The Abenaki Struggle

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**IDENTITY CRISIS**

The Abenaki have lost much that was theirs 200 years ago. Not just things like traditional fishing and hunting sites, but intangibles. Most tragically, they nearly lost their identity.

Although historians now agree that there was a nearly continuous habitation of Vermont by ancestors of today's Abenaki Indians, the Vermont Atlas and Gazetteer, published in 1974, states: "Prior to the coming of the White Man, the present state of Vermont was largely an uninhabited area. Indian artifacts are rare and a dispersed hunting ground claimed by Abenaki tribes of Indians, who resided in that part of Canada, and the powerful Iroquois Confederation, whose principal villages were in what is now New York State."

It is "The Original Vermonters," published by the University Press of New England, authors William A. Haviland and Marjorie W. Power, are mystified why so many writers continue to ignore the vast documentation about Vermont's earliest ancestors and period in making the Native American story "someone else's." They suggest that the Abenaki, part of the Algonquian family, were robbed of their farming, hunting, and fishing grounds by disease and forest into the social underdog. They say again against Abenaki villages to everyone but themselves and language. Thus, the Abenaki adapted their identity for survival, to avoid discrimination or worse. They became a disguised, class, of the elite and, in the intervening years, their sense of nationhood has been nearly eliminated. They became the poorest Vermonters. Today, they lack the state's highest employment, teenage pregnancy and a school dropout rate.

These sad statistics have improved somewhat through the efforts of the Abenaki Self-Help Association and the Abenaki Tribal Council, which was founded in 1972. A new state office is 200 Abenaki in the Beaman High School in the Abenaki community, and also in St. Johnsbury, Addison, Waterbury, Hyde Park, Eades, and other northern Vermont Abenaki communities.

But the battle for dignity and respect is far from won. Although the Abenaki Indians of Vermont are working desperately to revitalize their heritage before it is too late, there is still great apathy and disillusionment.

The worst loss for any people would be that of their sense of self and this nearly happened to them. They have no written history prior to 1760 when the British took over their land and the kind of history that is written by others is inauthentic. Among their own people, many of those who knew the oral traditions have died.

Had it not been for the spirit of surge they caught from the Native American pride and activism movements that swept the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the few Abenaki who thought it important to hold on to their culture might not have succeeded.

To further their cause, where name is Leonard Lampman, says the older generation goes west in search of other opportunities for the next generations, develop cultural and historical awareness among their people, and increase self-sufficiency of the tribe. Abenaki leaders see federal tribal recognition as the key element to achieving self-sufficiency, and they will be applying to the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs for formal recognition next month.

Recognition would give the Abenaki the legal right to apply for land for a base reservation in the community, administration offices, schools, and facilities. It would give them the right to appeal decisions of the fishing and hunting rights.

The first thing Lampman wants is the federal approval process to remove the state from the offer.'We want the state to be removed,' he says. "But they won't work."

They also want the federal recognition in the old depot in the Abenaki Self-Help Association headquarters, a site of low-cutting rooms in which wintering skills and crafts are being taught and young Abenaki mothers are counseled in how to be better parents. They also distribute federal books and have a gun and careful understanding.

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**COMMUNITY LIFE**

Driving into Swanton in the evening when the snow is deep and new, it looks like a picture-postcard community. The means that snow on the road in the downtown area and along the train storage piers and mighty view it in any way new England country.

But head into the back Bay section of town, the side streets and you will find the Abenaki homes. A mother of the community points them out: the homes are worn out, soda cans plastic over the windows, peeling paint.

Inside the homes, says one social worker who works with the Abenaki, there is a common cultural bond. There are problems of poverty, depression, problems that are common to other members of the community and other communities, but more prevalent among the Abenaki.

However, she says things are improving. Yes, she says, the Abenaki Self-Help Association is making a difference.

There are, of course, wholesome Abenaki families where a sense of pride is already prevalent. One couple moved to the Adirondacks from Vermont to join the Self-Help Association. Although she is single parent, she manages to keep her home neat, as a sign to educate her young daughter about the Abenaki heritage.

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**CHIEF BLACKIE**

Blackie sits by a desk next to a wood-burning stove smoking cigarettes after cigarette and, occasionally, very occasionally, rewards a visitor with an answer to a question. Like his ancestors, he seems to have an inherent luster of smile and a