

Project Canterbury

Missions to the Oneidas

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The Oneida mission passed, at different periods, through very serious dangers, when it seemed as if the ark of the Church in their midst was about to be severely wrecked. That it was saved by prayer we cannot doubt. There was earnest prayer offered for them in those hours of peril by the living; and we may well believe that the prayers of many in Paradise were also heard by Him Who careth for the poor. Who can doubt that we who are now living are receiving the benefit of prayers offered for us years ago, by those most interested in our welfare. Nay, who can doubt that we of this century, as a Church, and a nation, are receiving the benefit of earnest supplications offered by devout Christian hearts of past generations. The prayers of Bishop Kemper were assuredly heard in behalf of the Oneidas, and doubtless those of Bishop Hobart also brought a blessing. Prayer has a life beyond death.

On the second Sunday of October, 1853, the Rev. Edward A. Goodnough, a young deacon, recently ordained by Bishop Kemper, having resigned the parish at Portage for the purpose, entered on his arduous duties at Oneida. The parish had been vacant about two years. The people had lost ground sadly. A half-wild tribe are in the mental condition of children; they may have made a promising beginning, even decided progress in the right direction, but if abandoned by their guides they must inevitably fall back. When the brave young deacon came among the Oneidas everything was looking very dreary. He was a stranger among a wild race whose language he could neither speak nor understand. The majority of the people were very shy and suspicious. A few of the better men and women, however, received him very kindly. He was living alone in the mission house; they brought him bread, game and fish, washed his clothes and provided him with firewood; but there were others who hoped to drive him away as they had already driven two missionaries off the field. At night they would come about the house, making hideous cries, and savage yells. The Saturday nights were fearfully disorderly. They would go to Green Bay to trade and come back dreadfully intoxicated, shouting, fighting and yelling like so many fiends.

There were at that time white men at Green Bay whose object it was to debase the Indians by all the means in their power, in order to render them odious to the whites, and thus bring about their expulsion from the reservation. They coveted the fertile lands and fine timber of the Oneidas, and to obtain possession of these were eager to drive the red man farther into the wilderness. There was no village on the reservation.

When the white race first explored the territory of the Iroquois tribes, more than two centuries earlier, the wild people lived in strongly stockaded villages of bark lodges. These lodges were well-built in their way, long, in proportion to their width, and occupied by a number of families, to each of whom a portion was allotted. The name given by the Konoshioui, or "United People," to their confederacy was the People of the Long-House. The eastern door of their long-house was in the Mohawk country, the western in the Seneca country. The Oneidas were next neighbors and "Daughters" of the Mohawks. The English

called these stockaded villages "Castles," and affixed the arms of King George to their gates. During the war of the Revolution these villages were broken up, but the Oneidas, as allies of the Americans, rebuilt several hamlets on their old lands, the principal being dignified by the name of "Castle"--a name it preserved for some time. But there was no long-house, they lived in separate cabins. The people were divided early in this century into the Christian and Pagan parties, both distinctly organized. The Pagan division, having become Christians also, took the name of the "Orchard Party," from a fine butternut grove where they had built their scattered cabins. Butternut Orchard in Oneida is Ka-na-da-ga-hoc.

From the day when the Oneidas first took possession of their reservation in Wisconsin to the present hour there has been no hamlet in their midst; they were found by their young missionary, in 1853, living on small farms, in separate cabins, on each side of the Duck Creek, which was crossed by six bridges, cabins and bridges being alike built by themselves. The farms were very roughly worked, and carelessly fenced. The cabins, chiefly of logs, were comfortless and untidy. It was surprising how little English was spoken by the people, after two centuries of intercourse with an English-speaking race; there were few men who spoke the language with any facility, and among the women, with one or two exceptions, there were none who could say more than a word or two. It was at first difficult to find a good interpreter; while the Oneida Prayer Book was used, of course, in church, the sermon was interpreted; on one occasion, early in Mr. Goodnough's ministry, he quoted the text relating to the widow's two mites; this was interpreted: "She threw into the treasury two little worms"! The church building was in a very dilapidated condition, needing many repairs, while the white paint had been almost entirely washed away by the rain. The congregation was at first very small. At the first celebration of the Holy Communion there were only thirty present. Two years earlier there had been 150 communicants. At the first Confirmation there were only five to receive the rite. The school house was an old tumble-down shanty, with a door at each end, and for chimney an old stove pipe running up boldly through the roof. There were often heavy drifts of snow on the floor during the winter months. The average attendance was only fifteen. The mission house about 800 yards from the church was small, a story and a half high; there were out-houses about it, and a glebe of eight acres. Everything was out of order.

To this desolate mission house, in April '54, came a brave young girl not yet seventeen, the newly married wife of the missionary, to whom she had been betrothed for some time previous. Blessed was the day when Ellen Saxton Goodnough came among the Oneidas, with her brave spirit, her warm generous heart, her cheerful, vigorous, healthy nature, and her good judgment. From the day when she first crossed the threshold of the mission house, she scarcely left the reservation even for a few hours, during her busy Christian life, of more than sixteen years. A true helpmeet to her husband, she gave heart and strength to the work among the red people. The Rev. Mr. Davis, and the Rev. Mr. Haff had both been married men, and their wives labored faithfully with them in behalf of the Indian women, but they were not so long connected with the mission, and their influence was not lasting. The cheerful, untiring zeal, the affectionate sympathy, the wise and helpful guidance, with which Ellen Goodnough moved about, day by day, during all those years, among the Oneidas, could scarcely be surpassed in devotion. "She gave her life," said one who knew her intimately, "through self-denial, and many hardships, and some reproach to the task of elevating the Oneidas; and they loved her warmly in return." "Her influence became almost unbounded, and her words were law to a great many of the women and girls." The Oneida Mission begun more than two centuries earlier by the zealous, celibate Jesuit priest from Canada, was now to be carried to a higher development by married missionaries of the Anglican branch of the Church Catholic. Associate missions of unmarried men have already

done good work in our Church, and may yet do more; probably it would be better if there were more of this class of missionaries, especially on new ground. But it is clear that much good has also been done by married missionaries, husband and wife working together. Happily our Church is not tied down to either course. She leaves the question of celibate service, where our Lord and His Apostles have left it--to the individual conscience.

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