE ONEIDA LANGUAGE TIMELINE

BEFORE 1600

- Oneida was our first language
- Our ancestors recited the Thanksgiving Address to open and close all ceremonies

- All Oneida nation governmental meetings to conduct the business of the people were in Oneida

1600's

- The arrival of the French, Dutch, and English began to impact our economy and these European languages were learned by a few Oneida people in order to conduct trade.

1700's

- 1709 – Queen Anne ordered that the Common Prayer Book be translated into the Mohawk language. This was done by Eleazer Williams in 1800.
- 1750 – Samuel Kirkland began missionary efforts which impacted our language. Many Oneida supported the Americans in the American Revolution.

1820's

- Eleazor William's land negotiations and missionary efforts resulted in the move to Wisconsin.
- Hymn and sermons were in Mohawk and Oneida
- Oneida people continued to speak Oneida as their first language.

1880's TO 1920's

- Oneida children attended boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak Oneida
- Our ancestors continued to speak Oneida in the schools, but kept it a secret for their teachers

- “Medicinal Plants Used by Oneida People in Wisconsin” was research and completed by Lee Olsen with Huron Smith, including the Oneida names for plants and medicines

1930's

- The first efforts were made to write and preserve the Oneida language through the WPS, Works Progress Administration (For more on the WPA, see page 5)

1940's

- The Common Prayer Book, earlier translated into Mohawk by Eleazer Williams, was translated into Oneida by Oscar Archiquette
- Our Elders kept Oneida language alive by continuing to speak the language, but the next generation did not learn to speak Oneida as their first language.

1952

- “Historical Changes in Kinship System of the Oneida Indians”, a language study, was written by H.W. Basehart, and American anthropologist

1960's

- Oscar Archiquette taught classes at High View School for everyone who wanted to learn
- The Oneida Hymn book was compiled and translated into Oneida by Oscar Archiquette, Floyd Lounsbury, and Morris Swadesh

1970's

- In the early 1970's, the federally funded Wisconsin Native American Language Project began in Milwaukee. Elders included Maria Hinton, Lavinia Webster, and Emily Schwamp.
- The “English-Oneida Lexicon” was published in July of 1975
- The Oneida Bilingual Program began with federal funding and ran through 1985. (For more on the Oneida Bilingual Program, see page 6)

- The “10 Lessons in Conversational Oneida” (tape and booklet) were produced during this era. They continue to be used to the present time as the first introductory lessons in Oneida language

- Many teaching booklets, tapes, and curriculum guides (K-6) were developed
- Oneida language became part of the curriculum at Head Start and Day Care
- Working with Cliff Abbott at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, became a university level credit class
- Learners could obtain teacher certification through UWGB

1980's

- Federal funding for language programs ended
- The Oneida Tribal School (K-8) began and included Oneida language as part of the daily curriculum
- Community members continued efforts to learn to speak Oneida by holding language classes in their homes
- Summer language camps were held for children
- Amos Christjohn and Maria Hinton conducted classes for the community
- The University of Wisconsin at Green Bay offered evening language classes with Cliff Abbott
- “Oneida and Great Lakes American Indian Uses of Plants for Food and Medicine” by Janice Schreiber was published by the Oneida Bilingual Program

1990

- Efforts of revitalization of the Oneida language grew stronger

1994

- Oneida Nation High School began to require four years of Oneida language/culture for graduation
- The Business Committee passed Resolution 1-12-94-A declaring Oneida the official language of the Oneida Nation

- Resolution 5-18-94-G passed giving support and encouragement to our culture and language
- The play “How Frog Lost His Teeth” was presented by Summer School students in the Oneida language. Directed by Gail Danforth and Pam Bluebird
- Classes taught by Elders and UWGB continued in the community

1995

- In 1995, the play, Corn Spirit, was presented by 4th grade students. Some language and traditional songs were used. Directed by Laura Cornelius, Larry Cornelius, and Nicole Daniels
- The Oneida teaching Grammar was published by Cliff Abbott, UWGB Linguist
- The Thanksgiving Address tape and booklet by Bob Brown was published through the Oneida Nation Schools

1996

- A six week summer session on semi-immersion language efforts brought Elders, trainees, and teachers together to learn immersion teaching techniques in an effort to produce fluent speakers. 30-35 people attended the daily sessions.
- Elders included the following:
 - Amos Christjohn
 - Mary “Wali” Danforth
 - Melinda Danforth
 - Hudson Doxtator
 - Priscilla Manders
 - Lloyd “Anoki” Schuyler
 - Leona Smith
 - Lavinia Webster
- Current Language Trainees are as follows:
 - Richard Baird
 - Dawn Cornelius
 - Randy Cornelius
 - Vickie Cornelius
 - Mike King
 - Stephanie Muskovitch
 - Curtiss Summers

Inez Thomas
Leanne Thompson

- Others who have also participated in the Language Program as trainees are:
 - Lavinia Acquirre
 - Laura Cornelius
 - Kenneth Brickman Metoxen
- A Ten Year Language Immersion Plan was developed by the group of trainees, teachers, Elders, and community members. (for more on the Ten year Immersion plan, see page 7)
- A lifetime dream became a reality when the Oneida Dictionary was published by Maria Hinton and Amos Christjohn
- On August 15, the Oneida Language House also known as Takal^{atu}, became a reality. The program began with eleven Oneida Elders who were transferred from the Oneida Tribal Schools as Elder Speakers/Translators.
- They were:
 - Mary Danforth
 - Lydia Denny
 - Hudson Doxtator
 - Melinda Doxtator
 - Luella Elm
 - Mary Jourdan
 - Leona Smith
 - Helen Shenandore
 - Margaret Summers
 - Lavinia Webster
 - Loretta Webster
- Two of the Elders were over 90 years old. Later that summer, five trainees were also transferred from the Tribal School.
- Resolution 9-25-96-A passed declaring those Oneida Elders who kept our language alive as experts of the Oneida language and as a National Treasures. The resolution stated our Elders “shall be accorded all respect due as the primary custodians of the Oneida Language in this community.” Vera Wilson joined the Language Revitalization Program staff.

- Turtle's War Party was recorded on video with Lloyd Schuyler narrating and Mary Lee Prescott illustrating.
- The first CD-ROM in the Oneida language was developed using the Turtle's War Party video with Lloyd Schuyler narrating and illustrations by Mary Lee Prescott.
- The three Oneida communities: Wisconsin, Thames/Canada, and New York began holding annual language meetings. They met twice a year and took turns hosting.

1997

- The WPA stories were published by Maria Hinton, Amos Christjohn, and Anna John with illustrations by Mary Lee Prescott.
- An ANA Grant was awarded to establish an Oneida Language web page.
- A second CD-ROM on the Thanksgiving Address was produced with Bob Brown narrating.
- People continued to hold language classes in their homes.
- Bob Brown taught cultural language classes at the Cannery every Wednesday.
- The Three Sisters tape and booklet, originally produced in the 1970's was reproduced on CD-ROM with Maria Hinton.
- A telephone hookup connected Takal^{atu} with the South East Oneida Tribal Services (SEOTS) in Milwaukee, allowing classes to be conducted long distance.
- A National Park Service Grant was awarded on Preserving the History of Oneida Spoken to Written Language.

2000

- An ANA Grant was awarded with funded two trainees and multi-media projects Oneida language classes were taught at Day Care, Head Start for employees and for families in their homes

2003

- An Oneida Language Charter Team was established. (for more on the Oneida Language Charter Team, see page 7)

2004

- April 3, the Oneida Business Committee honored our Elders as "National Treasures."
- April 14, the Oneida Language Charter was officially completed and signed
- In April of 2004, Mary McDonald, Fluent Speaking Language Facilitator, was hired at Takal^{atu}. Leander Danforth was also hired as her assistant.

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION 1935-1942

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal cultural programs marked the U.S. government's first big, direct investment in cultural development. The largest and most important of the new Deal cultural programs was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a massive employment relief program launched in the spring of 1935.

The WPA funded Oneida Language and Folklore Project was headed by anthropologist and linguist, Floyd G. Lounsbury. It was designed to teach Oneida people to write their language and to develop Oneida orthography. It also helped to preserve tribal history and folklore. The Oneida participants interviewed Elders in the Oneida language to record stories and oral histories. Oneida was still the first language for many Oneida people. The interviews were:

Oscar Archiquette
 Tillie Baird
 Andrew Beechtree
 Ida Blackhawk
 Guy Elm
 Dennison Hill
 LaFront King
 Stadler King
 Alex Metoxen
 David Skenandore
 John A. Skenandore
 Walter Skenandore

Louis Webster

During the mid-1970's, there was a small collection of the WPA notebooks, filled with first-hand accounts of Oneida history and folklore, many written in the Oneida language. These were the notebooks that were used during the Oneida Bilingual Program.

Then, in the fall of 1999, another 167 notebooks were found at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. With the help of Cliff Abbott, a student of Lounsbury, the notebooks were returned to the Oneida Cultural Heritage Department in Oneida, Wisconsin. This collection included those same interviewers, plus five more:

Hyson Doxtator
Amelia Jordan
William H. Metoxen
Sherman Skenandore
Alma Thomas

The notebooks contained several thousand pages of information involving over 200 Oneida people, telling their stories or they were mentioned in the stories of others. Many of the notebooks were written in the Oneida language and are in the process of being translated into English.

These interviews now provide us with invaluable historical, cultural, and genealogical information on the Oneida people and their lifestyles.

THE ONEIDA BILINGUAL PROGRAM 1974-1985

The Oneida Bilingual Program began with federal funding. For the first time, Oneida language and culture were recognized by the federal government as legitimate topics for school instruction. Oneida was taught for 10-15 minutes daily in five area public schools.

The program included participants taking college classes to obtain teacher certification. People involved in this major project were:

Elders:

Amos Christjohn
Dellora Cornelius
Melissa Cornelius
Mary Danforth
Melinda Doxtator
Maria Hinton
Mary Jourdan
Flora Skenandore
Loretta Webster

Administration:

Shirley Barber
Amelia Cornelius
Bill Gollnick
Bobbi Webster

Teachers:

Gail Danforth
Maxine Thomas
Dorothy Tolkinsen

Illustrators:

Don Applebee
Marshall Ellis
Mary Lee Prescott
Kathy Webster

During this project many of the stories from the WPA Writers Project were translated from Oneida into English, taped, recorded and illustrated. Sixteen booklets and seven larger booklets were produced on a variety of topics. "Animal Stories" and "Memories of the Old Days" were two of the major publications produced. They were edited by Cliff Abbott and illustrated by Don Applebee and Mary Lee (Lemieux) Prescott.

The Ten Year Language Immersion Plan 1996

Studies at that time indicated that there were approximately 30 fluent speakers of the Oneida language. Further research indicated that the number was fewer with many of those over the age of 70. With all of the projects over the years, there have been no speakers produced. The past projects, however, have produced teaching materials.

The immersion plan, in order to succeed needed three major components: 1) Oneida Elders willing to teach, 2) Trainees willing to learn and 3) A consultant with

immersion technique experience to help revise the current language structure. The participants were to make a commitment to become Oneida language teachers for at least three years after receiving Oneida language teaching certification.

The goals of the plan included:

- Official recognition of our Elders as National Treasures. Developing and implementing Oneida Nation Language Teacher Certification based on competency in speaking, teaching, curriculum, and material development
- Developing career paths for our youth to become speakers and teachers, fluent in the language
- Planning for summer immersion family language camps, and
- Hearing Oneida language spoken throughout our Nation

Long range planning goals were as follows:

Years 1-3

- Immersion instruction with a core group, developing curriculum, and annual evaluations

Years 4-6

- Core group returns to teaching but continues to meet weekly to continue learning and to act as mentor to the second group who begin the three year immersion process, and a career path is developed. Yearly evaluations continue.

Years 7-9

- A third group begins the immersion process and the second group returns to teaching but continues to meet and to act as mentors, yearly evaluations continue.

Year 10

- The third group returns to teaching and the language will be spoken in the community.

The evaluation will be based on language fluency, teaching skills, and language material development. Oneida teacher certification is awarded as each group passes certain certification criteria.

Learning the language has many positive aspects such as: pride of being Oneida, working with our Elders, developing learning and listening skills, seeing the joy on the learners' face, and feeling a connection with Oneida people in Canada and New York.

THE ONEIDA LANGUAGE CHARTER TEAM 2003

The Oneida Language Charter Team was designed as a tool to expand bilingual learning. The mission of the Charter Team was to "identify immediate needs and develop mid-range plans to keep our language alive and implement the Business Committee's four resolutions as they relate to the Oneida language."

Under the charter's plan, the Oneida Nation would form a teacher certification program and the Oneida business Committee would send communication to 3000 Oneida language is the tribe's official language.

On April 3, 2004, a community meeting was held at the Norbert Hill Center in Oneida, Wisconsin to honor our Oneida speaking Elders who worked so diligently through the years to help keep the Oneida language alive. Oneida Business Committee representatives Brian Doxtator, Trish King, and Paul Ninham were on hand to present a plaque designating Oneida Elders as our "National Treasures," They also presented individual award to Elder speakers, past and current, which had been instrumental in keeping the language alive well. Those present were Hudson Doxtator, Loretta Webster, Maria Hinton, and Vera Wilson. Those not present received their awards at a later date.

On April 14, 2004, the Oneida Language Charter Team, which included 13 representatives from across our Nation, officially signed the completed Oneida Language Charter.

The hope was that if there were speaker that we had not year reached through our surveys, that they would come forward to help in preserving our identity as a people.

Part of the purpose of the Language charter Team was to encourage positive involvement in the revitalization of our very complex, very descriptive, yet vibrant Oneida language, keeping it alive for those who will follow us.

ELDERS AT TAKAL<ATU

As small children, many of us remember bearing our parents and our grandparent speaking the language or of learning a few phrases, but very few of us grew up with Oneida as our first language as our grandparents did. As a child, I remember with warmth, the sound of my mother at the back door, calling "swatekhuni" and we'd all come running because we knew it was time to eat. And after the meal, we'd never think of leaving the table without a "yaw<ko, mama, yaw<ko," It is imperative that our little ones are offered that same opportunity to be able to hear the Oneida language spoken in our homes.

To reiterate, the Oneida Language Revitalization Program was started in 1996 as the result of a survey conducted indicating that there were less than 30 community members who learned to speak Oneida as their first language and were still fluent. The situation created a state of emergency with regard to losing our identity as a nation and a people.

At the time, a group of Oneida Elders were hired as Elder Speaker Translators along with a small group of trainees who became the core of the language program. The following are profiles of those beloved Elders who took part in the project to save the Oneida language. Sad to say, many of them are no longer with us.

Lydia Denny

B: August 4, 1907

Lydia is the daughter of Taylor and Elizabeth (Wheelock) Summers. About 1928 she married Raymond Ira Cornelius, who passed away in November of 1962. Then in 1974, she

married Joshua Denny, the son of Joshua and Isabel (Cornelius) Denny. Joshua preceded her in death in 1983.

Lydia brought with her the dialect from the south end of the reservation, which has proven to be of great value to the language program. Listening and distinguishing the different dialects that exist within our spoken language is an important part of who we are and who we have become.

Lydia has an amazing sense of humor and a knack for making learning the language fun.

Lydia is currently in a nursing home but still enjoys visits from her friends and family, especially when she gets the opportunity to use her beloved Oneida language.

Helen Skenandore

B: June 17, 1913

Helen is the daughter of Mason and Sophie (Antone) Cornelius. She married Edmund Skenandore, son of Jesse H. and Electa Cecilia (Hill) Skenandoah.

The Language Revitalization Program is fortunate to have had Helen involved because her wealth of knowledge of the language.

She's another of the unstoppable akshotas-always on the go, always generous with her time. Once in a while, Helen will decide to mean a mean batch of brownies for the pot luck lunches, endearing her to the staff even more.

Leona Smith

B: January 20, 1920

Leona is the daughter of Hyson and Martha (House) Doxtator. She married Peter Smith, son of Joseph M. and Rose (Cornelius) Smith. He preceded her in death in 1981.

Leona is one of the few speakers who were raised speaking the Oneida language. She diligently kept learners' tongues tied with practice, practice, practice.

Leona taught those who were really motivated to work hard at learning this complex language. Her soft smile comforted students who were unsure. Along with teaching came

many stories about “how things used to be”, always creating a captive audience. Along with her brother, Hudson, we got a brother/sister tag team. It was a beautiful thing to watch them talk at length in the language.

Leona’s dedication came shining through whenever she would show up, even during the worst snow storms.

Loretta F. Webster

B: July 25, 1910

Loretta is the daughter of Elijah E. and Margaret (Baird) Skenandore. She married Willard R. Skenandore, son of Seth Willard and Melissa (Green) Skenandore. Willard passed away in 1981, and Loretta later married Charles Webster.

Loretta is one of our language teachers who has been giving all she can. The evening community classes were a great success with her help. The winters were very hard on Loretta, but she still kept hanging in there whenever she could.

Loretta’s fluency with the language was so beneficial to everyone who had been lucky enough to be in a class with her. When asked for help with the pronunciation of words, she was so patient and supportive that you just wanted to keep on asking. It brightened up the day just to see her smiling face come through the door.

Vera Wilson

B: June 4, 1921

Vera is the daughter of John A. and Helena (Adams) Skenandore. Her first husband was Clifford Powless; she later married Owen Wilson.

Vera is the late comer to the group. When she retired from the Land Management Department at the age of 77, she joined the language team. She has been steadfast in her determination to learn as well as to teach. Her quiet ways, sweet smile, and eagerness to help have been a true asset to work being done in preservation of our Oneida language.

The following Elders have found their home with the Creator. Their spirits, energy, and love for our language live on in those who were fortunate enough to be their students.

Margaret Summers

B: December 14, 1908

D: November 11, 2004

Margaret was the daughter of Noah and Celinda (Hill) Webster. One June 29, 1929, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she married Austin Summers, son of Taylor and Elizabeth (Wheelock) Summers.

Energy is the word you would think of when you spent time with Margaret. Many times she would rather walk than ride to the post office. She’s another Elder who loved to share her time and knowledge with the youngsters at Head Start. Speaking the language came easily for her; it was all her family spoke for many years.

Just hearing her laugh brought a smile, and she had the funniest stories to tell! Margaret, affectionately called Kwaklit, brought so much energy to the group. She has been truly missed since she’s passed on to the Creator’s world.

We’ve all been very fortunate to have had Margaret involved in the language program. Her great-nephew, Curtiss Summers, is one of the language trainees.

Lavinia L. Webster

B: January 25, 1924

D: March 31, 2004

Lavinia was the daughter of the late Andrew and Lillian (Skenandore) Doxtator. She married Stewart Webster, son of Peter and Emma (Coulon) Webster, who passed on to the Creator’s world in August of 1993.

Lavinia is another of the loyal advocates who consistently promoted the Oneida language. Before her ten years teaching in the Oneida community (eight of which were with the Language Revitalization Program), she spent twenty years teaching in the Milwaukee community.