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Opinion

Path to creator regained

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8/9/1999 File photo - Onondaga Chief Paul Waterman, seated, right, sprinkles sacred tobacco onto a ceremonial fire at the during the ceremony to rebury the remains of Onondagas recovered from the Rome Historical Society. From the left are, Sid Hill, Tony Gonyea, and Jake Edwards with his son, Orris Edwards, 6. Some of the bundled remains can be seen in small bundles on the ground.

By [Dick Case, Post-Standard columnist](#)

This column originally was published in the Herald-American on Aug. 15, 1999. It is one of 10 columns Dick Case picked as his best.

The ancient ones are home.

Saturday, 81 women, men and children of the Onondaga Indian Nation were put back into the hilltop where they'd started on their journey to the Creator maybe 300 years ago.

This pilgrimage was interrupted in 1961 by scientists with shovels, trowels and brooms.

Later, the bones, and the worldly goods buried with the Onondagas in a small village cemetery east of the modern hamlet of Jamesville, were taken away in grocery bags for study.

They were divided, traded, hidden, lost, argued over, maybe even sold. One time, these ancestors of the Onondagas of 1999 were spread out on an airport tarmac at Rome, the better to be photographed, measured, handed around tables, held up to the light.

They needed to be put to rest.

Saturday, they were buried a second time. One of their own, an Onondaga chief, told them he's sorry the journey had been interrupted, that he and his people "struggled to get you back on that path."

Chief Paul Waterman's ancestors returned to the territory carefully wrapped in buckskin tied by bright ribbons, with tobacco smoke, prayers and a pair of hawks flowing over them.

Paul, a Turtle Clan sachem, is assigned by the Iroquois Grand Council to see to it native remains and artifacts are returned to the Onondagas and other nations under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

The chief and the Onondagas have been on this case more than 10 years, including negotiating with the county for title to the one-acre plot east of the penitentiary where the original cemetery and village were exposed by archaeologists in 1961.

This had been the burial ground of an Onondaga settlement more than 300 years ago, when Natives lived in stockaded communities by clans. They farmed, fished, raised

crops. When the energy went out of the soil, the Onondaga moved to better locations, leaving behind the bones and burial goods of their ancestors.

The ancient ones, returned to Mother Earth, then begin a journey to find "the place where the Creator resides, " Paul Waterman explains.

Amateur and professional archaeologists led by Peter Pratt of Syracuse excavated the Onondaga cemetery in 1961 and 1962 with permission from Onondaga County and, according to the archaeologist, the late George Thomas, principal chief of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The team found 59 graves containing about 120 to 130 individuals and hundreds of burial artifacts such as axes, knives, rings, Jesuit crucifixes, clay pipes and glass beads. Peter Pratt regarded his work at what came to be called the "Pen site" as the highlight of his career.

Under his 1961 agreement with the county, material from the "dig" became the property of the two sponsors of the project, the Fort Stanwix Museum in Rome and William Ennis, president of the Brewerton Board of Trade.

Both Ennis and Gilbert Hagerty of Rome have since died. The museum evolved into the Rome Historical Society, the board into the Fort Brewerton Historical Society.

Bill Ennis, a collector of Iroquois artifacts, apparently kept the materials for himself, as did Hagerty. In 1995, Ennis told me he had sold all of the funeral goods from Jamesville to the Rochester Museum and Science Center. He said he didn't know about the skeletons.

His partner left skeletons and objects at the Rome museum when he changed jobs. This was most of the material brought back Saturday: 81 whole or partial skeletons and about 600 burial pieces.

In addition, Onondaga's chief medical examiner, Dr. Mary Jumbelic, came to the hilltop with four wrapped native remains that have been at the county morgue for years, uncovered by chance.

"We found a way to bring them back, " she said.

Another 19 remains are at the Rochester museum, according to Connie Bodner,

director of collections there. She said they were acquired in 1979 from Hagerty.

Asked why these weren't returned for Saturday's ceremonies, the director explained the museum still worked its way through steps defined by federal law.

"They will be rehabilitated," she said. "The wheels turn slowly, but they are moving."

That would leave about 20 individuals lost, somewhere off the path.

Peter Pratt has said he acted properly, with sanctions, and had no regrets about his lifelong study of the Iroquois.

He points out that while removals from burial sites are condemned today by Native Americans, the federal government and some anthropologists, that wasn't true 30 years ago.

The Onondagas agree "things were different then." They resist speaking harshly of elders who may have approved the work. Paul Waterman said he could find nothing about permission from the nation in tribal records.

"What would happen if I walked into your cemetery and started removing people?" the chief asks. "I'd be in jail."

Gordon De Angelo was among Saturday's visitors. He worked with Pratt as an amateur excavator in 1961.

"I was here when the journey was interrupted; it's only fair to see them continue," he said.

Other visitors included County Executive Nick Pirro and Sen. Nancy Lorraine Hoffmann.

Paul Waterman is a wizened elder with a broad sense of humor who uses a wheelchair and says he's 99 years old. His conversation often leaps into the Onondaga tongue that's part of a heritage that swells the chief's chest every time he talks about "our way of life."

He got his assignment of returning lost ancestors about 10 years ago. The work has taken him all over the eastern United States, to abandoned and current "digs" where ancients have been discovered.

Occasionally, the Onondaga has to warn diggers not to disturb a site. Unlike 30 years ago, he now has the force of U.S. law to back him.

Paul first saw his ancestors in boxes at the Rome museum, where he tells me the staff has been extremely cooperative. Rochester, he says, has been less so.

Mary Speicher has worked closely with the chief during her five years as director of the Rome society. She watched Saturday morning as Paul lighted tobacco and prayed over the bones before he drove them to Jamesville.

"It's been an incredible experience for me, and my children, " Mary explained, "a real privilege to be part of this and expand my knowledge."

The remains and artifacts were studied and sorted at Rome by experts with Hartgin Associates of Troy with money provided through the repatriation act. Other expenses were absorbed by the museum or covered by donations from the community, including buckskin provided by Fort Stanwix Museum and ribbon bought by a Rome women's club.

The chief also worked with Kathleen Bouska, museum curator; Eileen Perry of the Onondaga County law department, and Tom Sheedy of the county corrections department.

The county provided food for Saturday's funeral meal that included buffalo meat, beans, corn and strawberries, as well as a tent and excavation of the site - a large circle surrounded by 48 burial holes for the remains and an opening at the center for 17 bundles of artifacts.

Paul supervised the wrapping of bones in bundles - assuring the ancestors, "We're here now; we'll take care of you." Remains are packaged in the skin of the deer, and ribbons picked with colors to represent the earth, the sky, water and the sun. Burial materials were put in white cloth, separate from skeletons.

He pointed out these are important for the dead "so the Creator recognizes us when we get to where he lives." Although personal items are separate in the cemetery, "when you get there, they'll know what things are yours."

Mary Speicher at Rome mentioned that the reburials combined Iroquois tradition and

modern improvisation: "They had to invent a ceremony to rebury the dead. They don't have a tradition for that."

The remains were brought to the circle in white archival boxes, then transferred to burial places by Onondaga men, including Sid Hill, the Iroquois principal chief, and Chief Irving Powless.

After Paul's prayers, 100 spectators were asked to join the Onondagas in throwing handfuls of special soil into the graves before a county crew filled them in. The soil was compost from Mary Speicher's garden.

Then the chief invited everyone to go with him to the tent "for our last meal with the people we just interred."

The plot is part of the penitentiary property and is reached by a driveway from Taylor Road. Access is by permission from prison officials. The cemetery is to be marked with a state historical sign.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254.

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