

Who we are as Anishinabe: Mike Swan

Today the Anishinaabe-Ojibwe people constitute the second largest tribe in North America. With reservations and communities living on our ancestral homelands the Ojibwe are spread out across five American States and three Canadian Provinces- a geographical area unmatched by any other tribe.

The fundamental essence of Anishinaabe life is unity. The oneness of all things. In our view history is expressed in the way that life is lived each day. Key to this is the belief that harmony with all created things has been achieved. The people cannot be separated from the land with its cycle of seasons or from the other mysterious cycles of living things - of birth and growth and death and new birth. The people know where they come from. The story is deep in their hearts. It has been told in history and legends, in dreams and in symbols. It is in the songs a grandmother sings to the child in her arms and in the web of family names, stories, and memories that the child learns as he or she grows older. This is a story of the spirit - individual and collective.

We are one people with three names. Those names are Chippewa, Ojibway and Anishinabe. Each name has it's own history.

Chippewa "Chip-eh-wa"

The name Chippewa is the "official" name as recognized by the United States Government and is used on all treaties. As such, this name is often used when talking in an official matter, or informally to non-Indian people.

Ojibway "Oh-jib-way"

This name is the most popular and the most proper as given it was given by our enemies. We use this when talking with other Indian people or someone more familiar than the above "Chippewa". It has many different spellings; Ojibway, Odjibwa, Odjibwe, Ojibwag, Ochipoy, Tschipeway, Chepeways, Achipoes and others. There is some controversy over it's real meaning, but suffice it to say it means, "to pucker." "There are some that believe it is due to our puckered seam moccasins that were sewn that way to keep the snow out.

Anishinabeg "Ann-eh-shin-ah-beg"

This is the word that we call ourselves. Generally, it is reserved for Anishinabe people to refer to themselves, although there are some that would rather be known by this name. Actually, the Anishinabe are also people that live in our creation stories. They are the original people and were very weak.

One meaning is "original people as opposed to those other people who came later." Another meaning is "Original people meaning creators, as opposed to those who cannot create". Connotations of the first meaning are that the "original people" came down from the sky.

There is a need to understand "Where did we come from? How did we get here?" Then you need to understand our history. It was not until recent that it has been written down.

Teachings of the Seven Prophets: The Seven Fires

The source for this story is *The Mishomis book : the voice of the Ojibway* by Edward Benton-Banai. Printed in St. Paul, Minn. Published by Indian Country Press, copyright 1979.

Seven prophets came to the Anishinabe. They came at a time when the people were living a full and peaceful life on the North Eastern coast of North America. These prophets left the people with seven predictions of what the future would bring. Each of the prophecies was called a fire and each fire referred to a particular era of time that would come in the future. Thus, the teachings of the seven prophets are now called the "Seven Fires".

The first prophet said to the people,

"In the time of the First Fire, the Anishinabe nation will rise up and follow the sacred shell of the Midewiwin Lodge. The Midewiwin Lodge will serve as a rallying point for the people and its traditional ways will be the source of much strength. The Sacred Megis will lead the way to the chosen ground of the Anishinabe. You are to look for a turtle shaped island that is linked to the purification of the earth. You will find such an island at the beginning and end of your journey. There will be seven stopping places along the way. You will know the chosen ground has been reached when you come to a land where food grows on water. If you do not move you will be destroyed."

The second prophet told the people,

"You will know the Second Fire because at this time the nation will be camped by a large body of water. In this time the direction of the Sacred Shell will be lost. The Midewiwin will diminish in strength. A boy will be born to point the way back to the traditional ways. He will show the direction to the stepping stones to the future of the Anishinabe people."

The third prophet said to the people,

"In the Third Fire the Anishinabe will find the path to their chosen ground, a land in the west to which they must move their families. This will be the land where food grows on water."

The Fourth Fire was originally given to the people by two prophets. They come as one. They told of the coming of the light skinned race.

One of the prophets said,

"You will know the future of our people by the face of the light skinned race wears. If they come wearing the face of brotherhood then there will come a time of wonderful change for generations to come. They will bring new knowledge and articles that can be joined with the knowledge of this country. In this way, two nations will join to make a mighty nation. This new nation will be joined by two more so that four will form the mightiest nation of all. You will know the face of the brotherhood if the light skinned race comes carrying no weapons, if they come bearing only their knowledge and a hand shake."

The other prophet said,

"Beware if the light skinned race comes wearing the face of death. You must be careful because the face of brotherhood and the face of death look very much alike. If they come carrying a weapon ... beware. If they come in suffering ... They could fool you. Their hearts may be filled with greed for the riches of this land. If they are indeed your brothers, let them prove it. Do not accept them in total trust. You shall know that the face they wear is one of death if the rivers run with poison and fish become unfit to eat. You shall know them by these many things."

The fifth prophet said,

"In the time of the Fifth Fire there will come a time of great struggle that will grip the lives of all native people. At the warning of this Fire there will come among the people one who holds a promise of great joy and salvation. If the people accept this promise of a new way and abandon the old teachings, then the struggle of the Fifth Fire will be with the people for many generations. The promise that comes will prove to be a false promise. All those who accept this promise will cause the near destruction of the people."

The prophet of the Sixth Fire said,

"In the time of the Sixth Fire it will be evident that the promise of the First Fire came in a false way. Those deceived by this promise will take their children away from the teachings of the Elders. Grandsons and granddaughters will turn against the Elders. In this way the Elders will lose their reason for living ... they will lose their purpose in life. At this time a new sickness will come among the people. The balance of many people will be disturbed. The cup of life will almost become the cup of grief."

At the time of these predictions, many people scoffed at the prophets. They then had medicines to keep away sickness. They were then healthy and happy as a people. These were the people who chose to stay behind in the great migration of the Anishinabe. These people were the first to have contact with the light skinned race. They would suffer most.

When the Fifth Fire came to pass, a great struggle did indeed grip the lives of all native people. The light skinned race launched a military attack on the Indian people throughout the country aimed at taking away their land and their independence as a free and sovereign people. It is now felt that the false promise that came at the end of the Fifth Fire was the material and riches embodied in the way of life of the light skinned race. Those who abandoned the ancient ways and accepted this new promise were a big factor in causing the near destruction of the native people of this land.

When the Sixth Fire came to be, the words of the prophet rang true as children were taken away from the teachings of the Elders. The boarding school era of "civilizing" Indian children had begun. The Indian language and religion were taken from the children. The people started dying at an early age ... they had lost their will to live and their purpose in living.

In the confusing times of the Sixth Fire, it is said that a group of visionaries came among the Anishinabe. They gathered all the priests of the Midewiwin Lodge. They told the priests of the Midewiwin Way was in danger of being destroyed. They gathered all the sacred bundles. They gathered all the scrolls that recorded the ceremonies. All these things were placed in a hollowed out log from the Ironwood tree. Men were lowered over a cliff by long ropes. They dug a hole in the cliff and buried the log where no one could find it. Thus the teachings of the Elders were hidden out of sight but not out of memory. It is said that when the time came that the Indian people could practice their religion without fear a line boy would dream where the Ironwood log, full of sacred bundles and scrolls, was buried. He would lead his people to the place.

The seventh prophet that came to the people long ago said to be different from the other prophets. He was young and had a strange light in his eyes. He said,

"In the time of the Seventh Fire New People will emerge. They will retrace their steps to find what was left by the trail. Their steps will take them to the Elders who they will ask to guide them on their journey. But many of the Elders will have fallen asleep. They will awaken to this new time with nothing to offer. Some of the Elders will be silent because no one will ask anything of them. The New People will have to be careful in how they approach the Elders. The task of the New People will not be easy."

"If the New People will remain strong in their quest the Water Drum of the Midewiwin Lodge will again sound its voice. There will be a rebirth of the Anishinabe Nation and a rekindling of old flames. The Sacred Fire will again be lit.

"It is this time that the light skinned race will be given a choice between two roads. If they choose the right road, then the Seventh Fire will light the Eighth and final Fire, an eternal fire of peace, love brotherhood and sisterhood. If the light skinned race makes the wrong choice of the roads, then the destruction which they brought with them in coming to this country will come back at them and cause much suffering and death to all the Earth's people."

Traditional Mide people of Ojibway and people from other nations have interpreted the "two roads" that face the light skinned race as the road to technology and the other road to spiritualism. They feel that the road to technology represents a continuation of headlong rush to technological development. This is the road that has led to modern society, to a damaged a seared Earth. Could it be that the road to technology represents a rush to destruction? The road to spirituality represents the slower path that traditional native people have traveled and are now seeking again. This Earth is not scorched on this trail. The grass is still growing there.

The prophet of the Fourth Fire spoke of a time when "two nations will join to make a mighty nation."

He was speaking of the coming of the light skinned race and the face of brotherhood that the light skinned Brother could be wearing. It is obvious from the history of this country that this was not the face worn by the light skinned race as a whole. That might nation spoken of in the Fourth Fire has never been formed.

If the Natural people of the Earth could just wear the face of brotherhood, we might be able to deliver our society from the road to destruction. Could we make the two roads that today represent two clashing world views come together to form a mighty nation? Could a Nation be formed that is guided by respect for all living things? Are we the people of the Seventh Fire?

Migrations story of the Ojibwe

When the seven prophets came to the Ojibwe with instructions about life from Creator, the People were living in the east on the shores of the Great Salt Water. There were so many people that these words have been told through generations, "The people were so many and powerful that if one was to climb the highest mountain and look in all directions, they would not be able to see the end of the Ojibwe nation." Life was full and there was ample food from the land and sea. Because life was so full, some amongst the People doubted the migration predictions of the prophets and there was much discussion about the migration and the prophecies of the Seven Fires. Huge gatherings were held to discuss the plans. Many didn't want to leave, many did and there was one group who supported the migration but agreed to stay behind and guard the eastern doorway and care for the eastern fire of the people. They were called the Daybreak People. (Today some believe these are the people on the east coast of Canada and the USA known as the Wabanaki. The Passamaquoddy are a part of the Wabanaki.)

So, those believing in the migration started off, traveling first to the island shaped like a turtle, as the first prophet instructed. (This area is probably somewhere on the St. Lawrence River around present day Montreal.) There were many ceremonies held there as the people sought instructions. After some time the People began their journey west again. Along the way some clans and families stopped and set up permanent camps. It is now believed that the People continuing moved along the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River and that their second major stop was around what is known today as Niagara Falls.

From here they traveled to what is today Lakes Huron and Erie. It is here that the Ojibwe and Iroquois confronted each other. The dispute was later settled when the Iroquois gave the Ojibwe a Wampum Belt made of a special shell. The Pipe was shared and a peace was sealed. The People began moving westward again and stopped when they came to a large body of fresh water as explained in the prophecy. (This was probably along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.) At this point many went off in search of a way across the water. There were other tribes that had joined the Ojibwe in this migration; the Odawa, and Potawatomi. They split off and travelled into what is called Michigan. Some went south and others settled down to wait for more instructions. Generations passed until the People were instructed to travel north. Eventually they stopped at the place where "food grows on water," as told in another prophecy. More and more Ojibwe came to the largest island in this area (now known as Manitoulin Island) until this area became known as the capital of the Ojibwe nation.

For some time the People stayed on this island, but then many set off to what is now the Sault Ste. Marie area. Because of the large abundance of food in the area many people settled here also and this became the fifth stopping place of the migration. From here the People split into two large groups - one group following the northern shore of (Lake Superior) another large body of water and another followed the southern shore.

The northern group settled on an island (today known as Spirit Island) at the west end of the big lake. Some of the southern group also settled here where they found "the food that grows on water," (wild rice) believed to be a sacred gift from Creator. This became the sixth major stopping place of the Ojibwe people. But, something was still missing. One of the prophets had spoken of a turtle-shaped island at the end of their journey. The southern group had seen such an island on their journey. The People returned and settled on the island known today as Madeline Island), calling it Mo-ning-wun-a-dawn-ing or "the place that was dug".

At last the migration had found their sacred ground. It is thought it took about 500 years to complete the journey, which began around 900AD. The Ojibwe people have been living in the area now called Minnesota since 1400AD, 400+ years before any Europeans settled in this area.