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# IROQUOIS TEMPERANCE SOCIETIES: FACING MODERNITY ON THE WESTERN RESERVATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Haudenosaunee or Six Nations Iroquois initiated various methods to stem alcohol abuse in their communities throughout New York and Canada. This paper proposes four stages of temperance efforts. These stages include: Initial attempts by Iroquois leaders in the colonial era to appeal to stop the supply of alcohol to their communities; The Seneca Prophet, Handsome Lake's visions and the codification of the Longhouse tradition; the emergence of explicitly Christian-influenced societies; and tribal leaders' inclusion in mainstream North American temperance societies.*

**Key Words:** *Temperance, Native Americans, Iroquois, Early American Republic*

## Temperance in the United States

For a long time historians, social scientists, and even addiction specialists have been interested in discussing the role alcohol has played in the colonial enterprises in Native American territories. Much is made of the use of alcohol by traders, land speculators, and even government officials to manipulate tribes. Much is also made of the role alcohol played in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the exacerbation of poverty and disease on reservations and in Indian communities in cities. What is often missing from the story is the variety of ways in which Indian nations attempted to counteract all of these problems by managing the sale, use, and abuse of alcohol in their territories. This paper examines the ways that the Haudenosaunee or Six Nations Iroquois (including the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora), created solutions to the problems caused by alcohol.

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Among the Iroquois, living within the boundaries of New York State and Ontario, there were four primary, but overlapping, stages in their temperance efforts before the twentieth century. First, there were attempts to control supply of alcohol in their communities. Village and tribal leaders attempted to appeal to colonial authorities to stop liquor traders from entering their territories. Other times, they attempted to make agreements with other tribal leaders to keep out the traders who violated colonial restrictions on trading with Indians. The second and third stages were two differing, though related, methods of moral suasion. One was initiated by Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet. The other wave of movements resembled the Christian-oriented movements that emerged in the broader American environment and were promoted by the missionaries among the tribes. In a fourth stage, Indian organizations and individuals were actually incorporated into the structures of broader North American temperance organizations, some individuals even being elected to national and international offices in popular organizations.

### **Stage One: Initial Attempts**

Native American temperance movements predated many formally organized white temperance groups. As early as 1754, the Algonquian-speaking Nanticoke from southern New York State attempted to develop an agreement with the Onondagas to refrain from alcohol consumption (Beauchamp, 1902). In the 1760s, the Delaware Prophet Neolin, who experienced visions from the Creator, advocated temperance for many of the same reasons that white reformers would later. One historian comments that alcohol “had spread poverty, as hunters traded for liquor instead of for essential materials, such as clothing. It had also led to violence.” Neolin’s message was heard by many surrounding tribes and even by the Senecas from the Genesee Valley (Dowd, 2002, p. 101-102). However, these nascent efforts to stop some of the economic and political disruptions caused by the liquor trade and excessive drinking were not as enduring as the one that would emerge from Seneca territory in 1799.

For the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, Mohawks, and Tuscaroras, the Market Revolution was one more wave in a flood of white Americans’ pressures upon them that began in the colonial era, but was rising even faster during the Early Republic. After the American Revolution, the Iroquois nations saw their extensive hunting territories and agricultural fields reduced to small plots, hardly able to sustain even their dwindling populations. Furthermore, the Iroquois League had been fractured by the events that occurred during and after the American Revolution (Graymont, 1975; Snow 1994; Hauptman, 1999). Many pro-British

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Iroquois warriors and their families fled New York and settled in Canada, in the Grand River region of Ontario. Poverty, violence, disease, disruption of the matrilineal kinship system, and collapse of the childcare patterns all resulted from the massive loss of land and destructive policies of New York State and the Federal government. Intratribal conflict emerged on reservations among various groups who differed in their strategies for negotiating the new world they faced. Christian and so-called “pagan” factions emerged on reservations; other rifts opened between those who wished to trade lands in New York for new lands in the Old Northwest and those who refused to give up their homes. So bad had life become on the reservations that the scholar Anthony Wallace described them as “Slums in the Wilderness” (Wallace, 1974, p. 184).

In the cities, white Americans often observed Indian people at their worst. In 1822 a girl described a scene from the streets of Utica:

Here we first met with Indians. One of them, a female, was excessively intoxicated lying in the open street while her husband[,] hung over in distress [,] . . . tried to rouse her, but in vain. Then finding he was obliged to leave her, he went into a large store before which she lay and . . . offered the storekeeper a sixpence . . . if he would care for his wife. We afterwards saw him going through the street carrying an infant strapped to a board in the Indian manner. (Niagara to Philadelphia, 1822)

The devolution of Iroquois civilization into this state compelled some Iroquois leaders to try to get people to stop drinking.

## **Stage Two: Handsome Lake**

The Seneca prophet Handsome Lake was one of the most successful temperance organizers in Iroquois territory. While other tribal leaders had noted the effects alcohol had on their people, Handsome Lake’s promotion of abstinence fit into a whole system of spirituality that spread across the western New York tribes in the subsequent decades. Handsome Lake, who personally suffered greatly from alcohol abuse, received a series of visions from the Creator in 1799. One of these visions was a very vivid picture of the effects of alcohol on individuals and Iroquois societies. His first vision indicated that four evils, “whiskey, witchcraft, love magic, and abortion-and-sterility medicine,” were to be banished from Iroquoia. In one of his visions, those who insisted on drinking in this world were punished in the afterlife by being forced to drink “molten metal” (Wallace, 1974, p. 245). Handsome Lake’s message did not emphasize individual moral reformation alone,

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but encouraged each nation's community to promote sobriety among the people. Tribal councils on each of the reservations were often accompanied by public harangues of abusers and commands to stop drinking. After Handsome Lake's death, his relatives formalized his message into a set of rituals that are still performed regularly in Iroquois communities (Wallace, 1974, pp. 303-304, 335).

The Seneca leader Red Jacket, though often critical of Handsome Lake, nonetheless embraced his temperance message. In 1801 Red Jacket told observers that "we have all agreed to quit the use of liquor[,] which you must be in some measure convinced of from what you see at the present meeting." Despite his animosity toward liquor and his resentment about it being introduced into Indian communities, he never fully gave up drinking (Wallace, 1974, p. 306). In 1822, a white traveler in the vicinity of Buffalo Creek observed that Red Jacket "was very much intoxicated and reeled as we met" (Niagara to Philadelphia, 1822). The temptation of alcohol for those well-intentioned backsliders is partially attributable to the growth of white settlement in places like Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo (Wallace, 1974, p. 309). Of course, the broader U.S. community also had its problems with alcohol and many non-Indian reformers attempted to stop alcohol abuse in their own ways.

Historians point to the publication of Benjamin Rush's work, *Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Mind and Body* in 1784, as the start of white temperance societies. However, it was not until the early nineteenth century that we see significant organizations trying to change human behavior through "moral suasion" upon the heavy drinkers. The Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance was started in 1813, "by gentlemen upset by the spread of drunkenness, social disorder, and disrespect for society's upper classes." Such local groups were eventually strengthened by the establishment of a nationwide organization, The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, in 1826. This organization had a direct link to many of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening, which was a large growth in evangelical Protestantism and the flourishing of several new sects (Mintz, 1995, pp. 72-73; Cross, 1950, p. 211).

For native-born white Americans, European immigrants, and members of the nations of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois League, facing the 1820s and 1830s offered similar challenges. The traditional labor organization of all the groups had been nearly erased by the new market economy and the emerging transportation revolution. For newly arrived German and Irish immigrants and native-born U.S. citizens, traditional labor systems based on a master-journeyman relationship, began, as one historian puts it, "to crumble under pressure from the burgeoning market [ . . . ] [M]ost masters and journeymen made a protracted downward journey

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to wageworker status through a process of specialization of task, deskilling, and destruction of the craft" (Way, 1993, p. 1399). All of these problems were exacerbated by the presence of liquor, around which many working people coalesced to relax, to celebrate, or to drown their sorrows. Estimates suggest that adults in the U.S. drank "between 6.6 and 7.1 gallons of alcohol" per year, twice the rate of present consumption (Pegram, 1998, p. 7).

### **Stage Three: Christian-Influenced Organizations**

The third stage of the Iroquois Temperance Societies began around the 1830s. These organizations were modeled more closely after those organizations started by whites. Among both groups, the membership, leadership profile, methods, and effects of pro-temperance groups varied with each passing decade and from one specific location to the next. For both populations, societies were organized in response to real misery caused by very high consumption rates of alcohol.

Non-Indian temperance societies have been criticized by some scholars, and in the minds of the general American public, as being overly moralistic and paternalistic gestures of middle-class values toward workers and immigrants. White reform movements on Indian reservations – especially those led by missionaries – have received even more condemnation and often deservedly so. However, temperance organizations were not necessarily imposed by outside groups, although they were often supported and even linked to broader temperance efforts.

I argue that the patterns behind Iroquois temperance societies follow some of the broader patterns of such societies in the U.S. more generally. Yet, despite having some of the similar ebbs and flows in membership numbers and even some shared methods as non-Indian temperance groups, there were always significant elements of their history that reflected the unique experiences and needs of Iroquois people. What made the Iroquois movements distinct was that the societies either sought to reconnect factions across the inter-confederacy rifts, or, alternatively, exacerbated them. Additionally, Iroquois societies all had to balance methods that might be considered "traditional" with those of the Protestant-inspired methods of societies that surrounded the reservations.

In 1830, the Six Nation Forest Temperance Society was founded in Canada, by the exiles from the Iroquois League who had fled there after the American Revolution ("Iroquois in Council," 1890; Noel, 1995, p. 15). During the same year, Tuscarora minister James Cusick initiated a temperance society on the Tuscarora

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Reservation in New York. Two years later, the two societies joined forces. When participation seemed to be on the decline, Graymont notes that Tuscarora Chief Samuel Jacobs,

conceived the plan of having the temperance people sponsor a feast on New Year's Day, even as the longhouse people did at midwinter. Jacobs was a church member and later a deacon and lay preacher, but he was also, in many respects, a bridge between two religions and between two cultures. (Graymont, 1969, p. 152)

By 1845, there were 231 Tuscaroras “pledged to temperance” (Graymont, 1969, p. 152). In some ways, success can be credited to the ability of the leaders to work with the factions within the community rather than to be exclusive of oppositional groups.

Around the same time various societies developed on other western New York reservations. Though the influence of the white Protestant missionaries and their churches is evident, there seems not to have been quite so heavy a hand played by the missionaries as with other assimilationist efforts. An Onondaga Lodge was founded in 1830 (“Pow-wow Marks 100<sup>th</sup> Year,” 1930; “Constitution,” 1835). In the 1840s, in a report on the Cattaraugus Seneca Reservation, the missionary Asher Bliss commented that “sabbath school books, temperance papers, and religious periodicals, have been circulated among the children and youth. Temperance societies have been patronized by nearly all the chiefs and leading men on the reservation.” Thus, at least some of the methods of promoting temperance did not differ markedly from similar white organizations. The use of the temperance pledge was widespread and had “received the signatures of a large majority of the population, of all parties, on the Washingtonian plan.” The “Washingtonian Plan” stemming from the Washington Total Abstinence Society founded in 1840, emphasized individual commitment not to drink and to the idea of saving the young individuals rather than targeting society’s problems as a whole. Such an emphasis helped to distinguish Washingtonianism from other mid-nineteenth-century temperance societies and it was also a step away from the external social pressure that the Handsome Lake tradition exerted over the Senecas and others (Schoolcraft, 1847, 2002, p. 490; Alexander, 1988, pp. 763-785; Pegram, 1998, p. 29).

The movement on the Cattaraugus Reservation was supported heartily by Reverend Bliss, who promoted individual repentance and encouraged emotional commitment to God as did many Second Great Awakening preachers. After arriving on Cattaraugus in the early 1830s, he made liberal use of the “anxious seat” where individual Senecas would “express their determination to seek salvation,”

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often ending up in tears by the end of the service. He was particularly delighted one November Sabbath in 1832 when ten individuals came forward to the anxious seat and shared personal sentiments publicly. Such confessions mimicked the methods of the Washingtonian movement, too, whose “centerpiece [...] was the ‘experience speech,’ in which a reformed drinker discussed frankly and vividly his own struggle with alcohol.” Although Bliss does not describe presiding over *experience* speeches directly, he was well steeped in temperance literature and preached sermons on the subject frequently.

He became very interested in the writings of fellow missionary Stephen Spaulding’s work for temperance among the Hawaiian Islanders and read his and other temperance pieces in his spare moments throughout the 1830s. Bliss wavered between reveling in successes and lamenting his failures throughout his career. In 1841, just prior to his note about the success of the Washingtonians, he sadly confided in his journal that the abuse of liquor was still widespread and he hoped for a “thoroughgoing radical change that shall affect the heart” (Alexander, 1988, pp. 763-785; Bliss).

Of course, Bliss’s anxious seat and the Washingtonian experience speech shared some elements of past temperance movements in Seneca society. Part of Handsome Lake’s message was the confession. His first vision indicated that minor transgressions of the laws laid out by the Creator could be confessed to Handsome Lake himself; major violations needed to be confessed to the Creator directly (Wallace, 1874, p. 241). This connection would not have been lost on a society that for forty years had been considering the syncretic elements of Handsome Lake’s vision and the various competing Christian denominations on the reservations.

Drinking was never eradicated – as it was not eradicated in white communities with the passage of the Maine Law in 1851 and in other states that passed similar laws. Yet, the movement had some effect. In 1853, an American reporter noted that “at a meeting of the Six Nation Indians, at Brantford[, Ontario] [...] ardent spirits were offered for sale. As soon as this was discovered, the Chiefs seized them and poured them upon the ground, a libation to temperance” (Untitled, 1853). As with the non-Indian temperance societies throughout the U.S., we begin to see a decline in the interest in, or at least coverage of, temperance societies in missionary writings and reporters’ accounts in the 1850s. Whether this was due to actual decline in consumption or in coverage of the topic in the press is difficult to discern. By the mid-1850s, reform-minded journalists were consumed with the rising tensions between pro- and anti-slavery factions in Kansas and the coming conflagration of the U.S. Civil War.

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Temperance societies were not unique to the Iroquois. In 1829, the Cherokee National Temperance Society was formed. In 1830 and 1831 the Chickasaws and Choctaws formed their own temperance societies. These developments were certainly part of the same pattern of emerging temperance societies all along the East Coast. However, population size, variations in their political structures, the greater impact of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and the more overt legal issues associated with the southern tribes' movements helped to distinguish their experiences with temperance from those of the Iroquois nations. The Cherokees' society was more overtly political than the Iroquois societies seemed to be. Certainly, Iroquois resistance to alcohol sales and alcohol abuse in their territory was in part a response to the association of alcohol with their lands being hemorrhaged into the hands of whites, often aided by Indians under the influence. In the Cherokee Nation, the society itself became a major political body. After Georgia banned the Cherokee National Council, the society became a surreptitious way to maintain the old leadership and to fight the pending removal program (Ishii, 2008, pp. 76, 91, 101; Hayes, 1991, p. 299).

#### **Stage Four: Inclusion in the Mainstream**

In the post-Civil War Era and the Gilded Age, temperance began to re-emerge in all of its forms. Two non-Indian organizations that eventually found counterparts on New York reservations were the International Order of Good Templars and the Women's Christian Temperance Movement. In October of 1877, the month when the followers of the Longhouse tradition met to recite the tenets of Handsome Lake, a group of representatives from the Oneidas, Senecas, Onondagas, and Cayugas, in addition to three whites, helped to institute a lodge of the Order of Good Templars on Onondaga. The authors of the article linked the current Iroquois temperance movements to Handsome Lake, crediting him with beginning "to teach Total Abstinence about the year 1800, and exert[ing] a most beneficial influence among the Six Nations." In the establishment of the Onondaga Good Templars we see the participation of "Pagans, Methodists and Episcopalians, in their religious faith, most of them people of some culture, and a few of good English education." Although the organization seemed to be accepting of all the faiths represented among the Six Nations, the service was held at the Methodist Episcopal church opened with organ music and the singing of a "devotional piece followed by a fervent appeal to the Throne of Grace by the secretary" Reverend Welcome Smith ("Temperance – Interesting Event," 1877). While we must note the Christian hegemony in these services, the openness to all factions contributed to some of its

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success. By 1890 there were about 100 members of the lodge and, according to one estimate, “the consumption of whisky, lager, hard cider, and other intoxicating liquors is less by nearly one-half than twenty years ago” (Bruce, 1896, p. 1057).

Iroquois people even got involved in the broader “white” temperance societies. One of these was Oronhyatekha, “Burning Sky,” a Mohawk Physician from Ontario, whose Christian name was Peter Martin. He became involved with the Independent Order of Grand Templars in the 1870s, even serving as “Worthy Counselor” in the 1880s (equivalent of the Vice President of the organization). Oronhyatekha had largely assimilated into the white society and was well-traveled, but frequented his home community. In many ways he became separated from the reservation life in Canada (Fahey, 1996).

Some temperance organizations seemed to be born out of existing conflicts on the reservations. A case of this kind is found in the development of the Hiawatha Women’s Christian Temperance Union in 1900. The first president of the HWCTU, Eliza Pierce, explained in a newspaper interview that the organization was part of an attempt to curtail the negative influences of Oneidas and Mohawks from outside the reservation, who often drank heavily and encouraged Onondagas to do the same. The ranks of the officers of the union were filled with many young women from the boarding school environments. Jesse Waterman had graduated from Hampton Institute and Frances Cook from the Lincoln Institute; others attended “the State school on the reservation” (Kimbart, 1902). The Hiawatha WCTU co-existed with the longer-standing organizations. Thus, many of the leaders, too, were those who had been directly involved with white society.

In 1902, William Beauchamp described the history of temperance movements among the Iroquois, referring to the Six Nations’ Temperance League as being “peculiarly Iroquois, confined to Indian membership and working on its own lines.” What the relationship between organizations was is unclear at this point. However, the methods to promote temperance are remarkably similar to those used 100 years before. Meetings coincided with the October councils and activities included speeches on the subject and temperance bands (Beauchamp, 1902). They depended alternatively at times on individual reform impulses and at other times on social pressures and the desire to reform society as a whole.

## Conclusions

Throughout the nineteenth century there was a dynamic interplay between non-Indian and Iroquois societies regarding this reform effort. From the evidence relating to temperance, the overt paternalism does not seem quite as strong as with

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white impositions of economic structures, housing, or non-temperance aspects of religion. By the early 1900s, there were co-existing temperance groups, some of which met in October, in line with the Code of Handsome Lake, others which seemed to be used by acculturated factions to resist social turmoil inflamed by people from other reservations. Yet, both those temperance supporters who converted to Christianity and those who followed some version of the Longhouse traditions, all saw the alternatives to temperance as quite glaring and destructive.

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