The Abenaki Struggle

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The Abenaki children, however, learned nothing of this people who lived in tune with nature, whose god transformed land into rivers and lakes, whose people believed and acted on their beliefs.

Up until the late 1970s, history books used the stereotype in the local schools to describe the Abenaki as "bloodthirsty savages who killed all the white people in Swanton." Nothing of their history was detailed and mentions of their remains on colonial villages, although differing events from the French and Abenaki version, further supported the stereotype.

In the mid-1970s when parents complained, the local school board seemed to acquiesce and agree to the offending paragraphs. However, Abenaki children were taken out of their classes, sent to the library with history books, and paper and glue and told to cover over the section they didn't like.

Unfortunately, the parents did not like the school board's action. At first there was added violence, but out of this came a program to make the schools more acceptable to the Abenaki people.

In the office of the Abenaki Education Program, Jeff Beery, Indian education project director for the Franklin-Woodward Supervisory Union, relates the programs that have been initiated in recent years to effect changes as well as the high dropout rate of Abenaki children in St. Albans, Swanton, Highgate, Franklin and Sheldon schools. Abenaki children represented 20 percent of the student body but less than 5 percent of the graduates. As a result of the program, a survey several years ago showed that the program was successful; the drop-out rate has fallen to almost 2 percent.

Under Title IV of the Indian Education Act, the supervisory union received a grant to improve achievement, reduce the drop-out rate and develop cultural awareness. When the program began eight years ago, the retention rate for Abenaki children increased from a high of less than 25 percent. This year, Beery predicts 100 percent promotion.

One reason, he says, is the home-tutoring program. A visit to one section showed Indians Amy St. Fiance, who has learning disabilities, was being tutored by Lynn Flatter, who has worked in the program since 1980.