Our Story

If people could hear the story the earth told, the people she would speak of in the Kitchissippi Valley would be Omàmiwininì. We moved along the Ottawa River and its tributaries from Long Sault Rapids up to Lake Nipissing for thousands and thousands of years before we were obstructed by disease, the French, the English, settlers, government legislation, religious organizations, alcohol, and foreign trade politics.

Although archaeological evidence of bone, stone, pottery, shell and copper shows that our people occupied the Ottawa Valley for at least the last 10,000 years (since the last glacial period), our story has been a long and quiet one. Traditionally, history has documented civilizations only through the excavation and examination of its structures, documents and artifacts. But our relatives moved with the weather and the seasons to hunt, fish, harvest, trade, celebrate, socialize, and participate in ceremonies and seasonal activities, returning to permanent sites along the Ottawa River again and again. We prepared hides for clothing, made birch bark containers for cooking and food storage, and built homes for shelter. We formed tools to make canoes, snowshoes and toboggans for transport, and to make bows, arrows, snares, spears, hooks, and nets for trapping, hunting, fishing and defense, all out of the natural materials in the surrounding environment, with the exception of those materials that were traded from neighbouring Nations.

Everything we built, used, or wore, for all of our activities, was made from wood, or plants, or rocks, or animals. But only the things that were made of pottery, stone, bone, shell, or copper remained; the wind and snow of three winters can easily turn a sapling lodge structure into a pile of sticks that simply disintegrates, leaving only carbon from the nearest fire pit to show that it was ever there at all. Our people lived lightly on the land; our riches were marked by the continuing ability of the earth's abundance to sustain our life and the lives of future generations.

After initial European contact with Champlain in 1613 our "history" was documented by Europeans with various agendas of interference. Our oral tradition, beliefs and lifestyle that had served us well from time immemorial was rarely understood and so it was seldom acknowledged by them, and often treated with contempt. Each date you read about in the history of Upper and Lower Canada, and the settlement of the Ottawa River valley, has a story that you don't hear, that the old ones tell us, about deceitful dealings and harm done to our people, and about the loss of our land and our lifestyle.

Groups of Omàmiwininì, including Kitchesipirini, Weskarini, Kinounchepirini, Mayouwekatini, Ottagoutowuemin, and Onontchataronon, along with the Nipissings, became allied with the French and Huron-Wendat in order to protect and take part in the fur trade. We controlled use of the Ottawa River by charging tolls for passage.

In the period from around 1640 until the end of the 17th century, a period which is known as the Iroquoian or Beaver Wars, epidemics of new diseases and warfare between the Iroquois and our allied forces resulted in a huge loss of life, many adoptions or alliances, and relocations. Many of us, along with Nipissings and Huron, moved closer the French settlements at Trois Riviers, Sillery, Quebec City and Montreal. At the end of the 17th century, the Iroquois occupied only the eastern edge of Ontario seasonally, having been driven out by the Ojibwa-speaking Chippewa or Mississauga; we occupied the rest of the Ottawa River watershed through the 18th century.

At the conquest of 1759 when the French were conquered by the British, the British specified in the 1763 Royal Proclamation that ‘the Indians should not be molested on their hunting grounds’, and that we could only sell our lands after a public council for that purpose was held, and that our lands could not be sold until they were ceded [surrendered].

Our initial alliance with the French and the division of French and English (Upper and Lower) Canada served to allow governments to confuse their obligation to us using language and territorial divisions. Much of our contact with European officials took place at the Christian mission at Lake of Two Mountains in Lower Canada where we gathered in the summer until we were “encouraged” to leave by the priests so that they could take the land our cabins were on. The Crown in Upper Canada was constantly reminded of our position through our petitions arguing the purchase of our lands from others and they acknowledged that we had entered into no treaties, nor had we taken part in any surrenders. Regardless, our land was constantly encroached upon by settlers and government purchase, often from other Nations who had no claim to them.

In 1764, the pre-confederation period, Carillon was established as the point on the Ottawa River beyond which traders required a license to trade in Indian Country. We petitioned the government in 1772, and again in 1791 (the year that Upper and Lower Canada separated), clearly stating our occupation and use of the Ottawa River from Long Sault to Lake Nipissing.

The Quebec Act in 1774 extended the boundaries of Quebec and included areas of our land, while in the 1791 Constitution Act the Ottawa River became the dividing line between Upper and Lower Canada, placing our land under two separate government administrations.

Although the Crown was aware of the requirement to obtain a surrender of the land from the Indians before settlement could be established, it made three land purchases in order to settle soldiers, loyalists, new settlers, and a group of Mohawks under Brant on Indian land. The Crawford purchase of 1783 overlapped with our eastern land.

By 1822 the Crown had ruled that it could not appoint exclusive hunting territories for the various tribes (Nations); as a result, our former strictly-observed and -enforced hunting land boundaries were ignored, and our ability to provide for our own sustenance was compromised, once again.

Upper and Lower Canada were reunited through the 1840 Act of Union, and ‘Licenses of Occupation’ were granted; reserve lands were set aside for our people in Quebec starting in the mid 1840s, in order to compensate for their loss of hunting grounds. Although it was clear that our livelihood depended on gathering, hunting, fishing and trapping [except for the small income that we made by leasing our islands in the Ottawa River before the Crown denied us that right in 1839], the government had not yet formally acknowledged our rights to any of our land in Upper Canada/ Ontario.

In 1873, after many petitions, the 1745-acre Golden Lake Reserve, located at a Hudson Bay trading site on the Bonnechere River, was purchased from Ontario by Canada with our money (which was part of the Trust Funds defined in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, in which the Crown collected 40% on our behalf for all resources removed and sold from our land). These reserve lands were vested with the Department of Indian Affairs in trust for us. This allowed us 'certificates of possession' and 'transference between members' rather than ownership, so we were never able to participate in the dominant culture's system of finance whereby land can be used as collateral. At the same time, our land around us was being given by free grant to white settlers by the government of Ontario. But it was illegal for us, as Indians, to get these free land grants.

Further, Ontario refused to allow lands near the head waters of the York branch of the Madawaska River to be set aside for our use in 1897 after our 1866 license of occupation lapsed; is seemed clear the government of Ontario didn't want us close to Algonquin Park, which had been established on our land in 1893 with no consideration given us. Although all of our traditional activities were outlawed within the boundaries of Algonquin Park, we continued to trap and hunt these lands, where we had always trapped and hunted. After the park was established, we found that we had to out-maneuver the park rangers. We were unable to set permanent trap lines and if we set up a small shelter to stay in during our working time on the land which was often more, but no less than a month at a time, in cold weather, our shelter would be burned down. Because Aboriginal rights were not recognized, our men would be charged and fined for hunting infractions in the park while trying to provide food for their families.

We had to endure many years of this legal action in order to establish precedents that recognized our Aboriginal rights; in 1991 the first hunting and fishing agreement between the Ontario government and the Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn was established. It is still a long way from respecting our rights regarding these traditional activities, but then, governments have never been quick to honour them. Today there are nineteen established trap lines in the park, but there is little money in trapping, and there is a much smaller animal population, especially of beaver, since the tree cycle changed from poplar and birch to evergreens. Our reliance on wild meat as a food source has dwindled: people don't snare rabbits, partridge, muskrat or deer like before when bullets were expensive; they tend to make do with hunted deer and moose for their wild meat.

We have always fished pike, eels, bass, perch, ling, trout, mud-pout, whitefish and suckers from the lakes and waterways of our territory. Before contact we used spears, bone hooks, and nets woven from plant and root fibers to fish. We relied on fish as a source of food throughout the year and netted fish in the winter. Given our knowledge and experience we were able guides for tourists that came here to fish on holiday. Now we fish using modern equipment and boats instead of birch bark canoes. We have always been good canoe makers; our canoes are made of birch bark, cedar and spruce root and gum, and so are kind to the environment. This traditional knowledge still exists at Pikwàkanagàn, but care needs to be taken to allow birch and cedar trees to grow big enough to make canoes.

The lack of consideration of Aboriginal rights by the governments of the time was made even worse when Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's government implemented the Indian Act in 1880, which made it illegal for us to speak our language, use our drums, sing our songs, practice our ceremonies, wear our traditional clothing, or challenge any policy legally. This remained the law for *seventy-one years*, until these provisions were removed in 1951.

Many of us stayed where our families had always lived in the valley, although that government "encouraged" us to move to the reserve or we wouldn't be recognized as Indians (by being issued a 'status card'). This process of counting, labeling, and branding us was an attempt to remove us from our ongoing relationship with the land and our traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, gathering food and trapping, so that others could take our lands. The government had decided that we should become farmers, but bringing a railcar of goats into the reserve and giving each family two, and some chickens, didn't make us farmers. The government had set up two test farms on the reserve. But we knew, through the experience of countless generations, that our land of bedrock was not farmland; rather, to survive on it, our old ways were best. So many families stayed in the bush, living in a more traditional way, and so faced their 'lack of status' problem later.

The Indian Agent, a non-Native government official, had the authority to issue, or to deny, us a permit to leave the reserve. The Indian Agents were often unfair and played favourites. Indian Agents also decided who qualified to continue their education once Indian Day School on the reserve was completed. During the depression some girls went by train to the convent at St. Jacques in Quebec, where they were taught weaving. Then, Indian Affairs sent some looms to Golden Lake, but didn't send any thread. After they learned that we couldn't afford to get the thread ourselves, they took them back.

As Indians, we were not allowed to vote in Canada until 1960. If we got a college or university education, our Indian status was revoked. In order to do the things that were legislated as illegal to us, we could voluntarily give up our government recognition/identity as Indians and become "enfranchised" as Canadians. To purchase or drink alcohol, we had to show our pink slip that proved our enfranchisement.

Our experiences as veterans are so varied that the inconsistencies leave many questions. Those of us who fought for Canada in the world wars or Korea (all but three able-bodied men from the reserve fought in WWII) were enfranchised (lost our Indian status) in order to fight. Then, instead of being honoured when we returned, we didn't receive any of the benefits that other veterans got, so we ended up living in poverty. Luckily, here we were allowed to stay on the reserve, even though our 'status' was gone; no one seemed to notice. Lately the government has marked veteran's graves with black crosses to acknowledge service.

Women who married non-Indian husbands were also "enfranchised" as Canadians; as a wedding gift, the Indian Agent served us with a $3 government cheque and informed us that we were no longer an Indian. We lost our Indian status and were forced to live off of the reserve away from our relatives. But if non-Indian women married a 'Status' man, they were issued status cards by the government, and became an Indian. In 1985, amendments to bring the Indian Act in line with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms the Canadian government attempted to address this discriminatory legislation. But those white women are still Indians.

There is also a section in the Indian Act that removes membership if we were away from the reserve for more than 5 years. So those who went away to work found themselves off the list when they came back. Those that stayed had few job options. For men there was still trapping, hunting, fishing, canoe making (though it really didn't pay much), and timber drives or hunting/fishing guide work made for limited earning opportunities. Women earned what they could through sewing pajamas for the sanatorium and knitting rawhide for snowshoes. We picked berries along the tracks or after paddling up to Sauer's mountain and camping overnight and sold them at the local lodge or traded them at the general store for groceries or cloth for making clothes. We also tanned deer hides and smoked them by hanging them, sewn like a bag, over a can of smoldering, rotten wood. Women sewed mitts, vests, gauntlet gloves, moccasins, and dresses from leather for us and for tourists.

The rail line had a junction on the reserve between the Ottawa line coming from Barry's Bay and the branch line west to Pembroke. Some of us, to avoid the stigma that had become associated with being Indian, or in order to try to improve our circumstances, rode the train to cities, or north to the bush to try to find work. Some of us jumped the train, avoiding the Indian Agent pass issue, in order to spend the day at Pembroke. The trains allowed transport, but also placed us in jeopardy – wartime soldiers often came to the reserve by train looking for women to take advantage of and abuse. Many of our women were afraid to walk alone to the Village of Golden Lake, as the path ran beside the rail line.

Those of us living on the reserve never really noticed the Great Depression, as our lives stayed the same as before. We used kerosene or coal oil lamps unless we had the luxury of the much brighter Aladdin lamp for light. If there wasn't money for coal oil in the winter, sometimes we'd use a candle to eat supper by, and then go to bed. Winter nights were long. We heated and cooked with wood and used outhouses. There was no hydro on the reserve until the 1950's and then, it was a challenge to get money to wire our houses to hook-up. Most families got water from the lake all year for our needs, except for a few families that had a dug well and a pump. There was also a pump with good water at the second school on the reserve, located at the old log museum building, which many families used.

In the early days on the reserve, we had mid-wives to help with births, and once doctors became available, our women often said that the mid-wives were better at delivering babies.

We treated ourselves for every aliment, because medical services weren't available. People made teas, salves, and poultices from balsam, cedar, spruce, goldenrod, slippery elm and many other plants. We treated everything from infections, coughs, toothaches to burns and fevers. People knew what part of the plants to use and when to gather them, and they gathered them in a good way. Some people still know the medicines today.

At Indian Day School you could go up to senior 4th or grade eight. In those times we came to school in bare feet if we didn't have shoes, and in the winter, once it was cold enough, we could wear moccasins because they wouldn't get wet. In the winter it was hard for some of us to get to school. Sometimes the snow was so high that you couldn't even see the boxcars when the train went through. Some children had to walk up to three or four miles. Some of us came on sleds that our dogs pulled. The third school, located where the post boxes are now, was still one room for all grades. There was a teacher's residence built over top. Someone would come in early and fire-up the wood stove and lunch was cooked there. We were also fed wood-like, government-issue vitamin biscuits and cod liver oil. If there was a good teacher, we would have events like skating parties; if not, things were rougher. After Day School we could go away to boarding school, but Indian Affairs didn't pay for it, and many of us were to poor to go. We could also attend high school in Eganville by train, but you didn't get back till 8 at night. After school we'd have chores like filling the water barrel and wood box.

Some of our children were sent away to the Catholic residential school at Spanish and were subjected to the physical and sexual abuse and isolation that residential school is now known for. In this school system, they cut off our hair, separated the boys from the girls, punished us for speaking our language, and for waving at brothers or sisters from our own families. We were dressed in the way they believed white children should dress, and the girls were trained to be kitchen help and boys to be farm hands. We were always hungry there, and some of us took apples from the root cellar to eat because we were never given any. We were cut off from our families, their caring, and the experience and stories that could teach us our traditions and history. Some of us stayed a long time, came back, and are sad remembering those times. Often our children have suffered for our experience there. We were told by the Mounties, the Indian agent, and children's services, who came to take our children, that "it was for their own good." Many of our children died there.

The implementation of government regulation and policy continued to be prejudiced, inhumane, and disheartening when family relationships suffered again as we lost our children to what has come to be known as the "60's Scoop". Many of our children were taken by Indian Affairs and Children's Aid, through pressure put on young mothers in childbirth, or by taking them, often without our consent, right from our homes, while we were struggling to try to make ends meet. Seventy percent of our children who were taken during this time were placed in non-Indian families. The agencies responsible considered us to be inferior because of our poverty, even though it was imposed upon us by unjust legislation and circumstances. As a result, we were alienated from our children and them from us. But the removal of our children was slowed – and made to involve lengthy and costly court proceedings – when our band administrator, on behalf of Chief and council, wrote to the Children's Aid Society requesting that they follow their own rules and institute the Child Welfare Act only. Over the years, some of our children who were adopted out found out where they were from and returned, but many have not. Some of our relatives, who are strangers to us, still enter our lives from time to time.

A daycare was started in 1979 on the reserve, and today our children's school readiness programming is integrated with Algonquin, English and cultural teachings. Older children attend schools in the surrounding communities, since 'integration' was instituted in the sixties. There is an Algonquin language program at both elementary schools in Eganville, and a Native Studies program at the district high school. We also have a post-secondary education counsellor who helps our college and university students adjust to life on campus and achieve their goals.

In 1966 Indian Affairs hired a band administrator, or manager, and got rid of Indian agents; this was said to give us more autonomy, although all policy was still decided in Ottawa. Golden Lake Indian Reserve #39 became part of the Peterborough District including Alderville, Curve Lake and Scugog reserves. This self-administration policy, whereby we would administer the funding allocated by the Department of Indian Affairs, was an attempt by the government to overcome its previous depleting assimilation and isolation policies, which had resulted in apathy, dependence, poverty, substance abuse, and a well-deserved mistrust of politics and government for our people. But the new policy failed to address the core issue: an insubstantial land base to allow sustainable economic, cultural, traditional, agricultural or resource independence, development and management.

The Omàmiwininì never separated faith from life, and we understood that helping others have a good life would make us happy. We honoured our individual right and responsibility to understand various spiritual beliefs for ourselves, and to choose the right one for ourselves. We have always had our traditional beliefs to guide us, even though they were misunderstood, obstructed, and outlawed by governments and religious organizations since contact times.

Some of our families have been devout Christians for generations, ever since our relatives stayed at the Christian mission at Lake of Two Mountains. In the early reserve days, an Algonquin-speaking mission priest would arrive once a year to perform the sacraments, and all the baptisms and marriages. The first Catholic Church on the reserve, which had two rows of pews and a central box-stove for heat, was built by parishioners; it was replaced by the current in 1954. Now, a priest comes from Eganville to say mass each Sunday. Some of us are strong traditionalists, some walk both Christian and Red Road together and some of us are undecided. Although some of us are willing to share our beliefs, it has never been our way to tell others what they should believe.

In 1977 we built Tennisco Manor for people of various ages requiring supportive housing. A new facility, which will also have self-contained apartments, is currently under construction. In 1984 we built a ball field and in 1989 the Makwa Community Centre for classes, events, recreational activities and presentations, was completed. Also in 1989, Pikwàkanagàn hired a

Community Health Representative; programs for medical transportation, drug and alcohol and community health were instituted. A health manager was hired and the current health centre was built and opened in 1998. Today our community health team at Pikwàkanagàn is leading the way in health transfer according to Heath Canada. In 2003, our current administration building replaced the old cement block one. It houses Chief and council and several departments: education, economic initiatives, social services, lands, estates and membership, and public works.

2009 marks our 22nd annual Traditional Pow Wow at Golden Lake. At this ceremonial gathering our traditions and culture are shared through drumming, song, dance, food, celebration and socializing, allowing us to honour our ways and the broader community an invitation to celebrate them with us. We established Omàmiwininì Pimàdjwowin, currently housed in the old log building, in 2002 in consultation with First Nations membership and Chief and council of Pikwàkanagàn to serve the need of protecting and restoring our cultural traditions and working with our museum collection.

A process of enrolment began in 1992 to identify people of Algonquin descent for the purpose of electing representatives from our respective Algonquin communities. There are currently Algonquin Nation Representatives from Antoine, Ardoch (Snimikobi), Bancroft, Bonnechere, Greater Golden Lake, Mattawa/North Bay, Ottawa, Pikwakanagan, and Sharbot Lake (Shabot Obaadjiwan).

The earth still speaks, but not many people can hear. Our story of Omàmiwininì of the Kitchissippi Valley is now being told as we live it. Although the French, British, settlers, disease, government restriction and assimilation legislation, dishonesty, trade politics, substances, and religious organizations have interfered with our way of life and caused us much harm, we are still here. We are a resilient people who have had to work hard to survive. Here, we remain with knowledge from our ancestors that some of us have found again, about the way to live in this place that we have always held sacred as our home. With having to overcome so many obstacles, to survive with good balance takes time. To date we have never signed any treaty or surrender, nor ceded our lands, and we are currently engaged in land claim and treaty negotiations with the governments of Canada and Ontario.

Information from ‘An Historical Summary of the Algonquin People of Pikwàkanagàn’ taken from the ALGONQUINS OF GOLDEN LAKE CLAIM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY prepared by Joan Holmes & Associates, ‘Algonquin Traditional Culture’ by Kirby J. Whiteduck, and ‘220 Years of Broken Promises’ by Greg Sarazin, as well as compiled stories from Algonquin people, were used in the writing of Our Story.