

WHERE HISTORIES MEET: INDIGENOUS AND SETTLER ENCOUNTERS IN THE TORONTO AREA

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Conclusion: Confronting History, (Re)making History

It's a powerful history that we have.

—Phil Monture, Six Nations of the Grand River¹

How is this history remembered by local First Nations? How is it used? What is its power? The Knowledge Keepers, community activists, and Elders of the five First Nations interviewed for the Changing the Narrative project provide crucial perspectives on their communities' histories and the shared history of Indigenous peoples and settlers in the Toronto area.

Elder Garry Sault of the Mississaugas of the Credit expressed a basic truth about the colonial encounter: "Our leaders did their best. But they [the settlers] wanted our land more than our friendship."²

Ben Cousineau of Chippewas of Rama eloquently summarized how dramatically things changed for Anishinaabek:

You were born in 1800. There is no Canada. You still have your original name. You're speaking just one language. You don't know much of church, and then, for someone born in Rama here, by the time it's 1840. You've seen yourself relocated to a reserve. The reserve's been taken away. You've now had religion forced on you. You've had Western education forced on you . . . You have an Indian agent running your life by the time you die. Your kids are being taken away to school. You've been told that being Anishinaabe, being Indian, is wrong your whole life. Your own parent never experienced any of that at all. It's mind-boggling how quickly it changed . . . And when you flip it to the pioneer perspective. That's the most exciting time in Canadian history. That's when they're opening everything up. The railway is here, everything's awesome. Screw England. We're going to this new, beautiful place where there is no coal, and

Elder and interviewee Margaret Sault. Sault is a long-time historical researcher for the Mississaugas of the Credit and, as of 2024, the organizer of thirteen Mississaugas of the Credit Historical Gatherings. Elders, scholars, community members, and others share and learn at these gatherings | Courtesy of Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation



we can breathe in the air. And they are excited for a new beginning, and they are given land in Muskoka, which they hold onto for a few generations, and now their grandkids live there and sell it for millions. But it's completely different histories, although at the same time period.³

Chief Kelly LaRocca of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island spoke of the need for people to understand “that when we talk about colonization, it’s such a huge word with all kinds of bits and pieces and parts with tons of baggage that they just yawn

and want to close their eyes. But it’s real. The colonial experience is real.”²⁴ Cousineau also emphasized that this history is not an abstraction:

Now we talk about them as if they are these events that happened to this nameless, faceless group of people. But there are people who lived through all these things . . . And there’s this underlying story of strength, I guess, where, despite everything, our ancestors—our grandmothers and grandfathers—survived all of that. And the result is that we still have



Elder and interviewee Sherry Lawson, Chippewas of Rama, storyteller and the author of several books | Photo by Victoria Freeman

some language, and we're trying to bring it back. We still have our culture. We still have a unique way of being . . . That doesn't happen without all that strength and stubbornness. It's not a completely defeatist history. There is resilience there.⁵



The late Elder and former Chief Andrew Big Canoe with his grandson | Photo by Kim Big Canoe, courtesy of Chippewas of Georgina Island

Mark Douglas also spoke of this resilience: “Wherever they went they adapted to where they were. And one of the worst places that that happened was Rama. We got moved over and over and over until . . . Okay. There’s this really bad

Lauri Hoeg
with the land
acknowledgement
plaque outside East
Gwillimbury Civic
Centre | Courtesy
Lauri Hoeg



piece of land. It's rocky, swampy and no good for anything. But yet, we settled. We adapted.”⁶

Matthew Stevens of Chippewas of Georgina Island reflected on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a time of profound loss: “It’s like the dark time. It’s like the last hundred years that we existed in, people were really coping with the traumas.” He noted the impact of trauma on the transmission of knowledge: “My grandma’s generation and my grandpa, they would have had access to stories that their parents and grandparents would have had. But there was an interruption of that. And I think that’s mainly because of the effects of how life was.”⁷

Former Mississauga Chief Carolyn King spoke of trying to educate Torontonians when

the Mississaugas were invited to help celebrate Toronto’s 150th birthday in 1984:

They asked our Chief of the day, which was Maurice LaForme . . . And he said, “No. We’ve got nothing to celebrate.” And they kept calling. So I said to Maurice, “They really want you to go, and they said you can say whatever you want.” And he said, “No. I’m not going. But it seems that you would like to go. You can go in my place” . . . So they call me up to speak after [Lieutenant-Governor] Jackman . . . And I just said, “I bring a message from the community and from the Chief. In war, there are winners and losers, and

there are survivors on each side. We are the survivors on the losing side. So as you celebrate, think of us.⁸

Although some things have improved since then, Stevens spoke of how the structural inequities created through the process of colonization are still present in his home community of Georgina Island: “So when I go home and I see the owner of DeBoers building a multi-million-dollar cottage . . . but we don’t have adequate housing for our own, it’s really . . . it’s hard not to be upset. It’s hard not to be angry with that.”⁹

According to Ben Cousineau, there are many opportunities for the recovery of Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices because of the interconnections between communities: “Whereas there are things that maybe we lost, another community held on to. And those things are exchanged in ceremony and gatherings and stuff. And then, collectively, we all learn from each other again. So I think everything is still there.”¹⁰ Albert Big Canoe echoed this: “Well, it’s certainly come back. We have the Powwows now. And they do ceremonies now. My sister herself, she was buried Native style. Because she was never a Christian.”¹¹

Rhonda Coppaway of Mississaugas of Scugog Island described a recent water ceremony held at Scugog to celebrate finally having clean drinking water: “So they had various drummers and dancers come in, and I’m going to get choked up here, and I don’t normally get choked up. But I watched our children in their regalia, and they were so proud, and they danced and they danced. And we never had that growing up. We were ashamed.

But I thought, here’s little Scugog taking that step forward once again. Our children are so proud, and they’re not going to know those things.”¹²

Vicki Snache of Chippewas of Rama commented, “We had society. We had governance. We had all of these ways of being that were so rich. And only now that we are able to start practising our culture and our language and all of that again, only now are we scratching the surface of that beautiful richness of who we once were.” She noted that even within a community, knowledge is being shared: “But each family is unique, and there are a lot of Knowledge Keepers in our community, various types of knowledge, whether it be medicine or ceremony or harvesting, fishing, crafting. Some family groups are known more for that than others.” She also spoke of the recovery of identity and family: “A lot of people have been displaced through various mechanisms throughout history, and now they are coming home and relearning who they are.”¹³

Kory Snache spoke of the challenges of bringing people together: “Within our communities, there are communities within communities. And I think that’s a big thing that even our own people need to own up to and outsiders need to understand, too, I guess. That there are traditionalists, there are Christians, there are harvesters, nonharvesters, people with their status coming back, there are all these different communities. So each one kind of had their say.”¹⁴

Phil Monture of Six Nations said that despite efforts to change historical gender relations, “The women are strong here. Very strong. We have the cultural side of it, and we’re blessed that we still

Artwork created by research committee member Lauri Hoeg for the land acknowledgement plaque outside East Gwillimbury Civic Centre | Courtesy of Lauri Hoeg



have the Longhouse in which the ceremonies are kept. That teaching continues. The respect that goes with it. The ceremonies. The language part of it is coming back. Many of our generations were forbidden from speaking it.”¹⁵

Lauri Hoeg of Georgina Island noted the persistence of the connection to the land, despite historical attempts to eradicate it: “The one thing that didn’t get lost, really, is your connection to the fish and the water and the land. We’ve been doing that forever, and we’re doing it now. We’re still fishing.”¹⁶

Others spoke of the persistence of Indigenous worldviews:

The worldview, it still exists today, in that we’re a part of Creation, and the world isn’t ours. We’re just a part of it. It’s not ours to dictate and manipulate. We’re all connected to each other and to the land and everything else within it. The belief and the teaching that everything has a spirit—that still exists today. It really contradicts with the Western and the Christianized view of things. We don’t

believe that we are better than everything else and that we're apart from nature and that Mother Earth is here to serve us. It's kind of the other way around. So that worldview still exists.¹⁷

People say, "Just give me a book already." I don't have a Bible or a Torah or Koran. I just don't have that stuff, but you're walking on it. You're walking on our book. That's where you're living. And that's kind of how I'll put it to them, and they're like, "Oh!" And I'll say, "That's how our people have come to have a host or set of beliefs. By the doing of and the engaging in activities with land, and its beings. And by "beings," I mean anything with energy, whether it's water or rocks or trees and animals or whatever.

—Kelly LaRocca, Mississaugas of Scugog¹⁸

Cousineau noted that over the past five to ten years, Rama has experienced a revitalization "where the cultural teachings that make us Anishinaabe, those things that may be unique to Anishinaabe, are coming back again. And it's probably because of a lot of hard work from a few individuals. And more and more community acceptance and openness to those things that probably their grandparents were told were wrong."¹⁹

What can non-Indigenous people learn from this history? Vicki Snache hoped that non-Indigenous people would reflect on their own

history and "come to a real understanding of who they are" so they can come to terms with that history and find ways to move forward: "How did they come to get here? What were the things that they did that caused them to believe the things that they believed at the time that they did those things? That caused them to create the laws that were created and the way that they were created?"²⁰

Albert Big Canoe commented that he heard a lot of non-Indigenous people saying that Indigenous people had been conquered: "I say, 'You conquered us? When? What war was it and when?' And they look at you. They haven't got a clue what you're talking about. There's a lot of stuff that the non-Native people don't know."²¹

Leona Charles of Mississaugas of Scugog Island also commented on the lack of knowledge of non-Indigenous people in the region:

They need to learn a lot. I'll tell you that. Our culture and that? They have to learn that we are around, close by, even though they don't think so. We are. We are still here, as they say. Because I know at our PowWow and especially our Sunrise [Ceremony] people start coming. And they live like 2 miles down the road. And they said, "We didn't even know you were here. We didn't know this was a reserve. And in the Sunrise Ceremony, the one guy started crying. He said, "This is so beautiful. I never knew. I'll be back." They didn't know. But they could learn a lot or understand a lot about how and why we do things.²²

Research committee member Tayler Hill, assistant director, Lands and Resources Department, Six Nations of the Grand River. Hill organized several friendship walks along the Haldimand Tract in September 2023 to build relationships and raise awareness about the Haldimand Proclamation and the loss and reclamation of Six Nations lands | Courtesy of the *Wellington Advertiser*

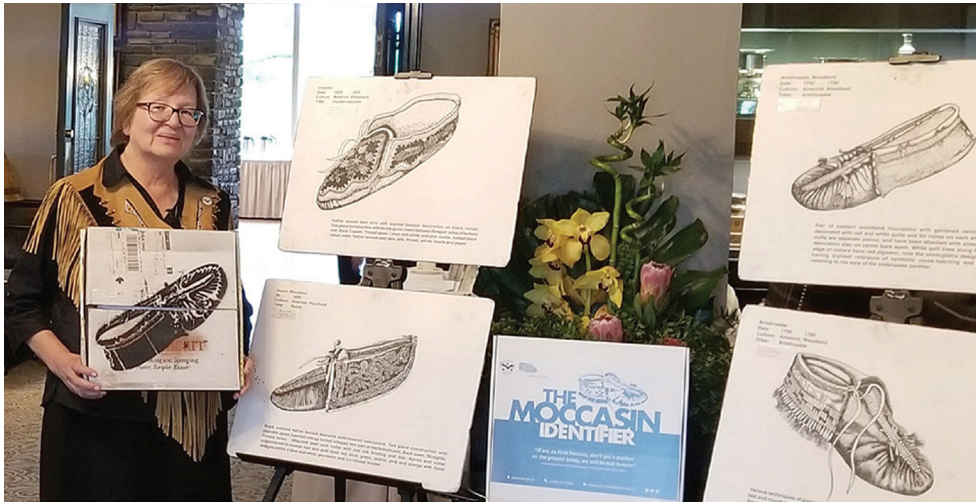


Several interviewees commented on the difficulties of confronting this history, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike, and on how best to teach it to children: “It’s hard to look at that history because it’s dark. It’s very dark. And it’s not easy. Sometimes, we forget how hard it is to look at. Not just from a non-Native perspective but from our own perspective. It opens up triggers. So I would be looking at the good things for the children. Although not forgetting that [difficult] piece but focusing on all the wonderful ways in which we are . . . We have all of those things that make us rich. And those things can be shared.”²³

Ben Cousineau noted that there is now more public acknowledgement of this history. “There’s

this really awful history, which only in the past, like, ten years has really entered public consciousness. A lot of bad things were done to a lot of good people. The reason why was racial, ethnic, religious sense of superiority. Now, Canada at least says they did the wrong things.”²⁴

Matthew Stevens stressed that both the positive and negative aspects of the historical relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples should be acknowledged: “Because the relationship wasn’t . . . always negative. It wasn’t always just constantly cowboys and Indians fighting. That wasn’t the case. There was enough examples and experience of positive relations, positive, mutually beneficial agreements that did work for a time.”²⁵ Similarly, Vicki Snache commented: “I



Former Chief Carolyn King of the Mississaugas of the Credit. King is the initiator of the Moccasin Identifier Project, which promotes public awareness of significant cultural historical sites and the ancestral presence of Indigenous communities through educational activities, including stenciling images of moccasins in public places | Courtesy of Moccasin Identifier™



William B. Davis Trail, Trillium Park, Toronto. The moccasins chiselled on rock reinscribe the ancestors' footprints at the waterfront and remind us of our treaty relationships to the land and to each other | Courtesy of Moccasin Identifier™

think the pioneers did bring some really interesting, amazing knowledge to us. It's not to say that that stuff isn't real either."²⁶

Kory Snache agreed: "I think the biggest thing is letting them know that there was a positive coexistence based on mutual agreement and understanding. And honouring those agreements. That's the biggest thing. Saying that there was a positive relationship. It wasn't all negative. And letting them know that out of a lot of both peoples' control, mainly government policy, it became sour. And that there is an opportunity to regain those ties again, to rebuild something great. I think those are the biggest things. There's an opportunity there for a renewed nation-to-nation relationship."²⁷

Others spoke of the need for newcomers to understand the true nature of the treaties. Kory Snache said: "I think the biggest concept is the idea that land title and ownership is not solely Canada's. I think that needs to be understood. That Indigenous people still exist in the area and that there are fiduciary obligations to Indigenous people because of treaties and because of agreements."²⁸

Phil Monture emphasized that peace, friendship, and respect were at the core of the treaties that Haudenosaunee entered into: "Those are always the foundation for our treaties. And I think the children need to know that those are their treaties too. They should share that part—the principle of peace, friendship and respect—and move forward. The commitment for the environment—all living things—that part is missing."²⁹

Carolyn King added: "They need to understand what is an agreement and what's a promise. And not all promises are written down." She added, "The treaty is a colonial document, the government's document of the day, that allows you to come and live here. And it is still relevant. That's what you need to understand. And that's why our people still talk about it."³⁰

Phil Monture spoke of his decades-long battle to have the rights of Six Nations recognized. "My battle has been with Canada, and the struggles have been to get justice for our land rights. We've been in litigation with Canada and Ontario since 1995. And it's very active right now as we speak. Our community is preparing for taking control of our own destiny on what injustices have occurred, for more land and preparing to address our housing crisis, get safe and clean drinking water to our community members."³¹

Several Knowledge Keepers spoke of aspects of Traditional Knowledge that were suppressed in the nineteenth century that are needed now. Matthew Stevens spoke of how "the Anishinaabe people, especially the—we'll call them Historic or Ancient Ones—they had mastered the way humans are supposed to live within this territory and this ecosystem. So anything that could be reimplemented from the way that they lived will help all life in this area."³²

Lauri Hoeg spoke of the irony of being an Indigenous trustee advising settler educators about how to introduce land-based learning into their curriculums: "They took our people, historically, off the land and put them into classrooms, and now everybody's . . . studying soil in a textbook

... And the soil is outside, on the ground.” Now, she noted, “They’re trying to figure out, a hundred years later, how to get [students] back out of the classroom and back onto the land to learn from the land, which Indigenous people have been doing forever!”³³

The fact that the research leading to this book originated in a critique of Black Creek Pioneer Village highlights that stories can either challenge or perpetuate colonial relations. They can either further understanding and build bridges, or they can be used to avoid difficult truths. Renaming this heritage site “The Village at Black Creek” marks a complex, inclusive moment of change for Indigenous peoples and settlers in the Toronto area. The name change was protested by some Torontonians.³⁴ But inclusiveness was welcomed by others. As Cousineau noted:

It’s easy to think that, as Anishinaabe, or even First Nations in general in Canada, these problems and things that we face are unique to us. But if you talk to people from ... especially immigrants, they’ve gone through similar things at the hands of, I guess, colonial nations. They’ve been persecuted. They’ve had their languages

taken. They’ve had their cultural ways removed completely off the face of the earth. They’ve been told who they are is wrong and so on. And I suspect that a lot of Toronto can find some commonalities with the stories of First Nations in Canada. Especially the immigrants. Fleeing whatever they’re fleeing in their home country. There are a lot of similarities.³⁵

The process of uncovering buried and suppressed histories is not something that can be accomplished on the first attempt. Kelly LaRocca recognizes that developing historical understanding is an iterative process: “There’s this historical write-up in the casino from when the casino first opened. And I just cringe. I’m like, ‘I know that’s not right anymore.’ We’ve learned more since that time. And I think that’s really it. History ... it’s not like it’s etched in some stone. It’s a living, breathing entity that changes with the more work you do.”³⁶

Together, the participants in the Changing the Narrative project did some of that work. They—and I—have shared what we know or have learned about the living histories of this region in the hope of a better future for all.

Chief Kelly LaRocca in regalia at
the 2023 Mississaugas of Scugog
Powwow | Courtesy of Ang Tek
Gie and Kelly LaRocca

