

Long before there was Vermont ...

Settlers' arrival spelled doom for Abenakis

By Patricia Haller
Free Press Correspondent

Jeanne Brink of Barre carries her family tradition in her hands and in her head.

As her fingers weave ash splint and sweetgrass into baskets, they remember the generations of Abenaki basket-makers who lived in Vermont before the first European settlers came. They remember the Indians who taught the whites how to make snowshoes and how to get sugar from maple trees. And they remember her ancestors, who fought to keep their land or feared it to the settlers but never got it back.

As Brink's basket takes shape in her hands, in her head she hears her grandmother's voice passing on the stories of her family. She hears of Rogers' Raid on her ancestors' village, when many of her people were killed. She hears of her own great-grandfather making baskets to sell to tourists on Thompson's Point in Charlotte. And she hears the voice of Vermont, the Abenaki homeland.

"In making baskets, there's some connection to mother earth," said Brink, 46, a resident of Barre. "There's something calming that comes through the sweetgrass and the splint."

Unlike European Americans, who have maintained genealogi-

cal charts or usually can reconstruct their family tree by researching birth, marriage and death certificates, Brink's family history has been passed down orally, generation to generation.

Many of those stories have been lost, because, like many Abenakis, Brink's family merged with white culture. Her grandmother, Elvina Obomsawin, married an Irishman and spoke English with her children. Brink's mother, Nettie Royce, never learned to make baskets or to speak Abenaki, and she and Brink both married European Americans.

"She wanted (her children) to be assimilated," Brink said of her grandmother. "She didn't try to hide the fact that she was Indian. She just wanted her children to be as American as possible. For her generation, that was very common. It was my generation that really began to look into" its Indian heritage, she said.

'People of the dawn'

According to archeological evidence, anthropological research and oral history, the Abenaki, or "People of the Dawn," lived, hunted and farmed the area east of Lake Champlain for more than 10,000 years before New Hampshire and New York began arguing over who owned it. When Columbus landed in the New World, there were more than 20 Indian villages in what is now



Jeanne Brink has learned to weave baskets in the tradition of her Abenaki ancestors.

Vermont. Brink's ancestors, the Obomsawin family, lived in the village of Missisquoi, located in what is now Swanton and Highgate. But as white settlers pushed north early in the 18th century, many Abenakis left their homes and moved inland or to other native settlements, such as the mission village of St. Francis in Odanak, Que., 50 miles northeast of Montreal near the confluence of the St. Lawrence and St. Francis rivers.

The settlers "brought a lot of diseases that the Abenakis had no immunity to, and it really decimated the population," Brink said. "The Abenakis would move to escape the plagues and things (the settlers) brought with them."

One plague the Europeans brought was war. From 1689 to 1763, the French and English fought a series of wars for control of North America, with both sides winning allies among the Native American tribes. The Al-

gonquin tribes, including the Abenakis, joined the French. The Iroquois, whose territory included the western shore of Lake Champlain, joined the British. In 1723, the Abenakis of Missisquoi and Odanak, led by an Indian named Greylock, began a series of raids against settlers at Rutland and Fort Dummer (Bratthorpe) and in Massachusetts. Repeated expeditions failed to stop Greylock, and the British eventually used for peace.

The peace was short-lived, however. English settlers continued to move into Abenaki lands, and the Abenaki continued to resist. Whenever their position became untenable, they would withdraw, but they always returned to their villages in Vermont.

Rogers' bloody raid

In 1759, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, supreme commander of the British forces, ordered Major Robert Rogers, an adventurer and scout

from New Hampshire, to attack and destroy the Indian village at Odanak. Rogers and his Rangers boarded whale boats at Crown Point in September and sailed up Lake Champlain to the Missisquoi Bay. From there, they marched northward to Odanak, where they slaughtered the villagers and burned their wooden houses.

Pursued by French soldiers and vengeful Indians, the Rangers split up into groups and retreated across Vermont. The few who made it to the Connecticut River became folk heroes. Rogers later claimed that he and his men had surprised and annihilated the village in a dawn raid, killing over 200 Indian men, women and children. The French, who arrived at the scene soon after the raid, said only about 30 Indians died. But there is no doubt that many died. Some were burned alive inside their homes.

Others, including Brink's ancestor, Simon Obomsawin, were killed as they tried to escape across the St. Francis River in boats.

Brink's grandmother, Elvina Obomsawin, told of her own great-grandmother — a child at the time — hiding in the woods

with most of her family to escape the massacre.

With peace in 1763, settlers poured into Vermont. As whites claimed more and more of the Indian lands, conflicts were common.

The Abenakis "did a lot of fighting to try to keep their lands," Brink said. "They tried to prevent the white people from coming in. They made a lot of raids and made the settlers very uncomfortable."

But the earliest written record Brink has of her family in Vermont is an unsuccessful attempt by the Indians to use European law to protect their lands peacefully.

In 1765, the Missisquoi Abenakis leased some of the village land to James Robertson for 91 years. The lease, which expired in 1856, was signed by Joseph Abomsawin. The family name, Brink explained, has many different spellings.

A culture vanishes

After the American Revolution, the Abenaki people officially disappeared from Vermont. It was as if the ancient culture had never existed. Census figures from 1790 to 1968 never included more than 60 Indians living in the state, and history books taught children that Vermont was uninhabited before the settlers came.

In reality, the Abenaki continued to live in Vermont. Some began to blend into white society, hiding their Indian heritage. Others, like Brink's family, continued to travel between Odanak and their ancestral lands. The Obomsawins followed the seasons, hunting, trapping and making baskets in Canada each winter, then returning to Vermont in the summer to sell their crafts to tourists.

"My great-grandfather, Simon Obomsawin, made baskets, canoes and snowshoes," Brink said. "Traditionally, it was the men that made the utility baskets — the big laundry baskets and the pack baskets. The women made the smaller baskets. (In Indian society), basket making was an important part of living. They were used to cook in, to carry water in, and to store supplies in."

(continued next page)

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