

THE INDIAN NEW DEAL AT ONEIDA*

by Oscar Archiquette

*Interview by Robert W. Venables, Shell Lake, Wisconsin, July 14, 1971. Reprinted by permission of Dr. Venables. Gordon and Larry: I would like to add a brief paragraph at the top summarizing Archiquette's role in the community. Would you please let me know how you would like it to read?

We came home [from TK] in late 1932 and managed to live by getting work here and there in Oneida. We were then checkerboarded with whites, as we had been since 1920. My teenage stepdaughter was in U.S. Indian school and the boy in a C.C. [CC stands for what?] camp. In 1933 I planted a garden, which helped out a lot on groceries. In the fall my wife and I would go out husking for farmers at 5¢ a bushel. In a way this was fun for us. In the spring we took a job cutting brush by the acre.

I worked on a W.P.A. project near Duck Creek, where we were doing some grading, shouldering, and culvert work. There was a culvert to be walled with limestone on each side. I jumped in and started laying stone as if I were experienced, and I was not; this really was my first experience in laying stone. The boss saw my work and was well satisfied, and he reclassified me as a stone mason.

I soon became a grade foreman under W.P.A. The only reason why I was selected to be a foreman was my past experience in construction work. Here again, I could have held a higher paid position if I did not use liquor.

Jobs were hard to get. Many Oneidas went up north, where they found work in the woods, such as cutting pulp, logs, and cordwood. The Oneidas were 99 percent landless, but my wife [Esther House Archiquette] had a home, and somehow I managed to make a living at home [in Oneida?].

During the Depression I started to build a three-room house. The first thing I did was to dig a basement on a side hill, then I set forms for concrete. I then put on the first floor and we lived in the basement that year. And finally I finished it by piecemeal. I used to mix mortar for an old Indian who used to do a little mason work now and then. Since I laid limestone I was interested in mason work. He did show me how to lay cement blocks the right way. I used to help him lay blocks every chance I had. He also made a number of brick chimneys and a couple of glass block windows.

The Indian Reorganization Act came into being in 1934, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs employees started to explain the act to various tribes of Indians. [I know this is explained in the intro, but it might be worth a sentence in brackets here to remind readers of the basic gist.] Since the Oneida chiefs were not recognized as legal representatives for the Wisconsin Oneida tribe, the Ashland Indian Agency did not know just whom to contact for a meeting in regard to the Reorganization Act. But they started out with the self-appointed chief. I finally did get a copy of the act, and I read it. I thought it was a good thing for my people, and I started talking about it to friends, and we had a number of Oneidas who had fair education and were not followers of the self-appointed chief; they also favored the act.

Somebody called a meeting in a private home where I was called to explain about the Wheeler-Howard Act, as it was called. The small log home where the meeting was held was back in the bush. I spoke in Oneida language all the way through, and when I finished everybody applauded. One Oneida

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man stood up and he said, "This cousin of mine has no business talking back here in the brush; he belongs in some big hall where he should talk about these good things he told us here tonight." It was not long before arrangements were made for me to explain about the act at the Methodist Church hall. Again I made a great speech concerning the act.

The people were really interested now and wanted to know more about it. And of course my background was considered, my father [John Archiquette] being a former captain of the U.S. Indian Oneida Police for twenty-four years, judge of Indian court, interpreter, and more or less legal adviser. And honest. At this meeting a committee was selected to work with me.

In the meantime, the self-appointed chief was busy telling his few followers that if the federal government purchased any land under this act, it would be way up north where there are rattlesnakes and stones. I wrote to the B.I.A. in Washington, D.C. about this, and the answer was that the government would buy land wherever the groups of Indians wanted to live. My committee contacted an attorney who was part Menominee to be a legal representative for the Wisconsin Oneidas.

We were told to organize under the state law, which we did. Next, officers were chosen; first was chairman. They said I should be the one. I said no, I was not qualified. One said, "You were the first one to go against the self-appointed chief, and it is no more than right that you be the first chairman." So I was elected.

The chief had called a meeting at the Parish Hall and even had a police officer present from Green Bay, since there were a great number of Oneidas who now hated him. Anyway, the hall was full; he acted as chairman and had an Oneida man to explain the act in Oneida. Then people could ask questions.

Every time I tried to get the floor he would ignore me, till the people started to stomp their feet on the floor, telling him to give me a chance, which he did. I thanked the man who explained the act as written. Then I said, "You have been told the government will buy the land elsewhere." I told them I had a letter with me from Washington D.C., and I pulled out the letter and read it. I am sure most of the Oneidas applauded.

The agency was then dealing with my committee. An election date was set in 1936, at which time the majority voted in favor of the Indian Reorganization Act. Some time after, the chief left for Chicago to live, where he died.

We were operating under a constitution and by-laws under state law. Since we [had] adopted the Indian Reorganization Act, it was then necessary to come under federal law, so we drew up a new constitution and by-laws. Election of tribal officers known as the Executive Committee took place once a year, and there was a general tribal council meeting every six months, in January and July.

About 1937 and 1938 I went among the white farmers on the former Oneida Reservation, taking options on land for the government, from which the government purchased 2,400 acres for the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin. Land was held in trust by the federal government. Since I did not have a car, I walked most of the time. My time was free of charge. The Executive Committee attended meetings once a month regarding tribal affairs.

When we organized under state law, only those born on the original reservation were eligible for enrollment, and we were operating under the four-person Executive Committee. When we switched to federal charter, we changed the membership rule, so that any Oneida who could prove one-quarter Oneida blood would be eligible for enrollment, and of late our constitution was amended to have nine

members of a tribal council—four officers and five councilmen. The officers are now paid \$10.00 per meeting, and they meet at least once a month. I don't know how many years some of us served without pay.

There were some fees promised in the Reorganization Act which never materialized. We were informed that there was a grant of \$36,000 as a revolving fund for the Oneidas. In the start the agency handled all loans made to Oneidas for lumber (and I know of one family that borrowed money to buy one milk cow). After a while, the revolving money of supposedly \$26,000 was turned over to the tribal treasurer. Our revolving fund had dwindled down to \$16,000. This could be due to bad loan agreements.

As for the 2,400 acres purchased under the Reorganization Act, this land was to be held in trust for us; now we are forced to pay for every inch of it, whether we approve of it or not. We are treated like orphans. We paid \$60 to \$80 an acre to the government, and it paid us 80¢ an acre for the same land in 1962. We are still waiting for a per capita payment. There has been 15 percent set aside for reservation improvement from the tribe's share of the judgment fund.

In 1939 an Indian folklore project was set up in Oneida under the Works Project Administration, under the sponsorship of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I was one of the first Indians to be contacted by a linguist [Floyd Lounsbury] to help set up the vowels of our language. I was recommended because I speak both English and Oneida languages fluently.

After the vowels were set up, then the linguist taught us the phonetic alphabet, which I mastered in four days. On the fifth day I went out in the field writing stories in Oneida. There were two of us who were considered the best spellers in a class of fifteen. I was chosen to do proofreading, and I could read the hand-copied hymnbook written in Mohawk sounds. I was asked to make the transliteration into the new alphabet. Since then I have been recommended as capable of teaching the Oneida language by a linguist. [does the interview also end here, or did you only reproduce part of it? If there is more I'd like to see it to possibly end on a broader note. Or else you might add an editors' note to say something like, "Archiquette did X, Y, and Z for the WPA till 19__ . He died in 19__." Just something to place it in context and bring a natural end to the section.]