

Remembering Our Underlying Aboriginal Heritage

By Joe Mancini, Good Work News, September 2011

Canadians hardly give a second thought to the Aboriginal culture that developed on their soil. 10,000 years before Europeans arrived, small bands of nomadic hunters moved into the Great Lakes region evolving a culture attuned to the land. How well do we understand this culture that grew on our soil? John Ralston Saul laments Canadians' disregard for Aboriginal culture but he is convinced that the way Aboriginals created egalitarian structures, the way they favoured negotiation over violence, the way they made the circle larger through inclusion, are examples of how our northern Canadian culture has been defined by the Aboriginal experience.

Two Kitchener Aboriginal settlements from the 1500's can now be identified near Schneider and Strasburg Creeks, both running to the Grand River. Acknowledging local aboriginal settlements sheds new light on the Aboriginal presence in our Region and how it has changed us. The Working Centre can be seen as an interesting model that combines complex and circular thinking with structures that are independent, inclusive and communal. Is this the way Aboriginal ethics are taking root in our culture?

Part 1

The Iroquoian Culture of Southern Ontario

The Iroquoian culture started adopting agriculture and sophisticated rituals, according to archaeological digs that are uncovering the period, from 1000 years ago. This group also experienced population growth, a wider scope of trading and increased interactions with distant groups. Their most important agricultural innovation is the kind of practice now adopted by organic growers. The Iroquoian horticulturists fixed nitrogen in the soil and smothered weeds by intercropping their main food sources of corn, beans and squash. These three crops were their primary source of subsistence.

The Iroquoian culture covered the wide Great Lakes region extending into present day New York and Pennsylvania and the Ontario north to Georgian Bay. The Huron, a northern Iroquoian group with settlements near Georgian Bay evolved cultural practices that were similar to the many other Iroquoian Great Lakes peoples such as the Neutrals, Wenro, Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida, Mohawk, and the Susquehannock. The Iroquoians prized "personal independence and economic equality" and they developed elaborate social mores that made this possible for their people. We know this from the detailed observations that Samuel de Champlain and the Jesuits made of the Huron people during the period of 1610-1645. The Huron welcomed these strangers as guests and it was these Europeans who provided insight into a Canadian indigenous culture that would have been lost.

Bruce Trigger describes the Huron whose "principal aim in acquiring wealth was to win affection and approval by sharing this wealth with others."¹ In this matriarchal society where women had more decision making authority than men, friendship was equated with hospitality, gift giving and exchanges. "Generosity was highly valued, and social status accrued to those individuals and groups who lavishly gave away their possessions." Witchcraft was associated with stinginess and this further encouraged generosity. Visitors noted how their strong sense of communal responsibility meant that Hurons would not let a member of a community go without food or shelter. The Hurons were hard workers, every inch of their self-reliance was based on communal hunting, growing, drying, gathering, crafting, and building. They had a culture of small groups that rewarded those who were

“brave, industrious and generous.” For the Huron these were the actions that “strengthened the creative forces of the universe.”²

Stories of the Neutral People

During the 1500's, the Neutral People whose home base was between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie (at the mouth of the Grand River), acquired their historical name for their 'Neutral' position as mediators and mostly non-combatants in a long feud between the 5 Nations of the Lower Great Lakes region (Mohawk, Seneca, Onondagas, Oneida and Cayuga) and the Huron Nation. The Seneca were geographically closest to the Huron and these two groups were the main combatants in small scale, almost ritual battles during the summer months which usually resulted in minimal deaths and prisoners. This warfare was perpetual as it was in retaliation for the skirmish of the previous summer. These were not wars for territory until the Dutch supplied the 5 Nations with large quantities of guns to spark the Beaver Wars. The Neutrals territory was where these roaming warriors had their summer camps.

Historical evidence that is now being gathered confirms the extent of settlements that the Neutral people had near the Grand River and especially in what is today Waterloo Region. The recent discovery of a Neutral Village in the Huron Nature Area (The Record, Terry Pender, October 21, 2010 and Diane Vernile CTV Province Wide <http://swo.ctv.ca/provincewide/> (link is external) Sunday July 10th) is significant as the Huron Nature Area had never been cultivated or excavated. This is in contrast to an Aboriginal earthworks site in the heart of Kitchener-Waterloo that in 1895 had already been disturbed, although pleas were made to preserve it.

It was the historical research of rynch mills' who brought to light an **1894 Archaeological Report** by David Boyle that was prepared for the Ontario Legislative Assembly. mills published this research in **Victoria Park: 100 Years of a Park and its People**.³ Boyle describes a four-acre area that is familiar to anyone who uses the Iron Horse Trail that crosses at Gage Street (parallel to Belmont and before Glasgow) where a small trout stream can still be seen. In his report Boyle describes the outline of an Aboriginal settlement in that area.

The first earthworks visited this year is in a field near the Berlin and Waterloo general hospital a little west of the former town and south of the latter. Accompanied by Mr. Jacob Stroh, a most ardent archaeological student who has devoted much of his time during many years to collecting and documenting Aboriginal life in Waterloo County. Although cultivation has to a large extent leveled the area surrounding this village site, enough remains to show they formed a large semi-circle enclosing about four acres, the ends running to a small trout stream flowing through a swamp close by. A portion of the bank still traceable is of a hundred feet long on each side of which there has been a ditch.⁴

Boyle is describing the earth works which were earthen piles of up to five feet high, fortified with a natural mat of grass, on which young cedar and pine poles were twisted into the earthen piles in three rows and were woven together with small branches and bark.⁵ A developed four-acre site located near a flowing stream could last up to 20 years as a settlement for a population of up to 800 people living in 10 -20 longhouses. The Iroquoian people had three types of settlements – towns, hamlets and camps each with their own role and purpose. Towns and hamlets were more fortified than camps. Settlement areas would form a territory with councils, customs and history.⁶

Settlements were influenced by streams and also the presence of small fruit and nut bearing trees and it turns out that in 1894 Stroh and Boyle documented abundant wild fruits and nuts including plums, cherries, huckleberries, butternuts, beechnuts and hazelnuts.

Boyle charged that in the near future every “vestige of the ancient earthen works will be removed” and he was right. Despite the efforts of Stroh and others, no care was taken to “aid in the preserving of this pre-historic landmark.” Anthropologist Ron Williamson has estimated the “staggering losses to the archaeological record of Ontario in the past two centuries... hundreds of sites have been destroyed in Toronto in the last fifty years.”⁷ It is not bold to consider that other nearby settlements in Kitchener-Waterloo have also been turned under without any consideration for their historical or cultural significance?

rych mills also highlighted and described a detailed 1881 map that shows how Mill Street “followed closely the Aboriginal trail paralleling Schneider Creek.”⁸ This summer the City of Kitchener committed to completing the bike trail that follows Schneider Creek where it now crosses Queen Street South and ends around Rockway Golf Course. The plan is to extend the trail past Manitou through the woods, coming out at Homer Watson Park, from there it follows the Grand River towards the 401 pedestrian bridge. Ideally this trail should also find its way to the Huron Nature Area.

Less than 10 kilometers from Boyle and Stroh’s Strange Street archaeological earthworks site, the recently preserved Huron Nature Area has ceded a full scale Neutral Nation settlement that has been designated as an archaeological heritage site. This is the site that has garnered the recent media attention. According to The Record, this site has yielded artifacts from 500 years ago and all the way back to 4,500 years ago. It has been classified as a village with ten longhouses that was occupied by the Neutral people.

Did the Aboriginal trail that follows Schneider Creek link these two settlements together? The Strange Street Aboriginal Settlement was most certainly a Neutral village given the pattern of the way the Iroquoian people lived on the land. Other nearby settlements must have either been covered over or lie content to be discovered. This is just one story of what should be a large catalogue documenting the Aboriginal presence in what is now Waterloo Region. Paul Racher, head archaeologist at the Huron site, told The Record that, “there is an intimate connection between aboriginal peoples and the land in the Grand River watershed.”⁹

Part 2

The Story of Colonization and Demoralization

Do we have any sense of honouring all those who have passed before us on this land? European culture in southern Ontario represents a paltry 200 years. What of the culture that evolved on our land for over 10,000 years? European incursions into Aboriginal land in North America were a slow process that was completely dependent on Aboriginal knowledge and trading up to 1670. After that a colonization process interrupted, disrupted and demoralized Aboriginal culture throughout the Great Lakes region. When the Mississauga Nation consented to the British Crown granting 6 miles on each side of the Grand River to the Six Nations in 1789 the demoralization was already completed and further dishonest Colonial government policies of reservations, assimilation and marginalization, added to the burden that aboriginal people’s had to contend with.¹⁰

The so-called difference between European and Aboriginal culture is that Europe’s smaller, climate friendly land mass benefited from the prosperity generated by wheat, pigs, cows and sheep that had been domesticated by

the major river cultures of the Nile, Euphrates and Indus Valleys. The river civilizations started domesticating these species around 7,000 BC and they found their way to Europe around 5,000 BC. These plant and animal varieties were nowhere to be found in North America. Europe's smaller land mass also intensified political development. When the Europeans arrived in North America their germs from domesticated pigs and cows devastated Aboriginal populations. Vicious self-interested trading intentionally created more disruptions, undermining the carefully crafted Aboriginal societies of hard work and generosity. Aboriginal communal ethics that honoured the land were ideals that Europeans spoke of, but knew little of in practice.

Re-imagining Aboriginal History

John Ralston Saul wants to re-imagine Canadian history. His 2008 bestselling book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* retells Canadian history from a point of view that includes Aboriginal cultural practices. Saul wants Canadians to finally embrace their aboriginal heritage. For example, he quotes Brother Gabriel Sagard in 1623 who lived among the Huron on Georgian Bay and who inadvertently described the democratic and equal nature in Huron society. "Huron war chiefs could not order their warriors into battle, but had to persuade them." Saul contrasts this with the Huron critique of the Europeans they encountered. "These same Huron were horrified by the division between rich and poor among the French. A society that did not look after its own suggested 'unintelligent' people – 'ill-balanced' people."¹¹

Saul has sought to uncover Aboriginal ethics that underlie the story of Canada - a history Canadians have consciously ignored.

*It could be argued that the key moment in the creation of the idea of Canada was the gathering of thirteen hundred Aboriginal ambassadors from forty nations with the leaders of New France in 1701. The result was the Great Peace of Montreal. It was here that the indigenous Aboriginal ways of dealing with the other were consciously and broadly adopted as more appropriate than the European. Here the idea of future treaties was born. Here an approach was developed that would evolve into federalism. Sir William Johnson's great gathering of two thousand chiefs at Niagara in 1764 had been organized in order to cement the Royal Proclamation. In many ways, this was the second act in the creation of the idea of Canada – a continuation of the Great Peace of Montreal.*¹²

Saul contends that the constituent ideas that make up Canada, that make up the way we fashion our institutions, grew directly out of Aboriginal thought and experience that adopted practices that evolved from the northern experience of land. Saul explores the unique way Canadians have adopted ideas like federalism, fairness, equality, and peacemaking and demonstrates how these have been influenced directly by Aboriginal culture. The gathering of the many and the effort at broad consensus reflect the values of the Great Peace. He considers that the phrase from the Great Peace recognizing that we all "Eat from a Common Bowl" is indicative of "shared interests and shared welfare."¹³

What Saul uncovers is a deeply rooted complex Aboriginal philosophy that Canadians have for the most part chosen to ignore. This philosophy is concerned with looking after one another. It is about concepts of consensus that do not narrow relationships and exclude differences but gives time and space to working out and maintaining commonalities between people. It is a subtle egalitarianism that vividly understands the tension between the individual and the group with the goal of enlarging its inclusive circle to incorporate differences.¹⁴

A Fair Country is directed at the ineffective Canadian elite who still hold on to a colonial past. They limit the imagination of Canadians by using the tactics of the old Family Compact to divide and conquer. Their goal is to use government to take power away. The hallmark of the Canadian bureaucratic mentality is the use of destructive controls that tie up process and disrupt creative independence. In Saul's view, entitled groups with power and wealth retain their position through bureaucratic structures at every level that limit imagination and democracy. This is the Roots of Failure and is in contrast to the Aboriginal way that trusts in the capacity of their people, that lives a deep rooted loyalty, and that does not fear complexity.

Aboriginal Ethics at The Working Centre

There has always been something Aboriginal about The Working Centre. In 1982 we adopted the pastoral circle as our mode of learning and acting. This marked our work as circular – listening, analyzing and practically responding to multiple experiences. It was inclusive because each experience brought in new people who were welcomed in and who offered their insights and efforts. We became complex as we integrated these many ideas and perspectives into a community of people serving the common good.

In the 1990's Andy Macpherson designed a community gardening graphic that we also use for St. John's Kitchen. It is influenced by the integrative nature of the Iroquoian three sisters of agriculture – corn, beans and squash. Andy's circular graphic illustrates the complex integration of good food, good community, good spirit. Other writings at The Working Centre have noted the three sisters of community tools as work as gift, serving others and building community. New projects and approaches developed at St. John's Kitchen used a model of circles to involve all in resolving conflict and creating new understandings.

Saul is critical of Canadians putting “more energy into their relationship with technology – a personal attachment to the idea of progress – than into their relationship with place.”¹⁵ Place and land are deeply rooted in the Aboriginal psyche, it is a wellspring from which all good things flow. Working Centre has been blessed by place. With minimal resources supported by multiple acts of generosity we have been able to deeply root on Queen Street South in ways that have added to and influenced culture in new and surprising ways. It is from rooted place that culture and service to others grows.

There are many communal structures within The Working Centre. We call these projects community tools and a partial list includes Recycle Cycles, St. John's Kitchen, Job Search Resource Centre, Worth A Second Look, Multicultural Cinema Club, Public Access Computers, Computer Recycling, Queen Street Commons Cafe and GROW Herbal. Each projects evokes pleasure when one recognizes the important work they accomplish by inviting people to express their creativity and skills in ways that enhances the community around them. These projects involve people in circular, complex and integrative ways. They make possible access to tools by sharing resources generously. They live the spirit that the Huron's believed was the principal aim of Creation. To win affection and approval by sharing with others.

Saul concludes with this hopeful approach,

*I can't help but feel that the strategic key to our rediscovering our four-century-long path to fairness and inclusion lies in a rethinking and relaunching of the co-operative movement.*¹⁶

He goes on to say that we need to build the space for citizenship and we need to respect geography and place. He asks how structures of citizenship can anchor our communities and move us away from mass commodity

extraction and top-down bureaucratic sloppiness. These ideas were central to the Aboriginal vision of community. Up to now Canadians have consistently failed to recognize Aboriginal influences that are integral to Canadian society. The good news is that this is slowly changing and a new understanding of our relationship with deeply seeded Aboriginal history and culture awaits us.

This article is dedicated to Palmer Patterson who taught a second year Aboriginal History course at University of Waterloo in the late 1970's and supervised a reading course on the topic in later years. Palmer and Nancy Lou have supported St. John's Kitchen financially since it first opened in 1985.

Footnotes

1. Bruce Trigger, *The Huron Farmers of the North*, 2nd Edition, Harcourt Brace Javanovick, 1990
2. Trigger, p.48, 145
3. Rych Mills, *Victoria Park: 100 Years of a Park and its People*, Kitchener, 1996
4. David Boyle: *Archaeological Report 1894-95*, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Toronto, 1896 p.34-35
5. Trigger, p.21
6. Ritchler, *Ordeal of the Long House*, p.17-14, 292 -293
7. Ron Williamson, Editor, Toronto: *A Short Illustrated History of Its First 12,000 Years*, James Lorimer Ltd, 2008 p26
8. Terry Pender, "Aboriginal Village Discovered on Strasburg Creek." *The Record*, October 21, 2010
9. E. Reginald Good, 'Mississauga-Menno Relations in the Upper Grand River Valley', *Ontario History*, LXXXVII 2 (June 1995) 156-172
10. John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country, Telling Truths About Canada*, Penguin Canada, 2008 p.58
11. J. R. Saul, *A Fair Country*, p.69
12. J. R. Saul, *A Fair Country*, p.69
13. J. R. Saul, *A Fair Country*, p.59, 71
14. J. R. Saul, *A Fair Country*, p.86
15. J. R. Saul, *A Fair Country*, p.321

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