



Female Academy

Norridgewock Historical Society Newsletter

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River Watchers

I live in Norridgewock on the Father Rasle Rd. on an old farm built in the 1830's by the Bixby family who in two generations built a total of five adjacent homes along the fertile flood plains of the river here. This summer we began to notice eagles flying low over the land here, often being chased by fiercely territorial crows. In early summer as we walked through our high field, we saw an eagle land very high in a densely branched tall pine along the river. In the ensuing days we watched the pine assisted with binoculars and saw eagles coming and going from the same tree. We wondered if there might be another eagle nest in the tree. One day I walked down to the river edge just beyond the unoccupied cabin there and walked over to the trio of tall pines. I circled around their bases several times, craning my neck to see through thick green to the top and could finally make out a dense mass of well hidden dead brown branches in the Westernmost tree.

On my frequent drives to and from our shop in Skowhegan, I have watched for eagles for years in the dead pine on the River Road in Norridgewock across from the cemetery there. Every few trips I could see an eagle and sometimes two in the old pine. They were watching the River, for fish, for food. Sometimes I would see an eagle in a low branch perhaps eight or twelve feet off the ground further down the River Road where the little stream enters the river with a tiny pond on the opposite side.

The old dead pine finally toppled and the eagles stopped watching from the North side of the river, but now I frequently see them across the river on an overhanging high branch of a trio of tall pines across the River. In the Westernmost tree there is a clearly visible nest there as well.

Driving to Madison a few weeks ago along my road, I came to the big eddy by the Moore's homes and saw what looked like a large black and white skunk sitting vertically on a low branch of a tree very close to the water at the edge of the flood plane where Manny Moore grows his vegetables. I slowed down and then realized that I was looking down, rather than up, at a mature bald eagle who was at his or her normal occupation of watching the river for fish. Just around the corner, beyond the entrance of the Sandy River, the power lines leading out of the Father Rasle Monument cemetery cross the river and just below the power lines towards the Sandy, is another great tall pine with the oldest established eagle nest on this stretch of river. That makes three eagle nests in Norridgewock/Starks along a four mile stretch of river. There are enough fish in the river to feed eagle families from three nests and to support fly fishermen who come from many miles to the rapids above the old historic Native American Village and massacre site in the Pines on my road. In the Spring and Fall, hundreds and thousands of geese fly in to the river and corn field behind my home to rest and feed before they continue on their migrations.

In the heated local debate about retaining or changing the name of the Skowhegan Indians to something acceptable to Maine's Native American vocal opponents of the current name I would like to suggest the River Watchers as a suitable name and identity for us all. The name

Skowhegan roughly translated by many is The Watching Place. It is a place traditionally rich in fish with falls and rapids providing native people good access to this critical food source with nets and spears. It is likely that by the uppermost eagle nest where the power lines cross the river, the stones laid across the upstream end of the lagoon which create a very shallow crossing to the island opposite the lagoon and the ancient 5000 year old village site in Starks is not a remnant of the logging era but rather an ancient stone weir, designed to trap migrating fish in the northern end of the lagoon.

Let me tell you about my personal journey to this suggestion of a deeper embrace of the ancient meaning of this region's identity. When I was a senior at Old Town High School in 1963, we were the Old Town Indians. My tall twin brother, Howard, was the basketball team captain. He dated the cheerleader captain, our classmate, Judy Hill. I dated a short pretty blond sophomore cheerleader named Gail Collins. The cheerleaders wore soft white deerskin moccasins made on Indian Island. They sometimes wore headbands with feathers and Native American motifs on their dresses. Before each basketball game, to the sound of a slow beat bass drum, (was it Steve Mitchell from Indian Island who played the big drum?) the cheerleaders would bless the home team basket with a peace pipe ceremony. We were proud to be the Old Town Indians and proud of "our" Indian heritage. Our yearbook was called the Sachem. On its cover was the image of a handsome Native American man dressed in moccasins and a loincloth and a full eagle feather headdress, carrying a Plains Indian ceremonial pipe in his right hand and arm as he raised his left hand high in the greeting of peace. Each morning, over the loudspeaker in the principal's office, I led the school in the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer. Jerry Goldsmith, the third generation Jewish descendant of the Russian immigrant clothier Goldsmiths, was one of my best friends. We never saw or discussed the irony or legitimacy of our different faith traditions and my daily reading of the Lord's Prayer in school.

Teresa Sappier from Indian Island, was a member of my class. When in junior high school, a mile or so away from the new senior high school, we walked every day to the high school because this school offered a hot lunch from their cafeteria and the junior high had none. On some slippery winter days, the more daring amongst us would jump behind slowly moving passing cars and crouch low behind the rear bumper and grab on to ski undetected on our feet behind the car. I was not so brave or foolish to try that trick, but I did throw a lot of snowballs. One day on our walk back from lunch, I threw a long fly snowball at Teresa Sappier and her friend Mary Ketchum and hit one of them in the face. Both of them charged after me and ran me down and pinned my face in the snow and gave me a good lesson in justice and humility. Over the long years after that incident and after our graduation, Theresa and I became good friends, especially because of her gift of singing and her publication, with Tribe's permission, of a series of traditional Penobscot songs that her mother had taught her when she was very young. At that age, Theresa had no use for the songs and ignored them, but as she matured and as the Penobscot language became threatened, Theresa remembered that she had the songs inside her skull and she chose to share them, accompanied by her small drum, with her people and the world. My most memorable class reunion was one in which Theresa came and sang one of her Penobscot songs, perhaps a blessing song, for the rest of our class.

When I bought my farm home on the Kennebec river about forty five years ago, I was unaware of the meaning and history of the road named after Father Sebastian Rasle, the French Jesuit priest who lived with the Norridgewock's for over thirty years until the fateful day in August of 1724 when Rasle and the majority of the villagers were massacred by British troops. For five thousand years, the Norridgewock's had lived on the Starks side of the river on the Western flood plain

where the Sandy enters the Kennebec. Rasle moved them across the River to the French side of the river to build the historic settlement and chapel which were destroyed in the British raid of 1724. My friend, Kerry Hardy, is a self taught linguist and author of the wonderful book, "Notes on a Lost Flute: a Field Guide to the Wabanaki," says that Norridgewock translates into the words, "the place where the river flows in two directions." Indeed, when one stands at the site of the Old Village, the Sandy River cannot simply merge with the strong post rapids downstream current of the Kennebec and the Sandy River waters flow up river on the West side of the river while the main current flows down the East side of the river until they both gradually merge. I like Kerry's translation best of all that I have studied over the years that I have lived on this ancient and sacred ground. Watching the land with attention, gifts have often come to me. My first grandchild, Thalia, was born in an apartment above our back ell. I went out doors to give thanks on the morning after and found on the ground next to a native tobacco plant that I was growing for traditional give away offerings, a white quartz knapped hand knife. Many years ago, around Easter, while walking the floodplain behind my house with my daughter Anna, I told her to keep her eyes open for any rocks because there are almost no rocks in the sandy loam soil here. I said that any rock she saw might be a tool of the ancient peoples who had lived here before us. Along the far edge of the field the riverbank is high and every fifty yards or so, there is a beaver slide where the water edge bank nesting beavers come up to raid the summer cornfields and slide back down into the water. Halfway down one waterslide, I saw a small dark layer of exposed charcoal and a rock and went racing ahead of Anna to see what it was. Constant flooding and erosion had slowly pulled the edge of the field into the river and the old campsite of some native person or persons, exposed by the beavers, gave us, just before the next flood washed it away, a wonderful hand knife made of Mount Kineo flint. I held the stone for many days and nights and asked dreamers what they could tell me about the knife and a very gifted lady friend of mine said that the knife had belonged to a young Native American boy, a Norridgewock, and that this knife had been very special to him. To help anchor my son Scott to the river and this land, I gave the stone knife to him.

A Passamaquoddy elder and seer used to visit us in our home many years ago. We walked the land together and he described how he could feel the grip of the diseases that had fallen on so many Native people when the first European sailors landed on the New England coasts bringing with them the diseases to which the Native people had no resistance. The idea that approximately 90 percent of the original populations of coastal New England died of these diseases is almost unimaginable to us today. All of this occurred before European vs Native American warfare broke out for several decades in this land and along this river all the way to the ocean and up and down the coast as Native people tried to hold on to the traditional lands and seasonal pathways and Europeans tried to settle on the same land. Our Passamaquoddy friend stunned me when he said that when the violent raid in August of 1724 occurred just up the river, the wife and daughter were dragged bound across this very land after Bomazee was shot fleeing across the river at their fishing camp just below our home. One party of British soldiers came up the river and surprised Bomazee and his family at their camp. Another party marched overland from what is now Skowhegan avoiding the pronounced dogleg turn the river takes at the bridges in Norridgewock. The two parties of soldiers united somewhere just beyond my home site and descended on the undefended village for their annihilating raid.

The white moccasins and feathered head bands of our non-native high school girl friends Gail and Judy, along with the borrowed sacred Plains Indian basket ball hoop pre game blessing ceremony, suddenly took on a deeper and more troubling meaning for me. I remembered that my

wonderful father bought two pairs of moccasins every year for his two sisters in Cranston, Rhode Island. The moccasins were white and slightly beaded and soft and beautiful. When our family first moved to Stillwater, a part of Old Town, there was no bridge to Indian Island. There was only a ferry. I believe my mother's ancient cousin, Ada Runyon, from New York City once rode the ferry to Indian Island to buy special handmade basket gifts from Chief Poolar's tipi or directly from basket makers on the island. Sometime when I was just a boy, my father visited a basket maker on the Island and had a sturdy ash pack basket made, better than any sold today at L.L. Beans. When Howie and I were teenagers and active in the Boy Scouts, my dad took us across the new bridge and the same man took measures of us and produced two more magnificent brown ash pack baskets for us to own. My fifty five year old basket, one of the finest I have ever seen, is still in perfect condition after a half century of use. My mother befriended a gifted basket maker on the island named Pauline Shay and purchased some of her baskets. Late in Pauline's life I was able to purchase an exquisite sewing basket from Pauline or her family.

During graduation week at Old Town School I read my contest-winning essay, "Old Town My City," to the public and my class. There was no mention of Native Americans in my essay, no Penobscot baskets, no songs, no canoes, and no early history. In a junior English class, our teacher had us read the book, "Cry the Beloved Country," about apartheid in South Africa. This was the only moment we came close to discussing racism in our school. We had no African-American classmates. We had precious few Native American classmates and even fewer Jewish classmates and at least one closeted homosexual classmate. We lived in a dream, a real dream, but nonetheless a dream.

My children attended the public schools in Norridgewock and Skowhegan, and without question we embraced, as I had earlier embraced in Old town, the name Skowhegan Indians. We were the Skowhegan Indians. Skowhegan cheerleaders did not wear moccasins or headbands or feathers. They did not do any ceremonies with the sacred pipe, but we were all proud, without question, to be Indians, even though we were not. I, at least, am not a Native American, although my deepest connections with Spirit has come through encounters with a wide variety of Native Americans and their rich and varied spiritual traditions. The first Barden, I am told, landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1636 as an indentured servant and emerged seven years later as a free man and a trained mason. He would likely have met the Wampanoag Indians who survived in the Plymouth area. A year or two ago I was privileged to build a traditional brick bake oven at Plimoth Plantation and to walk the same sands that my first American ancestor might have walked on and to talk to survivors of the Wampanoag people who he might have met. I have built and participated in many sweat lodges, done a vision quest, carved my own sacred pipe, danced in traditional sacred dances and have created a special relationship with sacred rocks to learn and relate to Spirit that is within and all around us. A Lakota family taught me to give thanks to "All my Relations," not only my friends and relatives, and God or Great Spirit, but also to the land, and the river and the "creepy crawlers," "the finned ones," "the winged ones." "the four leggeds" and the silent keepers of this land. My own blond and red headed children do, however, have a bit of Maine Native American Blood on their mother's side. Many residents of the Skowhegan area may have a similar story. I was told that their mother's grandfather or great grandfather married a Native American woman but this connection was kept largely silent and secret.

When I came to this land that I live on, I learned to pray to the land. Neither my early church upbringing nor my days in Divinity school nor my ordination as an Episcopal priest had taught me to pray to the land, but I deeply wanted to have Lady Slippers to grow on the land. I looked and looked with no luck for a Lady Slipper. Finally one Spring along the far edge of the flood

plain under a great pine near the aforementioned beaver slides, I found a single Lady Slipper in bloom and my heart was filled with joy. I started calling to the Lady Slippers asking them to come closer to the house and slowly, year after year, the Lady Slippers started appearing in the little forest next to my home and across the road under the pines next to the rail road tracks just beyond home. Perhaps they had always been there, but I knew something special was happening when I created a pine needle labyrinth in a cathedral stand of pines two hundred yards away from my home. There were no Lady Slippers in the grove but each year as I restored the pine needle circular windrows and walked the labyrinth, more and more Lady Slippers emerged in the woods around the pine grove and one Spring I knew the Lady Slippers were listening when I found in full bloom, five Lady Slippers at the entrance to the labyrinth at circle three. Each year now, the Lady Slippers come up in this spot in the labyrinth welcoming me and others home. This ancient storied land, on which I will only dwell one lifetime, is full of history, of tragedy, and beauty and harmony and peace. The fields are full today of uncut milkweed calling out for the endangered Monarch Butterflies to return. I won't bush hog the fields now until the Milkweed season is over. The honeybees are gathering the Milkweed pollen and come in all day long by my garden to deposit their golden treasures in the hives.

This year, 2015, on the day before the Fourth of July, on a nationally syndicated radio program, a wonderful female author of a new book called, "Our Declaration of Independence." read the Declaration from beginning to end. I, who as a Boy Scout, visited Philadelphia and Independence Hall and who purchased there my own replica of this document, but had never read it all the way through, heard the following sentence about the King of England from whom the colonies were declaring their independence: "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants and our frontiers the merciless Indians, savages whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." Here in our founding document of independence, written 53 years after the massacre of the Native people of Norridgewock, was the voiced consensus reality belief, that the land belonged to us the European invaders, and that the Native people would be conveniently dismissed without any rights of their own as "merciless Indian savages."

While reading Bruce Bourque's book on Maine's Native history called "10,000 Years in Maine," in which he documents the post glacial reoccupation of Maine by humans, I discovered a small black and white photograph of a document published as a broadsheet in Boston in August of 1724 regarding the Norridgewock massacre. It was titled. "The Rebels' Reward." An original copy of this broadsheet has been preserved at the Huntington Library in California. With the help of a strong magnifying glass, I started to read a bit of the document and realized that the history of the massacre had been written as a celebratory poem and that Native people of Norridgewock were the "Rebels" and the British soldiers (we Europeans were all British subjects then) had given the rebels their due "reward." I worked for several years to make contact with the Huntington Library and was unsuccessful in securing a museum quality reproduction of the document until I was able to get my sister, who lives in North L.A., to intercede on my behalf with a personal visit to the library. After many years of effort, the first six copies arrived in color, with the wood cut soldiers discharging their rifles at the unarmed villagers who we are told by some traditions were in prayer in the chapel with Father Rasle when the attack began. I have given a copies to Barry Dana, and to the History House, and to the Norridgewock Historical Society and a few other folks and will give a copy from the second batch ordered to the State Library and Museum. It is an impressive document because it tells from first hand accounts, of the events of the time but it also tells us who we as a fledging country of European immigrants

thought we were then and who the “savages” were, and it sheds light on who we think we are today. Who were these people? For the British and settlers along the length of the Kennebec and along the coast of Maine, Father Rasle was a troublemaker. He was a very well educated French born Jesuit priest with a keen interest in serving his church and his God and his Native flock of people of Norridgewock. He also clearly served France’s political interests who claimed this land for the French, but he is best remembered as the author of an Abenaki dictionary and as a saint and a martyr.

Many years ago, I led my family of two kids and a young friend of ours and a wife and two adult friends in three canoes in a trip down the Kennebec River from our back yard to the coast of Maine. I wanted my children to experience the annual summer migration that the majority of the Native people of Norridgewock took every year after planting their crops. If the woodchucks and raccoons and beaver and deer of today are any indication of the animals who lived here nearly three centuries ago, then surely some folks stayed behind to tend and protect the planted fields, but the many, including the “Black Robe,” canoed and portaged to the ocean where clams and oysters and lobsters and fish and seaweed and gatherings and parties would be plentiful. Along the way, white settlers laid claim to ancient land along their coastal route and conflict was perhaps inevitable. Fires and mayhem occurred as one culture slowly began to displace another. All across America, Native Americans were pushed, murdered, displaced, and disappeared in as many ways as possible, including the destruction of the Plains Indian buffalo herds, so that the entire sustenance of these people would be broken. Once the “merciless savages” were stripped of their land and their ceremonies and their beliefs and their hair and their languages, a process that continues today, then the dismantled cultures could be corralled and tamed and re-imagined and made more “civilized.” We as the dominant culture, could adopt an imagined portion of their history and include them in our school systems not as honored equals in our classes, but as names on our sweatshirts and as mascots on our football fields. We raised sacred pipes, about which we knew nothing, to our basketball hoops.

I once bought a sacred pipe, about which I knew nothing, from an antique dealer in a little run down shop in Farmington, Maine. I did not immediately buy it because it was powerful and beautiful and alien and expensive. Over the many days that I thought about the pipe, I finally realized that my job was to buy the pipe and return it to its home of origin and to a Native American medicine carrier. Then the money came quickly. The pipe was made of Catlinite or red pipestone and it dated, according to the seller that said a small slip of paper, now lost, found in the bowl had said, “received in a Shoshone Village 1870.” In the year and a half that I carried the pipe trying to bring it “Home,” I knew nothing about how to handle it as a sacred object or a living being. I carried it wherever I traveled and worked in the same red cloth that it was wrapped in when I bought it. I even had the opportunity to take it back to Pipestone, Minnesota, when I had a project to build in Rochester, Minnesota. There we met Lakota tribal members who taught me how to properly handle the pipe and to cleanse with sage and who assured me that the pipe was authentic and that I would one day be able return it to its rightful home. I dreamed with the pipe. I suppose you could say that I talked to the pipe. I made a simple request, repeated a thousand time, “where are you supposed to go?” One day, I received a call from a woman in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The woman wanted me to come and build her a masonry heater. I said that I could come on one condition, that is, that she would agree to help me make a connection with traditional Shoshone people who I knew had a reservation a few hours away just over the continental divide. I took my daughter, Anna, with me, hoping that we would experience another part of our amazing country and get a glimpse of another older culture. Our material shipment was

delayed in Denver, so the three free days that I thought we would have at the end of our work, suddenly got turned upside down and within 24 hours of arriving in Wyoming, I was seated in a traditional sweat lodge on Shoshone land in Fort Washikie with a young traditional medicine carrier. At round three of the sweat lodge, a two foot snake came into the lodge and crossed over my feet and over the feet of the medicine carrier and back out under the edge of the lodge. At that point I passed him the ancient Shoshone pipe and said that “this pipe is for you.” Curiously his medicine bundle contained no sacred pipe.

The wounds of Columbus, of Norridgewock, of Wounded Knee and countless other places are very old and very deep and cannot be healed by a simplistic or romantic and naïve understanding of our always complex and tragic past. The wounds between cultures and races can only be healed with a great deal of patience and listening and tolerance and requests for forgiveness for the wrongs we have done to others in the past and that we do today wittingly or unwittingly. I guess this sounds like a bit from the prayer I used to read in the Principal’s office in Old Town doesn’t it? “Forgive us our trespasses.....that stuff.”

When I attended the presentation made by nine tribal members from Maine to the local school board committee, I was one of perhaps only fifty or so people who heard the stories and testimony that these folks shared. I believe that if every student and every citizen of the Skowhegan area School District had heard these words spoken in at least four languages, the question of maintaining the name “Skowhegan Indians” would have been resolved to everyone’s tearful satisfaction. Skowhegan area people do not own the rights to the Indian name. The Native people, including some descendants of the Norridgewock massacre survivors, want to be seen as our equals and as our teachers and as the sharers of a long mutual heritage. The struggle to let go of the idea of the “Skowhegan Indians” and to embrace another healthier and more democratic version and name will be a challenging struggle but I am confident that over time we will find another name that we can all be proud of.

In my lifetime I want to see the Kennebec River restored to allow native salmon to swim all the way up the river to their ancient spawning grounds and to pass by the old village site where the Sandy river comes in. I want to see the river watched and kept alive and healthy and a source of food and beauty and recreation and health for us all. Skowhegan, the Watching Place. Let the eagles show us the way.

Albie Barden
Fr. Rasle Road
Norridgewock, Maine
November 2015

Norridgewock Historic Society
Post Office Box 903
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Next Meeting: June 22 - Steve Pinkham, Tales of the Maine Woods