Beth Horihan

Native Americans in Wisconsin: Mohican Indians

The state of Wisconsin is home to several tribes of Native Americans. These tribes often have received tribal sovereignty, independence from the federal government. The “people of the water that are never still” make up the Munsee Community in Stockbridge, Wisconsin (Mohican History , p. 1). This tribe is better known as the Mohican Indians. In today’s society, it has become ever more important to help students examine topics from multiple perspectives. With the Mohican tribe has an amazing history, culture, and story of attaining their tribal sovereignty there are several ways that learning about their culture can allow a broadened horizon for students.

The Mohican tribe began as a group that eventually split into a few separate tribes along the eastern coast of the United States. In their settlement by the Mahicannituck River, the people had easy access to food, water, and transportation. Ultimately their territory reached from Lake Champlain to Manhattan Island and Scoharie Creek to Massachusetts and Connecticut. In 1609, the Dutch trader Henry Hudson arrived and established a trading post in 1614. After this point, tension developed between the Mohicans and nearby tribes who sought beaver and otter furs to trade with the Dutch. Due to the tensions the Mohicans moved to Massachusetts and Connecticut. Here the English attempted to civilize them. In 1738, John Sergeant set up a mission in the Mohican village that became known as Stockbridge. Much of the Mohican land was lost and they became reliant upon the Europeans.

Disease spread quickly and the tribe’s numbers shrunk dramatically. The members then supported the colonists in their revolt, but after losing a great number of their people in the battle were forced out of their village. They then received land from the Oneida tribe near Oneida Lake and set up a new village there in the 1780s. They were only allowed to remain on this land until 1818 when New York began attempting to push the Native Americans out of the state. Many of the tribe left early and traveled with John Metoxen to settle with the Miami and Delaware tribes. However, when they arrived the Delaware land had already been sold. It was not until a treaty was signed in 1822 by the federal government and the Menominee and Ho-Chunk tribes that the Mohicans, both that had already left New York and those that had remained were able to begin moving to new land by the Fox River in Wisconsin. (Mohican History , pp. 1-4)

Upon arriving, the Mohican people had to set up yet another village. They began by building a church and a school. Members of the tribe became not only some of the first English speaking settlers in Wisconsin but also the first public school teacher and first Protestant minister. When Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1832, many members of the tribe feared they would be forced out of their homes again and began attempting to move toward Kansas and Oklahoma. Of those that did not die on the journey, many returned to Wisconsin which became a state in 1848. Shortly after, members of the Munsee tribe joined the Mohican tribe. The struggles for the tribe were far from over though. (Mohican History , p. 5)

Tension over the Indian Removal Act remained and caused divisions amongst the members of the tribe. Ultimately, some chose to renounce their status as an Indian and join the ranks of a tax paying United States citizen. Then, in 1856, the tribe, which was now referred to as the Stockbridge- Munsee, moved “to the township of Red Springs and Bartelme in Shawano Country (Mohican History , p. 5).” Here farming was difficult due to the fact that the land was sandy and swamp like. Therefore, the tribe turned to forestry as a main part of their economy. Finances were low despite the work done in forestry. Many items such as wampum belts were sold in order to help people survive. In 1887 the General Allotment Act, dividing the reservation into areas of private property for tribe member, was put into place, and many people were forced to sell their land to commercial foresters. This brought with it property taxes, that the people could not afford, to those on the reservation who owned land which resulted in the loss of much of the tribe’s land. (Stockbridge- Munsee History, p. 1) Coupled with the Great Depression in the 1930s these conditions took a major toll on the people of the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe. Thankfully, John Collier among others advocated for the Native American tribes. With the help of the advocates the Indian Reorganization Act was passed, and by 1937. (Mohican History , p. 5) This act allowed for the tribe to once again set up their own government and write their own constitution. In addition, 2500 acres of the land lost was place in a trust and the tribe had formed its new constitution for its government. The remainder of the 15000 acres that was purchased with funds from the IRA was returned in 1972, and a compensation for the land that was not repurchased was given to the Stockbridge- Munsee people. (p. 5)

Today, the tribe has a reservation in northeast Wisconsin. The nature of the reservation has recovered since the struggle that the Stockbridge-Munsee people endured. There are now forests with an abundance of various wildlife. The homes on the reservation range from the original homes built on the reservation to apartments and mobile homes. Numerous other buildings are present on the reservation including The Mohican Family Center, Health and Wellness Center, and The North Star Mohican Casino. The members of the tribe reside both on the reservation and places across the globe, and several residents on the reservation do not belong to the tribe at all. In addition the children attend local public schools and many member of the tribe have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, educators, and many other professions. (Mohican History , pp. 7-8)

Throughout their history, the Mohican Native Americans have faced numerous challenges. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Mohican tribe partook in seasonal work. Spring was for gathering sap in the Sugar Bush to make syrup. Winter was for repair of gear, basket making, and designing beautiful coverings for their homes by embroidering with things they found in nature. Also, winter served as a time to educate the youth through stories, such as the myth about Waunthut Mennitoow, the great Creator, which taught “…how to relate to each person…all the gifts of the Creator, and how to live with respect and peace (Mohican History , p. 1; Mohican Indian Legends, 2011, p. 1).” Each person in the tribe had a role. The women cared for the children, garden, and home. Homes were either wik-wams made of “bent sapling covered with hides or bark” or long-houses which were “long as a hundred feet” with bark covered roofs which housed several families (p. 1). The men’s roles were to find food or warriors, either to defend themselves or tribes with whom temporary alliances were made. Much of this tradition, especially religion, was lost at the arrival of the Europeans who prevented the tribe’s seasonal work schedule.

When so much of the Mohican tribe’s culture has only just begun to be re-found through research, the importance of multiple perspectives being used in the classroom becomes ever more important. According to Cortes modern students “should be able to identify, grapple with, and understand multicultural perspectives (Tamura, 1996, p. 2).” In order to do this, students must understand the cultures and histories of their own and other people. This is especially important because history often ends up uncovering “some of life’s complex web of interconnections (p. 4).” The more students understand how their culture intermixed with the cultures of others, the better the communication between peers and teachers can become. If the European settlers had used multiple perspectives when addressing the Mohican tribe, perhaps the people of the tribe would not have endured so much suffering. So, now by teaching students this approach we can help preserve identities of members of society while preventing future suffering due to lack of understanding.

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