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HENRY ROOT COLMAN

From a daguerreotype in possession of the family

Wisconsin Historical Society

Recollections of Oneida Indians,
1840-45¹

By Henry Colman, D. D.

In 1840 my father, the Rev. Henry R. Colman, then a member of Troy Conference of the Methodist Episcopal church, decided to come to Wisconsin as a missionary to the Oneida In-

¹ While the Oneida Indians were resident in New York, they were divided into two parties, known as the First Christian and the Pagan. In 1816 Eleazer Williams went among them as missionary, and succeeded in influencing a large number of the Pagan party, which thereupon took the name of Second Christian party. Upon Williams's removal of a large body of Oneida to Wisconsin, the First Christian party were those who accompanied him; the Second Christian party were much opposed to emigration. After Williams's departure a Methodist Episcopal mission was begun among the New York Oneida by Rev. Daniel Barnes. The party whom he influenced was known as the Orchard party, and was an offshoot of the Second Christian party. Later, this group began emigrating to Wisconsin, where in 1832 Rev. John Clark visited them and re-established the Methodist mission. He placed in charge a native local preacher named Daniel Adams, with an Indian girl named Quinney in charge of the school. These young people later married, and continued their missionary work together. In 1834 the Methodist mission received a considerable accession by the removal of another portion of the Orchard party from New York--see *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xiv, p. 439. They were soon settled at Duck Creek, where a log house had been built for the Adams family. The missionary in charge was named Crawford. In 1837 the Methodist missionary was Daniel Poe, with Ethelinda Lee from Vermont in charge of the girls' school. Then for a year or more the mission was without a missionary, the services being occasionally kept up by Rev. Jesse Halstead, missionary to the Brothertown Indians. The success

Recollections of Oneida Indians

dians.* He was influenced to that decision by his old-time friend, Rev. John Clark, missionary presiding elder in Illinois and Wisconsin, who visited the conference and urged him to this step.

The summer was spent in preparation for the journey. In September we arrived at Green Bay, and very soon after at the mission on Duck Creek, twelve miles southeast of Green Bay and seven west from De Pere. My father had, in his thought, always associated Green Bay and Greenland, so was pleasantly surprised to find everything green, and that frost did not disturb vegetation till late in October.

of Halstead's ministrations led to the building of a church, which was dedicated Jan. 4, 1840, by Rev. Julius Field, superintendent of Wisconsin missions. It was to this church that Rev. Henry R. Colman came that same year as missionary. The Methodist mission among the Oneida is still existing. They have now a neat frame church, an Epworth Hall, and a parsonage—worth in all about \$8,000. In 1910 the missionary in charge was Rev. J. S. Whitney. The membership of the church is now about 150, and a small Sunday school is kept up for the children, who upon week-days attend the federal government school.—En.

* Henry Root Colman was born on a farm in Northampton, N. Y., Oct. 5, 1800. Part of his early years were spent at Sharon, Conn., and later he taught school, marrying in 1823 Livia W. Spier of Northville, N. Y. In 1831 he entered the ministry, and in 1840 was transferred to Wisconsin, where he served seven years as home missionary—five on the Oneida reservation, and two with the Brothertowns (1845-47). During his first year at Duck Creek he was called on to preach at Green Bay. Likewise while among the Brothertowns he visited Fond du Lac, preaching in school-houses and private homes throughout the whole region for ten miles around. In 1849 a building burned in Fond du Lac. The local weekly paper announced that the village had met with a great loss. A conflagration had swept away the court-house, the Baptist, Congregational, and Methodist churches, also the public school-house. The one small building at different hours had done service for all these public gatherings. A throat affection caused Mr. Colman to retire from active ministry, and with the exception of two years at Appleton and nine at Evansville, he resided at Fond du Lac till his death in February, 1895. He was one of the charter trustees of Lawrence College, and aided in choosing its site.

Wisconsin Historical Society

The missionary's family consisted of his wife and four children, Charles L.,^a Julia,^b Henry,^c and Joseph Spier. Elihu^d was born at the mission in May, 1841. The parsonage was a log house of one room with a bed set, and an attic which we partitioned off with quilts. The house had a board lean-to used as a woodshed, and another covered with siding, containing one good sitting-room and two bedrooms. Around the parsonage were three or four acres of land from which the forest stretched to the east indefinitely. The forest furnished us with fuel and sugar; while the plough land gave us much for the table, and the pasture and meadow kept the cow and horse. A half mile distant on Duck Creek were lumber and grist mills, also a blacksmith shop. Green Bay was our postoffice and market, to

^a Charles L. Colman became the head of a large lumber company at La Crosse, where he died in 1901; his son is president of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

^b Julia Colman was one of the students who matriculated at Lawrence College on its opening day, Dec. 12, 1849. She later graduated at Cazenovia Seminary, N. Y., and lived in New York City, being the author of several books, chiefly relating to temperance and hygiene. She died in January, 1909.

^c Henry Colman, author of this paper, was born in 1834, and thus was but six years old when coming to Wisconsin. He gives these recollections merely as a matter of boyish memory, that cannot claim the reliability of history. He graduated from Lawrence in 1857, was classical tutor there for a year, then entered the Methodist ministry, and is still an honored member of Wisconsin Conference. His wife, Lucinda S. Darling, was a college classmate. In 1863-67 Mr. and Mrs. Colman were principal and preceptress respectively of Evansville Seminary. He was presiding elder of Milwaukee district, and pastor of five of its churches, residing in that city twenty-five years. In 1909, he retired after fifty-one years of active service, and still resides in Milwaukee, occupied in philanthropic and temperance work.—Ed.

^d Joseph S. and Elihu Colman have been prominent in Wisconsin history. The former was superintendent for many years of the Colman lumber mill at La Crosse, where he still resides.

Elihu was sergeant in the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry, graduated at Lawrence in 1865, and entered the legal profession. He was a member of the assembly for several terms, and for many years federal district attorney for the Eastern district of Wisconsin. He died at Fond du Lac in 1899.

Recollections of Oneida Indians

which father drove his pony weekly, taking the children a few times during the five years we spent at this place. This missionary's salary was only \$250 per annum, besides the use of the parsonage, the plough land, and the forest. Later, however, father received from the government a grant of \$400 for teaching the school.

The Oneida on the reservation were said to number about 1000. Of these the larger portion attended the Episcopal mission, located three miles north of us on the reservation.¹

The principal highway ran nearly parallel with the creek in a northeast and southwest direction. Along this road each Indian had cleared a portion, some more and some less, of the forest and was supposed to own back to the creek and east to the reservation limits. West of the creek were a few similar claims. I think there were but two frame buildings in the settlement, one owned by Jacob Cornelius, head chief of the Orchard party, and the other by Daniel Bread.²

¹The Episcopal mission was originally the outcome of the labors of Eleazer Williams; but owing to his eccentricities the Foreign and Domestic Missionary Society had sent others to take charge. The mission at Duck Creek was visited in 1834 by Bishop Kemper; for an account thereof see *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xiv, pp. 438, 439. Later, Rev. Solomon Davis was sent to the charge, and built in 1839 a substantial frame church—see *Ibid.*, pp. 505-507, 515. The mission is still maintained, and in 1897 Hobart Church, a beautiful stone structure, was consecrated.

²Jacob Cornelius was born in New York state in 1802. He remembered the advent of Eleazer Williams and the conversion of the Pagan party, to which his family belonged. He was head chief of the Orchard party. About 1834 he migrated to Wisconsin, and was one of the prominent chiefs of the Duck Creek settlement, being known as "Big Jake," because of his giant physique. He was a man of much influence and held up a good standard of living to the community. He was still alive in 1877; see *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, viii, p. 325.

Daniel Bread was born in 1800 at Oneida Castle, N. Y. He participated in the battle of Sandy Creek (1814), removed to Wisconsin in 1828, and was regarded as head chief of the nation. He was long a supporter of Eleazer Williams, but in 1832 definitely broke from the latter's influence. Bread died at Oneida, July 21, 1873. His oil portrait is in the Society's museum.

Wisconsin Historical Society

On a little rise of ground stood the church, a frame building painted white, measuring about 40x60 feet. The pews were made of pine boards, without doors, and unsoftened by cushions. Father preached through an interpreter. This latter functionary was usually William Woodman, who received for his services from the Missionary Society, the munificent sum of \$50 per annum. The hymnal used at the services was, I think, in the Mohawk tongue, which the Oneida understood. They were great lovers of harmony and sang beautifully, often employing themselves in writing music by note.

I well recall the appearance of the Sunday morning congregation. The men, who had doffed their blankets and were clad in the garb of American citizens, sat on one side. The women, still in petticoats and blankets, took the other side. The blankets were red or white, such as are now in use upon our beds, while many of the women were wrapped in large pieces of costly broadcloth. The younger women generally sat and walked the highways with their blankets over their heads, so that only one eye could by any chance be seen. The older women in church generally let their blankets fall to their shoulders. Some wore silk hats, with silver bands two inches wide; commonly one band sufficed, yet not unfrequently the hat would be nearly covered with them. These were worn throughout the service. I do not recall that the men indulged in silk hats. The women's skirts were often made of the finest cloth, bordered from one to twelve inches at the bottom with beads sewed to the cloth. The skirts never trailed in the mud, but were short and revealed pantalets of the same material and adornment.

The janitor of the church was Moses Cornelius. He had a well-shaped stick, about four feet in length. If any of the army of village canines crept into the church, old Moses's stick was after him, sermon or no sermon. When Moses's hand reached the dog, he was soon in the open and one strong arm held the dog kicking in the air, while the other plied the rod, whether the door was open or shut. Occasionally an Indian in church did not escape the arms of Somna (I say Somna, for the old Somnus is too sturdy). Moses's keen eye soon discovered the offender, and the whack of the corrective rod was much more startling than the "amens" of the worshippers. The

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DANIEL BREAD

From oil portrait in possession of Wisconsin Historical Society, by Samuel M. Brookes

Recollections of Oneida Indians

only waters that the rod of this Moses divided were the tears of anger of the culprit from the tears of laughter of his neighbors. It was whispered that if one came to church with a feeling of somnolency, he sometimes gave the owner of the rod a piece of tobacco to blind his eyes.

Next to the church stood a log school-house, where both boys and girls were taught the elements of education. There my younger brother and I sat on slabs with pegs for legs, and with the Indians were taught reading, writing, and spelling. Some of the youths were quite ambitious to learn the English tongue. One year John Cornelius, son of Chief Jacob, spent the winter in our home in order to perfect himself in our language. He afterwards attended the Episcopal Seminary at Nashotah. Another son, Elijah, attended Lawrence College a few years during the fifties. Henry Cornelius, who I think was a nephew of Jacob, was graduated from the college in 1864 and died nine years later.

Besides his pastoral and teaching duties, the missionary was the adviser-in-chief of the community. He comforted, exhorted, reproved, and upheld his flock, and made them suggestions about farming. Weddings were usually celebrated at the church. After the ceremony the bride went one way to her home, and the groom took the other direction. I remember well the first funeral that occurred after our removal to the reservation. Mrs. Wheelock, an Indian neighbor, with whose two boys my brother and I had mated, died. The coffin was of unstained pine boards, made when needed. The echoes of the hammer fastening on the lid still sound in my ears. After that, father supplied stain for the boards and screws for the lid.

In addition to their agricultural efforts, the Oneida depended largely for their support on wild game. Every winter, companies would be gathered for a hunt of several days. My brother Charles, who was the only one of the family who learned the Oneida language, once joined such a party. In the winter, when provender for stock was scarce, they had recourse to a curious expedient. They would bend down the branches of the great forest trees that grew everywhere on the reservation, and permit the horses and cattle to feed and fatten on the buds. I recall vividly a visit with my father to the home of John Cor-

Wisconsin Historical Society

nelius, brother of Chief Jacob. He was a man of sterling character, who acted as local preacher, and at times taught the people in the absence of the missionary. The snow was very deep, and had forgotten to leave at the usual time, so he was providing for his stock in the manner I have just described.

The greatest misfortune of the Oneida was their lack of self-control. If supplies abounded they were liable to gorge; if short, they fasted. Two men started early one morning for a hunt. Like Napoleon's armies they were to live on the country. As they returned at evening the next day, having taken nothing, one casually said, "I believe I am hungry." "Ugh! you had breakfast before starting and I didn't," was the scornful response. This lack of control made liquor their special curse. When we left in 1835, it was stated that only one adult man had never been drunk, and afterward he yielded to the tempter. Once a white man put up a shack just within the reservation and dispensed liquors. A squad of Indians armed with rifles went to his place, whereupon he suddenly migrated. Some of the better class of the men were, however, provident and accumulated considerable property. A temperance society was formed, and many of our mission members became consistent total abstainers, to the great improvement of both their material and moral conditions.

The Indians had a keen sense of humor. One winter day there came to the parsonage a large fellow who had a fairly good command of English. The Oneida, however, could never pronounce an "r;" when they attempted it, the result was usually an "l." While our visitor was with us, there rode by Louis Rouse, a very tall and corpulent man from Green Bay. With a twinkle in his eye, the Indian remarked to us, "There goes that gheat big Louse."

The Oneida were an independent nation, and dispensed their own justice. One winter a half-breed living on the reservation was accused of killing his three little children. The chiefs consulted their missionary and decided to hold a council in the school-house. After listening to the evidence and debating sufficiently, the guilt was clearly established and the decree of hanging was enacted. The scaffold was erected. A dozen or more of the warriors, garbed in the uniform of soldiers, with

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Recollections of Oneida Indians

bayoneted rifles borrowed from Fort Howard, acted as guard. Father offered prayer for the soul of the condemned, who was summarily executed. This was the only execution I ever attended.

As time went on, there grew up among the Oneida a Missouri party, who desired to accept the offer of larger tracts of land in that state. A council was held that my brother Charles attended. He reported an eloquent debate. One orator vividly pictured a deer quietly feeding in his native haunts, when the rustle of leaves startles him. He leaps away, the crack of a rifle terrifies him. Far in the dense forest, safe as he thinks from pursuit, he lies down to rest. The tramp, tramp, though so quiet, rouses him. He flees again, but to be followed. So the Oneida had been driven from place to place in the East. Finally they had come to the far West, hoping to be unmolested. But here the white man was crowding them again. He was everywhere. It was useless to flee from him. As a result of this council a few made a journey to the Western state, but most of them afterwards returned to their Green Bay home, and the idea of further emigration was abandoned.