

Indians, on the warpath ag

They want their land back
and in upstate New York,
one group is getting it

By ALTON SLAGLE

First of two articles

As far as most New Yorkers are concerned, relations between the white man and the red man were forever stamped by a single transaction in 1626 — the purchase of Manhattan island by Peter Minuit for \$24 worth of beads, trinkets and brightly stained cloth.

That deal did not rankle Indians until many centuries later. Indians from Maine to Oregon are now demanding the return of their long-lost lands, and New York has not escaped the tribal, legal and political turmoil.

So far, no Indian leaders have demanded that the United States void the Manhattan sale. But in the remote northeastern corner of the state, about 280 miles north of New York City, about 200 Indians have made their move.

And they won their fight. Or did they?

GANIKENH, MOHAWK TERRITORY — A narrow dirt road turns sharply from a two-lane highway, deceptively named the Military Turnpike, here in this remote northeastern corner of New York State, just 60 miles below Montreal. The little lane winds back into a forest of hemlock, pine, ash, maple and oak, now heavy with snow, back into an earlier time when proud Mohawk Indians hunted and fished and raised their children as member of the five-nation Iroquois Confederacy under the Great Law of Peace.

It heads into Ganienkeh, Land of the Flint — and towards a new day of hope for a hardy group of native Americans determined to break the reservation bonds of alcoholism, suicide and purposelessness as nonwanted wards of the government that took the land from their ancestors.

Only about 200 strong now, the resident of Ganienkeh have, in just over three years, progressed from armed occupation to a peaceful settlement with the state that originally bought their land from a war chief who they contend, had no right to sell.

Now, surviving the harsh winter of 1978 in crude shelters, with no electricity or other amenities of the late 20th century, they are at last beginning to realize their dream: The reestablishment of their nation and a return to the ways of their forefathers.

The fight has been hard and bitter, and it has not yet ended. But the first big hurdles have been cleared, and the

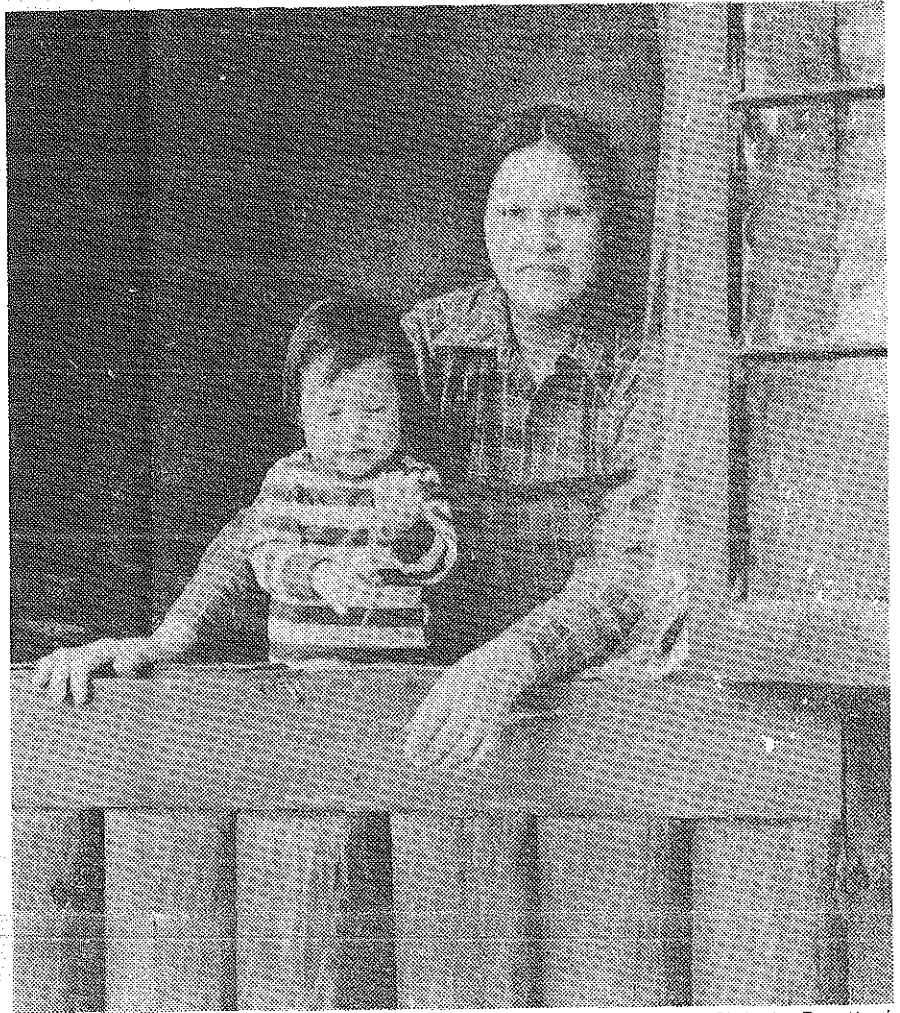


Photo by Tom Harris
An Indian mother and child in upstate New York carving a new life in a home that they can almost call their own.

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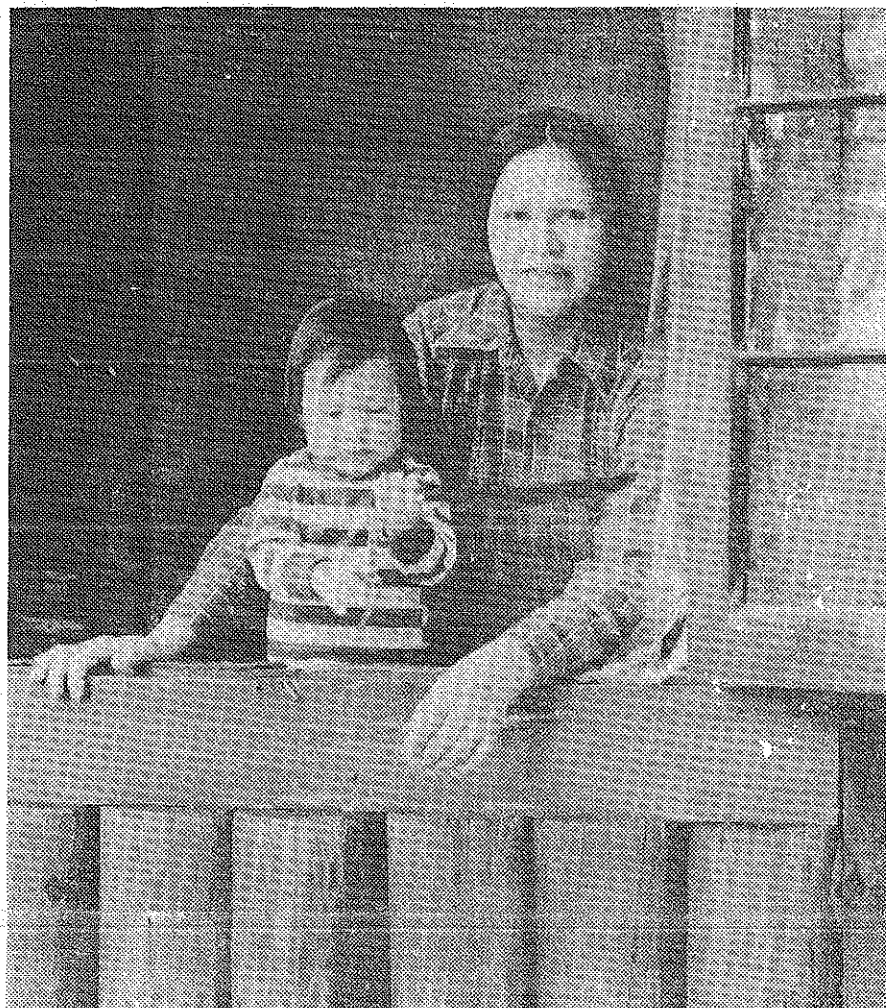


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However, the camp turned out to be

openly suspicious of the Indians from the beginning. Some shopkeepers refused to serve the Indians and once, last summer, a young Indian woman having a difficult birth had to be rushed 80 miles south to Utica because a local doctor refused to treat her severe hemorrhaging.

"I'm not going to treat Indians, hippies or motorcyclists," the doctor said.

One Indian woman was killed by a drunken white man in a car speeding in a 25-mile-an-hour zone. And whites would sometimes drive by the camp and take pot-shots with hunting rifles.

One report, commissioned by a New York State assemblyman, recommended a surprise night attack against the Indians with helicopters. And State Senator Fred Eckart called for their eviction by force if necessary.

THERE IS no question that the state, at any time, could have evicted the Indians. It did not have to negotiate with the rebels.

Someone suggested the services of Howard Rowley, an official of Rochester Gas and Electric and a volunteer member of the Washington-based American Arbitration Association. Rowley, a veteran of civil rights disputes involving blacks and Puerto Ricans, took the assignment. A conservative Wasp, he appeared on the scene with a Jewish lawyer, a black militant and a hard-nosed Indian named War Cloud.

Thus began another long series of negotiating sessions between the state and the Moss Lako rebels.

The Indians, meanwhile, had discovered that the area was not quite the paradise they had thought. The land was not good for their farming. They needed to find another spot.

One possible site was turned down because it was in the ancestral territory of the Oneidas, another Iroquoian nation. Finally, a 700-acre spot at Altona, near Plattsburgh, and 5,500 acre of reforestation land in the Macomb Reservation State Park were approved by all parties. The Indians were given a five-year renewable pact for the land in exchange for eventually setting up a model village, a sort of living museum, to show whites the ancient ways to which they want to return.

In addition, a trust was established to help them purchase private land in the area. The move from Moss Lake began as the Indians, with the state's blessing, began dismantling the lake buildings, board by nail, and moving them upstate.

Things were different at Altona. The Mohawks held meetings with their new neighbors.



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They presented their claim to the area to a Department of Environmental Conservation forest ranger, William Marlea. In Albany, Gov Wilson deferred action until after the election, thus throwing it squarely into the lap of Hugh Carey.

The new governor handed the negotiations over to Environmental Conservation Commissioner Ogden Reid. But on April 29, 1976, Reid resigned and the negotiations with the Moss Lake Mohawks stopped. They did not resume until the following Aug. 11, under Secretary of State Mario Cuomo.

Cuomo was able to convince the state attorney general to give him an opinion that Indians could lease state land. With that negotiating sessions went smoothly.

Relations between the Indians and their white neighbors, however, were far from smooth.

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"We've had no real problems with anyone except for maybe the first couple of weeks," said Tekarontakeh, a young Indian from a Canadian reservation. People were sort of afraid of us, and then they would find out that we speak English and that we're not going to scalp them."

The Indians are maintaining a presence at Moss Lake, primarily to look to after the 15 or so buildings they were unable to dismantle before winter closed in. That job will be finished in the spring. Meanwhile, many of the families have returned temporarily to reservations.

Already a new generation has begun arriving at Ganienkeh. At 4:30 p.m. on Dec. 6, while the snow swirled around a crude board cabin lit by an oil lamp, a 10-pound, eight-ounce boy was born. And with his birth, a new generation representing an ancient way of life put down a root in Clinton County.

Next: The bigger battle.