Indigenous History Bits and Pieces

Note: The final book was about half the size of the original version, which means that much text was removed in order to keep the story focused. In this document, regarding Indigenous history, the author has accumulated many of the parts that were edited out and assembled them here. They are in no particular order, there is some duplication of topic, and no serious editing has been done on this material. It is rough, but may be useful in elaborating on some of the topics encountered while researching the Indigenous history component of the Speedy story. Items are separated from each by three dots.

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The Mississauga people had been persistently peaceful in the previous decade as the new town of York was carved out of their land and settlers came to take up land along the lakeshore. The Mississauga families in the area of York would gradually move north to avoid contact with the strange newcomers. The impact of settlement was less severe in the area south of Lake Scugog than at York, but still serious. The Mississauga people of the Muskrat totem frequented this area,[1] wintering to the north and then camping at the shore of Lake Ontario in the spring for the hunting and fishing season. Later in the summer they would camp in the northern reaches of Lake Scugog and spend several weeks harvesting the extensive wild rice that covered the shallow shoreline.

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While most settlers had been co-operative, there were instances where settlers threatened the Mississauga people when they occupied their traditional camp sites near the lakeshore. They had been camping here for generations, long before the Europeans came. The Indigenous people across Upper Canada complaining about the rough treatment they experienced. Peter S. Schmalz includes an example in The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario, “The Ojibwa were misled by Indian agents and by early Loyalist pioneers, as Quinipeno, a Mississauga chief, complained: ‘Colonel Butler told us the Farmers would help us, but instead of doing so when we encamp on the Land they drove us off and shoot our dogs and never give us any assistance as was promised to our old Chiefs. Father - The Farmers call us Dogs and threaten to shoot us in the same manner when we go on their land.”[2]

The idea of private property was foreign to the Mississauga mindset. It was completely contrary to their traditional notion of shared stewardship of all the natural resources in the land, sky and water. They had developed a system of governance that allowed agreements to be struck between different groups for use of certain areas of land for hunting and fishing, but with some kind of compensation and reciprocation. These could be complex agreements but they were binding on all parties.

This approach was also applied to more serious crimes that resulted in injury or death. In the early 1770s, David Ramsay had murdered several Ojibwa people at Turkey Point, but this long, drawn-out episode would demonstrate how difficult it would be to charge a white man with murdering an Indigenous person. The English authorities were confused when the Ojibwa chiefs did not ask for capital punishment for Ramsay. “Why was the death sentence not insisted upon by the Southern Ojibwa? Peter Jones has already provided us with one reason - it was Ojibwa tradition to atone for a death by paying the relatives in goods and rum.”[3]

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The Mississauga people did not have a written language as the English define it. Their language was Algonquian, which reflected their heritage, but theirs was largely a verbal society, with traditions and history passed along between the generations in stories and ceremonies. However, there was a very powerful tool for documenting agreements and celebrating important events. Wampum was a method of communication as well as an art form. The extensive beadwork and the use of colours produced stylish and detailed belts and crests that were worn proudly by the chiefs. Each told a story and made a statement. Often, the information on a wampum belt represented a serious commitment between groups, what we would call a treaty.

In times of poor relations, a wampum belt could act as an effective symbol of mutual respect. Sir William Johnson had presented a wampum belt to a delegation of Ojibway from the Lake Superior area after the end of the Pontiac wars. "The belt was composed of white and blue beads, denoting purity and the clear blue sky, and this act settled the foundation of a lasting good-will, and was the commencement of an active communication between the British and Ojibways of Lake Superior."[4]

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Rev. Peter Jones described a general council meeting in History of the Ojibwa Indians, "The head chief of the tribe in whose territory the council is convened, generally takes the lead. The first thing done is to kindle the council fire. This is called the uncovering of the slumbering embers of former councils, and the closing of a council is called the covering of the council fire. From this fire they light their pipes. The council then proceed to the ceremony of smoking the pipe of peace, from which each Indian present takes a few whiffs. This is done in token of their friendship and good-will to all parties. The pipe of peace is generally decorated with coloured feathers, strings of wampum, and ribbons."[5]

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More specifically, the word "ceded" was central to the function of the treaty. This was an English word based on the idea of private property which did not exist in Indigenous cultures. The word had no equal in the Anishinabe language spoken by the Mississauga people. "There was nothing in the Mississaugas' traditions or experience that enabled them even to imagine the private ownership of land and water by one person. Although a family could use a certain area as its hunting and trapping ground, that land still belonged to every other band member, as much as to the supernatural beings and the natural world (plants, birds, animals)."[6] Unfortunately for the Mississauga people, and many other Indigenous groups at this time and later, these misunderstandings would always be resolved in favour of the English.

This kind of frustration was common for the Indigenous people of Upper Canada at this time. An example comes from the words of a Mohawk chief named Wabenip, in April 1798, when a meeting took place between several chiefs, some traders and Joseph Brant, leader of the Mohawks at the western end of Lake Ontario. The chief made the unusual request that this speech be written down and kept as a record of the meeting. He said "Brother, we are told that the white people do not fully understand our customs and Speeches by a Belt—We therefore now wish that this Speech may be written for us to sign, that you may shew them that these are our wishes and intentions".[7]

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To them, the English justice system seemed bizarre and evil. They felt hanging was simply wrong. Edwin Guillet informs us about the justice system of the time "The punishments of the time were, as in Europe, very severe. The death penalty was in force for a large number of crimes, including forgery and counterfeiting. In 1800 a man was executed in York for forging a note, and it is recorded that "with unparalleled fortitude he approached the place of execution! and to the last appeared much resigned to his unhappy fate". Two years earlier, in November, 1798, a man was sentenced to be burned in the hand for grand larceny, the law as to branding being part of the English criminal code adopted in Upper Canada on the formation of the province. Whipping was a common punishment for petty larceny, while in August, 1801, a thief was banished from Upper Canada for seven years."[8]

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They had also seen very clearly that justice was available if you were English but not if you were part of the Indigenous community. The failure of the authorities to track down the killer of Whistling Duck was clear enough to them. In the case of Whistling Duck, Chief Wabakeschoe had explained the situation to Charles Annis and Benjamin Wilson. All the British authorities in York needed to do was offer to sit down and discuss some kind of compensation for the death of Whistling Duck. Given a fair chance, they felt that some kind of arrangement might be worked out. However, this suggestion generated no response from York which was interpreted by Whistling Duck's family as a sign of disrespect. They won't even talk about it. How can you deal with these people?

Their communities were being ravaged by the twin devils of small pox and rum, resulting in disruption, poverty and suffering. Yes, their natural food sources were still available to them around Lake Scugog, but the chief was fearful that if the English wished, they could force his people farther north, away from their familiar land and home. In effect, they must be tolerant of these newcomers, no matter how they suffered, because their options were very limited and shrinking.

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A biography of Joseph Brant states "Through him the Mohawks therefore requested of Haldimand a new grant closer to the traditional Six Nations homeland. In the autumn of 1784, they received a huge tract along the Grand River (Ont.), which the Mississauga Ojibwas had relinquished in May, and, with the exception of the Fort Hunter Mohawks under John Deserontyon who preferred to settle at the Bay of Quinte, they established themselves on this land. A census made in 1785 shows more than 400 Mohawks, several hundred Cayugas and Onondagas, and smaller groups of Senecas, Tuscaroras, Delawares, Nanticokes, Tutelos, Creeks, and Cherokees to a total of 1,843."[9]

Joseph Brant was a dynamic and forceful leader who left no stone unturned in his efforts to provide the best supplies and food that he could for his people. The British authorities were anxious to keep Brant and his people happy because they might be needed as allies in the next confrontation with the upstart Americans to the south. Everyone believed that war was inevitable, it was just a matter of when it would break out and how it would happen. The British needed to make absolutely sure that the Mohawks would fight on their side, so a lot of diplomacy was required.

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When a death occurred in an English province, the justice system was intent on finding the person responsible and punishing them. Often, at this time, the result would be hanging. An elaborate legal system had evolved over centuries, part of British Common Law, which supported the process of determining guilt and exacting punishment. This was thought right and proper by all good English folk. In this context, the extraction of Ogetonicut from his home to be manacled and kept in a cold cell for four months was considered perfectly fine, as was the expected fate of the young man, hanging from a tree branch, miles away from his home. This was all thought the height of civilization in Upper Canada.

The Mississauga people did not agree. In fact, they were stunned and confused by the treatment they saw English people mete out to other English people. They could understand torturing or killing a prisoner taken in battle, but deliberately killing a member of your own group was simply immoral. It was also very bad in practical terms. The Mississauga people had experienced such a decrease in population due to disease and the disruption of the settlers, that every member of the community counted and should be preserved, just as a matter of need. Every young warrior was needed to hunt in order to feed the rest and, if they ever had to fight, they needed every young man available to present a formidable force. It was deemed against the public good for the community to deliberately kill one of their own.

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The Mississauga had no desire or need to cut down healthy trees. They might gather dried brush and cut a few smaller trees to make their homes or fishing weirs, but the practice of cutting down fully grown trees and burning the wood in huge fires right where they fell, seemed so senseless. Donald B. Smith expressed this in his ground-breaking book Sacred Feathers, which was a biography of Rev. Peter Jones published in 1987. "The Mississauga elders, for instance, avoided cutting down living trees to save them from pain. When green trees were cut, the elders told Sacred Feathers, you could hear them wailing from the ax's blows."[10]

More broadly, they believed the world around them was controlled by spirits that would respond to demonstrations of gratitude by the people. Of course, they " … most revered those forces believed to have the greatest power, such as the sun and the moon. Every evening at sunset the old men thanked the sun for the blessing of heat and light during the day. Every morning at the sun's rising they chanted hymns of praise to welcome its return."[11]

In practical terms, they knew very well that the forest was critically important in their daily lives. For as long as their people had roamed this land, the forest provided a home for the deer, moose and bear that were important food sources for the people. Even now, they were beginning to see the migration of the larger animals farther north, away from the settlers and the cleared areas. As a result, the hunters had to go farther to find the food they needed for their families.

George Copway would publish his memoirs in 1847 and become Canada's first literary celebrity, as he conducted speaking tours across the Unites States. His Ojibway name was KAH-GE-GA-GAH-BOWH, which was proudly displayed as part of the title of his memoirs. In Copway's work, emotion and hyperbole are mixed with clear descriptions of his life and the traditions of his people. Although Copway ran into financial trouble, his writings provide a compelling testimony to his Indigenous roots.

There is no doubt where his heart belonged. "I was born in nature's wide domain! The trees were all that sheltered my infant limbs—the blue heavens all that covered me. I am one of nature's children; I have always admired her; she shall be my glory; her features—her robes, and the wreath about her brow—the seasons—her stately oaks, and the evergreen—her hair—ringlets over the earth, all contribute to my enduring love of her; and wherever I see her, emotions of pleasure roll in my breast, and swell and burst like waves on the shores of the ocean, in prayer and praise to Him, who has placed me in her hand. It is thought great to be born in palaces, surrounded with wealth—but to be born in nature's wide domain is greater still!"[12]

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The Mississauga people had also learned that the settlers were cutting and burning the trees because they wanted to plant wheat, which would become an integral part of their diet. Ostensibly, this was done by each settler in order to feed their families. However, wheat would soon become a commodity that could be traded for other necessities, or even bring in some hard cash. The trees were being cut down so the newcomers could establish their own economy and way of life. It did not seem right to the Mississauga people. In their world, each living thing had a spirit, and all the living things lived in cooperation and harmony with each other. They would kill a dear, moose or bear to keep their families from starving through the long winter but they always perform a traditional ritual as an offering of thanks for the benefit the animal brought to them. The English held these notions in contempt.

The young men that Ogetonicut had grown up with could not accept this kind of wonton destruction of their world. Their ancestors had survived in this natural world for many generations and now these English were coming in and taking over the land, indiscriminately destroying the trees and the animals. Many changes were happening at the same time, all portending destruction of a way of life. This young Mississauga man, along with his chief and most of the family group, felt the pressure of the changes imposed by the English, but were powerless to oppose it.

Ogetonicut, who died fourteen years before George Copway was born, would not have the power of expression of later generations, but, if he could have read these words, he may have recognized the ideas that permeated the hearts and minds of his own people. For the Mississauga people, in 1804, their closeness to the land, including the trees and the living beings of their homeland, were not a cliché, or just cute stories to tell your kids. It was their way of thinking and feeling. It was their way of life.

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It was in these situations that the benefit of trading with the Mississauga people came into focus for young settlers. While the Mississauga were anxious to trade their furs for tools, kettles, boots and cooking utensils, the settlers learned to trade with the Mississauga people for rugged and functional clothing made of animal skins to help them survive in this land.

William Canniff tells us how the Indigenous people around Kingston assisted the people of the town and settlers in the area with regard to making clothing from deer skins "The Indians, who as a general thing were friendly and kind, when they visited the settlement, gave to the settlors the idea of manufacturing garments out of deer skin. They, now and

then exchanged skins for articles, the settlers could part with, and taught them how to prepare the fresh pelt so as to make it pliable. The process consisted in removing the hair and then working the hide by hand with the brains of some animal, until it was soft and white. Trousers made of this material were not only comfortable for winter, but very durable."[13]

A review of the clothing that young men, especially those employed in the fur trade, were wearing in the winter told the story. They might have a heavy woolen shirt along with boots and socks from the stores in York, but they also had deerskin trousers, leggings and undershirts. It wasn't just the men, either. In the early years of the French colony in Quebec, "The French women's adoption of the short skirt that Native women wore was one that scandalized many a clerical visitor from France."[14] Short skirts were not in fashion in the settler community a century and a half later, but more practical items remained popular.

Clothing made of deerskin, in particular, proved to be warm in the coldest of weather and helped dissipate perspiration, so were ideal garments for heavy work in the bush. In every cabin or canoe, there would also be a beaver skin cloak or maybe even a bearskin robe, which could keep a whole family warm in the wildest winter storm. Many men also donned belts and scarfs with beaded designs such as you might see in a wampum belt. Products from both cultures would share in the economy of the young colony for decades to come.

Notes

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4. Warren, William W., History of the Ojibway People, Second Edition, Minnesota Historical Society Press. Kindle Edition, location 3783 of 7168.
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11. Ibid. Page 12.
12. Copway, George, The Life, History, and Travels of KAH-GE-GA-GAH-BOWH (George Copway), printed by Weed and Parsons, Albany, 1847, PDF downloaded from Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lifehistoryandt00copwgoog/page/n9.
13. Canniff, William, History of the Settlement of Upper Canada (Ontario), Dudley Burns, Printers, Victoria Hall, Toronto, 1869, Chapter XX, Clothing–Furniture–Domestic and Farming Implements, page 212, PDF downloaded from Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/cihm_00468/page/n1.
14. Miller, J. R., Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens, A History of Native-Newcomer Relations in Canada, Fourth Edition, University of Toronto Press, 2018, Chapter Three, Commercial Partnership and Mutual Benefit, page 45.