

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 6: NATIVE HISTORIANS DO STAND UP

[Archival from the Richard Pryor Show, 1977]

RICHARD PRYOR (ARCHIVAL): *I'd like to introduce now a new talent on the show. Mr. Charlie Hill. Please welcome him.*

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *Hi-howareya, hi-howareya, hi howareya...My name is Charlie Hill. I'm an Oneida, I'm from Wisconsin. It's part of the Iroquois nation. My people are from Wisconsin. We used to be from New York. We had a little real estate problem.*

HOST: In the Fall of 1977, Comedy legend Richard Pryor showcased the young and potentially provocative comedian Charlie Hill on his show. With television cameras beaming his performance across the nation, a nervous yet determined Hill used the canvas of history to share his truth, becoming the first Native comedian ever to perform on national television.

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *I usually have problems doing my act, you know, because I know a lot of you white people have never seen an Indian do stand-up comedy before, you know. For so long, you probably thought that Indians never had a sense of humor, you know? We never thought you were too funny, either.*

HOST: It was a groundbreaking moment in television history. But what most people don't know is that Charlie Hill's act – his ability to share the Oneida story with comedy – was a link in a chain that led all the way back to the Great Depression, and to a young man named Oscar Archiquette.

Archiquette was also a member of the Oneida Nation, or Onyota'a:ka, which means "People of the Standing Stone," a branch of the Iroquois in Wisconsin. In early 1939, Archiquette picked up a pencil and began to write down his life story in a spiral notebook. He wrote frankly about the ups and downs of his life. Here, read by Oneida lawyer and activist Gerry Hill.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I was born at the time when raspberries blossom. My father's parents came from Oneida Castle, New York. My grandmother was a daughter of a chief. By 1920, I was on the bum. In February 1939, I was transferred to the Oneida Language Project. It is through this training that I am able to write my own language.*

HOST: Archiquette was one of a dozen Oneida who wrote their stories down. The assignment for the Oneida Language Project, a part of the Federal Writers' Project.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I was one of the first Indians to be contacted by linguist Floyd Lounsbury to help set up the vowels of our language. I was recommended because I speak both English and Oneida languages fluently. The linguist taught us the phonetic alphabet, which I mastered in four days. On the fifth day I went out in the field writing stories in Oneida.*

HOST: Archiquette's assignment was nothing less than revitalizing the Oneida nation, a group on the brink of disappearing.

[Theme music starts]

HOST: This is The People's Recorder, and I'm your host, Chris Haley. This is the podcast that explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project: the 1930s program that set out to document the United States. It ended up raising just as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

In this episode, the Oneida rediscover their language and reclaim their story. This is about Native Americans writing during the Depression, documenting a crisis in real time. They hoped their accounts might hold clues for challenges faced by later generations.

As an author and archivist, I am passionate about stories like this. The Oneida were a people who were in danger of having their culture and their very identity erased. But they were able to push back and not only preserve and affirm ownership of their own identity but pass it on proudly.

Also, just a heads up: when we say Oneida, we're usually talking about the Oneida people. But sometimes we're referring to the place they live in Wisconsin, the Oneida Nation just west of Green Bay.

The Federal Writers' Project was designed to put unemployed Americans back to work with a mandate to gather history and local stories. A main goal was to publish a series of travel guidebooks, often called the WPA guides. For gathering people's stories, the Writers' Project also employed what was then a fairly new practice, known as oral history. The program was a small part of the larger WPA, a key component of President Roosevelt's New Deal for getting Americans back to work

Gordon McLester was an Oneida historian mentored by Oscar Archiquette.

GORDON MCLESTER: *The WPA was a work program that was set up by the government back in the 30's. At that time, there was virtually no work around anywhere and especially on the reservation. They would have small work projects within the different towns that needed repair. Men would work on the side of the road clearing brush, trying to repair the roads.*

HOST: A WPA job was a welcome paycheck. But on the reservation, working for the U.S. government had a thorny history, and Archiquette had his own complicated history. He was the rebellious son of a police captain, and grandson of a tribal leader.

Archiquette grew up in Oneida, and first tangled with authorities as a boy in the government school. He later told the story to Gordon McLester about getting kicked out of that school, and how it led him to see himself as an outsider.

GORDON MCLESTER: *He was a boisterous, outspoken boy. He got into a squabble with his instructor because he had a book that was given to him by one of his aunts and he brought this book to school because that's what they were studying. And the instructor seen him with that book and wanted to know why he was writing in it, and he said, "Well, this is my book." The teacher said, "No, it's not," and he said, "Yes, it is." Anyway, they got into a disagreement, and he said, "I smacked that teacher and they put me into the guard house." He was punished.*

HOST: After high school, Archiquette sought his fortune outside of Oneida and bounced around the country with different jobs. In the 1930s, he returned to Oneida to settle down and get married. But the Depression dragged on and life got harder.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I married my wife in 1932. I thought maybe we would die of starvation since I'd had a hard enough time to live while I was single.*

HOST: The Depression hit Native American communities hard across the country. When President Franklin Roosevelt responded to the economic crisis with the New Deal, it included a new law to give tribes more control over their lives.

The Indian Re-Organization Act was passed in 1934. At the time, it was widely called the Indian New Deal.

[Archival – old newsreel about the Indian Re-Organization Act]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *The nation's current Indian policy, partly expressed in the Indian Re-organization Act of June 18, 1934, has three chief objectives: economic rehabilitation of the Indians, principally on land, organization of Indian tribes for managing their own affairs, civic and cultural freedom, and opportunity for the Indians.*

HOST: The law said that, instead of the federal government, each tribe now had autonomy to create a tribal council to govern their own reservation communities. The new law couldn't have come at a better time. Marginalized for over a century, the Oneida by the 1930s had lost much of their land, their language, and their culture.

Oneida historian, Loretta Metoxen:

LORETTA METOXEN: *By the time of the Great Depression, the Oneidas were 99% landless. They'd lost 20 million acres of land. It was an extremely low point for the Oneida tribe.*

HOST: Even though the Indian Reorganization Act couldn't undo the damage to the community, it did open a path forward. Oscar Archiquette was one of the first to realize the potential of the new law. Fluent in both English and Oneida, he explained the law to neighbors. He talked with elders who spoke only Oneida and young people who didn't.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I thought it was a good thing for my people, and I started talking about it to friends... Somebody called a meeting in a private home where I was called to explain about the law. The small log home where the meeting was held was back in the bush. I spoke in Oneida language all the way through, and when I finished everybody applauded. One Oneida man stood up and he said, "This cousin of mine has no business talking back here in the brush. He belongs in some big hall where he should talk about these good things he told us here tonight."*

HOST: At that point in his life, Archiquette didn't think of himself as a community leader. He still felt like a rebel.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I was the first Indian to become a foreman on the WPA in 1934. Later I was demoted because I shook a WPA official by the collar. In 1937, I was foreman again, but I lost that job, too.*

HOST: Despite his up and down relationship with the WPA, Archiquette's voice for a new tribal organization proved persuasive. The Oneida adopted the tribal council form and elected Archiquette their first chairman. So, he was already deeply involved in community life when a new WPA project came to Oneida, with a different kind of jobs program. One that involved writing down Oneida stories in their own language.

GORDON MCLESTER: *The WPA developed this Project about language. This was done throughout the United States, and when it came here in Oneida, they wanted to take the Oneida people and have them talk and have them tell stories about their life and their life experiences.*

HOST: Gerry Hill, whose voice you hear reading Oscar Archiquette's words in this episode, also spoke with us about the importance of this WPA program.

GERALD HILL: *The language part of the WPA project was looked at as a way of using resources from the federal government to save our language. That was kind of a big issue throughout Indian country. We don't ever want our language to be written down, but they could see it was going to be lost.*

HOST: Gordon McLester.

GORDON MCLESTER: *There was a gentleman from the University of Wisconsin that was assigned to come up and work on the reservation and set this program up.*

HOST: That man was Floyd Lounsbury, a linguist. Lounsbury grew up in central Wisconsin and studied mathematics at the University of Wisconsin. But there, he became more interested in Native American languages and their histories. He started helping with the Writers' Project. When the director of the program left, Lounsbury, though still an undergraduate, suddenly found himself in charge of the unit. He jumped in, seeing an opportunity to revive a native language. He proposed a local branch of the Writers' Project be staffed by the Oneida community.

LORETTA METOXEN: *By a streak of fate — some Oneidas say it was through the intervention of their native god, Te'arun-ya-wago, meaning “he who holds the skies” or “the creator.” The project affecting us, the Oneidas, had for its object the recording for the first time, the language of the Oneidas in a methodical, scientific manner.*

GORDON MCLESTER: *The people that they put to work here were Oneidas themselves. And they could also speak the Oneida language. There was 12 of them and when they went out into the community, they had pads and pencils. And that's how they did the recording of these stories from individuals.*

HOST: The 12 Oneida workers would write down these stories in the Oneida language for the first time. They identified which elders to talk with and went out to interview them. They were getting stories down from inside the community. This was different from how the Project approached Native communities in other states, which largely left them out of the telling of their own stories.

GORDON MCLESTER: *These other programs; they would send people in as interviewers, but there was no relation. These people may come from Toledo and work down in Cincinnati. So, they would not necessarily know the people and the environment that they were working in. The people that came in here were Oneidas.*

HOST: With the interviewers being Oneida themselves, they were able to get a more authentic story, on their own terms. One story was about the land and the Oneidas' connection to it – both to their land in Wisconsin and also where they had come from in New York. In the 1820s, the Oneida had been forced off their land in western New York and led west to Wisconsin by white settlers and church leaders.

Far from their roots with other Iroquois, they were pressured to settle on what was Menominee land outside Green Bay. By 1900, white landowners were pressing the Oneida to let go of that land, too.

IDA BLACKHAWK (VOICED BY ACTOR): *White people were buying Indian land. The Oneidas lost their land through failure to pay their taxes. They did not know how to pay the taxes. People started to lose their homes, and white people bought them from the real estate men.*

HOST: That's fifty-year old Ida Blackhawk, one of the Oneida writers, read by Oneida Nation Elder Marjorie Stevens. For the Writers' Project, she documented what she herself had seen.

IDA BLACKHAWK (VOICED BY ACTOR): *When the Depression started, the Oneidas were usually laid off first... About 40 percent of Oneida homeowners lost their land and homes. Families crowded into small houses two or three families together.*

HOST: The immediate goal was saving the language by writing it down. But in the process, the Oneida WPA writers were documenting important issues for the community. Not just about land, but also details about culture and family. In one notebook, Ida Blackhawk shared tragedies her family faced during the Depression, stories she rarely talked about.

IDA BLACKHAWK (VOICED BY ACTOR): *My youngest brother died in the winter of 1929 when he was about 30 years old, and my oldest brother died the following summer. So, my father had to pay two funeral bills. It was a blow to him to lose two grown-up sons. He kept on farming as it seemed the only thing for him to do. My mother was sickly and so I came home from Nebraska to help them out. My mother died in January 1931. My father asked me to stay, and I did.*

The following winter was about the hardest winter in Oneida. We hardly had any money. That was about the hardest time the Oneidas ever had.

HOST: In the notebooks, you find firsthand stories of Oneida history and culture, from their own point of view. For example, you hear why Oneidas stayed with the churches that a century before had taken them away from their ancestral lands.

IDA BLACKHAWK (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I think the old Oneidas were so faithful to their church because first, they had no other social center; second, they were in a strange land... having been moved from New York... They first built a little log cabin for their church and later built the stone church. Most of the masonry was done by the Oneidas. They were very proud of their handiwork, and this gave them zeal to continue to support the church. The young Oneida people who returned from government schools had no other place to go... and later when the parish hall was built, they held dances there.*

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *The Bible is translated into the Mohawk language and from this, the Oneidas wrote Indian songs or hymns, which they sing at a wake. When the speakers get through, just the singing takes place until just about daylight or dawn.*

HOST: What comes through in the notebooks, along with memories, are singular voices, charged with directness, warmth, and humor. Here's an example from Archiquette's notebook, read by Gerry Hill.

OSCAR ARCHIQUETTE (VOICED BY ACTOR): *It is through the first-class training by Floyd Lounsbury – Ad[^]na[^]*tsle – that I am able to write my own language. He is very ugly but what keeps him down is that he knows us Indians scalp a person if they make us mad.*

GERALD HILL (breaking character): *That's funny. He's teasing Lounsbury after he compliments him. Oscar – he was funny like that too, you know. He'd slip off into these side humorous lines. He's a teasing man.*

HOST: The Oneida had given the linguist a name in their language - that word you just heard, "Ad[^]na[^]*tsle." Archiquette and the others teasingly called Lounsbury "Lunchberry." That carried over into their name for him: "lunch," or Ad[^]na[^]*tsle.

GERALD HILL: *The way they talked back and forth with each other, you know, very familiar; very friendly, very respectful. Sometimes raunchy. I mean, they had no holding back from each other and I think that's why he could work well with Lounsbury. Oscar and Lounsbury connected*

because Lounsbury was a linguist, and he had a lot of respect for the language as well as the linguistic properties.

HOST: All this showed the trust they had established in their working relationship. It also reflected the deep impact the Project had on Archiquette, his coworkers, and the Oneida community. Loretta Metoxen.

LORETTA METOXEN: *The byproduct of all this was to preserve the Oneida language and to preserve stories of the Oneidas. The notebooks are like precious nuggets of information that we would never have if it had not been for this Project.*

HOST: Here's an excerpt from the notebooks, recounting a story from Guy Elm, here read by his grandson, Scott Nelson Elm.

EXCERPT FROM ONEIDA NOTEBOOK: *Long ago, my late father used to have these oxen that would escape. It's scary to chase them. They're fast and would get away from him. They say if you tie a rope around their horns and pull, it's possible to stop them. One time, he went to sell lumber and groceries in DePere. When he was riding back, somewhere along the road, something scared the oxen, and they took off. It was cold as he walked behind them. He tried to catch up, but he had to chase them for quite a little ways, they say.*

HOST: Not everyone saw the value of documenting these stories. The Project stirred some local backlash. White farmers complained to Congress about what they saw as a misguided and pointless effort by a meddling government.

VOICE OF WHITE FARMER (READ BY ACTOR): *Dear Congressman: There continues a lot of useless, worthless WPA projects. One of them is about 12 big fat lazy Indians, supposed to be writing the Oneida Indian Language. Can you tell me who wants to learn the Indian language? While they can get \$70 a month doing that they will never work for any farmer. That is one project that should be halted immediately.*

HOST: That letter, read by an actor, was one example of the pushback that was happening across the country. The Writers' Project, and the WPA as a whole, found itself at the center of a divisive political debate. Conservatives who distrusted FDR labeled the New Deal as socialist. There was a lot of finger-pointing, and Congress launched an investigation.

Later in 1939, the Writers' Project closed down abruptly, shuttered by these politics. In Wisconsin, the Project shut down before the Oneida notebooks could get published. Shoved into storage, they essentially disappeared. For half a century.

But they had already made an impact. Especially for Oscar Archiquette. His work on the Project showed Archiquette the importance of history for the present. The Writers' Project marked the start of his life as a community historian. And the work he did – along with the other Oneida WPA writers – would inspire others in the community in ways they couldn't have predicted.

LORETTA METOXEN: *I worked with Oscar Archiquette, and he taught me a lot. And the effect that it had on me of course is that I stuck with history for 41 years.*

HOST: Along with a love of history, Archiquette awakened in Loretta Metoxen the idea that she could make a difference. In the 1960s, Metoxen was raising seven small children in a home with no running water. One day, Archiquette came down her driveway and asked if she'd run for the office of secretary. She told him no. But her name somehow got on the ballot anyway.

LORETTA METOXEN: *When I got to talk to Oscar and when I got to know him very well and work with him, he inspired me because he was a political leader. And he influenced the politics of the Oneida Tribe. He encouraged me to run for the office. And I won in 1967 and then I served for 29 years after that. And after the 29 years, I was recruited to be the tribal historian and I've been that since. History and politics are intertwined. History of Oneida is the history of Oneida politics. There's no separation.*

HOST: Loretta Metoxen joined the tribal council at a time when it was rare for a woman to have an official role. Women were vocal but not elected. As she took on the role of public historian, Metoxen shared how Oneida faced crises before, and honored those generations.

LORETTA METOXEN: *We do need to honor them. Honor their words, honor their teachings and learn what they had to learn in order to not only survive but to go beyond survival and live good lives that have meaning. To the entire nation.*

HOST: Another member of the Oneida deeply inspired by Archiquette was Gordon McLester. Gordon had spent his early years in Detroit, where his father worked as a mechanic during World War Two. McLester was a city boy before the family moved back to Oneida. Here's his wife Betty McLester.

BETTY MCLESTER: *He was 13 years old when he moved back to Oneida. The family moved in with his grandpa until, you know, they could find a place.*

GORDON MCLESTER: *I was a junior in high school. And I was one of these guys that wasn't happy with anything. It reminds me of that movie with James Dean, Rebel Without a Cause. You know, you had a chip on your shoulder, and I guess that's kind of the way I was with the world.*

BETTY MCLESTER: *After we were married, he started his own machine shop with his dad, and he ran the machine shop for 18 years.*

HOST: What moved Gordon McLester from the mechanic shop to becoming a historian? Well, he got to know Oscar Archiquette as a tireless champion for revitalizing the Oneida language and traditions.

GORDON MCLESTER: *He was a very fluent Oneida speaker. People used to go to him to try to get information about the language, to ask if they were saying these words right or those words right. And he was a good storyteller. He was also a very strong person at the Oneida Mission Holy Apostles. And he was a very strong believer in Indian Rights.*

HOST: Oscar Archiquette died in December 1971. His obituary noted his contributions as a tribal historian and in the Oneida Singers, a local cultural group. And that he was the first chairman of the Oneida.

Inspired by Archiquette, McLester started recording elder Oneidas' life stories. He was very conscious of following in the footsteps of the WPA writers, but with new technology.

GORDON MCLESTER: *So, when you look at the correlation and the similarities, what I feel is the only difference is that he had a pencil and paper. You got a videotape and all the other shenanigans that go along with it, but the end product is the same in terms of trying to get the history of the Oneidas.*

BETTY MCLESTER: *Gordy just always, any way that he could, get people involved. I think that was his trick. And he did tape over five hundred different elders.*

HOST: McLester often started his interviews by asking their name, birthdate, where they grew up, and about their parents and other family members.

[Archival audio from Gordon McLester's original interview with Gladys W. Smith]

CAMERAMAN (ARCHIVAL): *Okay, Gordon, we're rolling.*

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *Okay. Mary, what I want you to do is give me your name, date of birth, and where you were born.*

MARY METOXEN (ARCHIVAL): *Mary M. Metoxen...*

BETTY MCLESTER: *He would generally try to keep it to an hour, but, sometimes, you get somebody up there that just likes to talk, and he would try to stop them at two hours because they just wanted to keep on going. He knew everybody, you know, and he knew a lot of their history, so he was able to worm things out of them that they didn't share with everybody.*

[Archival audio from Gordon McLester's original interview with Gladys W. Smith]

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *That had to be pretty tough country at that particular time up there.*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *I mean, I can remember when we'd go up there. And of course, they didn't have indoor plumbing or electric and stuff and my father would walk us to the bathroom if we had to go, for the night anyways, he would walk us because of the bears. There were so many bears around there. Of course, he'd scare us too. He'd go pound on the back of the outhouse and have us screaming...*

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *When did you find out or, you know, come to the realization that you're an Oneida Indian?*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *When I was in grade school.*

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *When you were in grade school?*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *Mhm.*

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *Tell me what the circumstances were that caused that to happen. That you'd become Oneida.*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *I was with all kinds of kids that were all blondes and fair-skinned and sometimes when we'd be playing or whatever they'd say different things and I would think, "Well, we never did that," you know or, "We don't do that in our home." And, you know, my father sat us down and told us. He said, "You're Indian. Your ways are going to be different than the white people's – a lot of it." he said.*

HOST: McLester's love of Oneida history touched everyone who knew him. That included a boy he coached in baseball named Charlie Hill. Charlie Hill dreamed of becoming a comedian. Late one night as a boy he'd seen Dick Gregory perform on The Tonight Show on his parent's television and was hooked.

After college, Hill went to Los Angeles to pursue his dreams and became a regular performer at the famous club The Comedy Store. Word about his act reached comedy icon Richard Pryor who had just launched his new primetime variety show. He asked Hill to appear in a skit, but even though it sounded like a great opportunity, Hill refused. The skit was called White for a Day, and Hill thought it was demeaning and relied too heavily on negative stereotypes. Pryor made him a counteroffer. He scrapped the skit and said Hill could do whatever he wanted with that time.

So, on October 20, 1977, on the Richard Pryor Show, Charlie Hill stepped out and became the first Native American to crack up an audience on national television.

[Archival from the Richard Pryor Show]

RICHARD PRYOR (ARCHIVAL): *I'd like to introduce now a new talent on the show. And, uh, he's an Indian brother. Uh, Mr. Charlie Hill. Please welcome him.*

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *My name is Charlie Hill. I see some people back there, putting their chairs in a circle.*

BETTY MCLESTER: *Gordy was his coach when Charlie played baseball and when Charlie came back here, he would refer to people here that he knew, growing up and, and he would refer to Gordy as being his coach. They were good friends, you know, they always visited when he was out here.*

HOST: Gordon McLester had taken Oneida stories forward from the WPA. Charlie Hill picked up that history and amped up the humor with his audiences. On stage with Richard Pryor on national television, Hill spoke directly and challenged stereotypes.

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *Columbus discovered America. They taught me that when I was a kid. Columbus discovered Indians... I went to Custer Memorial Junior High.*

BETTY MCLESTER: *When Charlie was just starting out to be a comedian, he would come back here and put on programs for the community. I think he would practice on us, and it was always a lot of fun. He got to know what things were funny to Indians.*

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *You know people come up to me now and they say, can you speak Indian? And there are like 300 different tribes. Can you speak Indian? That's like saying, "Hey, can you speak Caucasian?"*

BETTY MCLESTER: *One time he was putting on a program at the Radisson and we invited the principal of our kids' grade school to come. We were good friends because Gordy worked with him on trying to get the language into the schools. And Charlie Hill would tell Indian jokes that Indians could understand. But he would be talking down the white people. Our principal that came with us told us after that he was ready to get up and walk out because of the jokes that Charlie was telling.*

CHARLIE HILL (ARCHIVAL): *Pilgrims came to this land four hundred years ago as illegal aliens. Doesn't that just burn you up when people come over and they never leave? "Yeah, we'll leave after Thanksgiving."*

BETTY MCLESTER: *...But he stuck it out. And after we had a good laugh about that.*

HOST: Charlie Hill's stand-up comedy confronted Americans in their living rooms with a perspective many had overlooked. At the same time, another conversation about Native American rights was opening up in the courtroom.

Like we heard earlier, the History of Oneida is also the history of Oneida politics. And Gordon McLester said one reason he got into doing interviews was to bolster Oneida legal standing against court challenges to tribal rights. It was something he spoke about a lot with Michelle Danforth Anderson, a young filmmaker he worked with:

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *We have all of this information and documentation that solidifies that we were here and we're going to continue to be here. If there's a letter from George Washington saying, you know, thank you for fighting with them in the Revolutionary War, how do you question that you were in existence if you have a letter from George Washington? So, because of the Supreme Court case for land claims ... the more that you have of that, the stronger you are.*

[Archival from the opening of a Supreme Court hearing.]

COURT CRIER (ARCHIVAL): *The Honorable, the Chief Justice and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, oyez, oyez, oyez.*

JUSTICE (ARCHIVAL): *We'll hear arguments next in the county of Oneida against Oneida Indian Nation and New York State and the related case. Mr. Van Gestel, you may proceed when ready.*

VAN GESTEL (ARCHIVAL): *Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please the Court, you have a situation where...*

HOST: In March 1985, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Oneida, saying that two counties in New York had unlawfully seized Oneida lands in the 1700s. This was national news. In reporting the landmark decision, the media noted that the Oneidas still faced a long legal battle to regaining their lands.

McLester saw that documenting history could support their claims.

GORDON MCLESTER (INTERVIEW): *Now, in my interpretation, there's nobody that can take a pen in hand and sign a Declaration to give me independence or to tell me where can jump or run, eat or sleep. Although they try to. As far as I'm concerned, my interpretation of sovereignty is that's a gift that the Creator gave us. And no other man that walks the earth can give me that privilege.*

HOST: Gordon McLester and his dedication to preserving authentic stories of the Oneida stirs something in me. My own passion for history came from being with people like McLester. For me, it was my grandmother Ziona and my uncle Alex, and their commitment to remembering and sharing the stories of our family.

McLester had a direct impact on Michelle Danforth Anderson. She says McLester's care for people's stories nurtured a curiosity in her. He told her how his work traced its roots back to Oscar Archiquette and the work documenting Oneida stories for the Writers' Project.

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *As I got involved with Gordy and we started, first, it was the WPA stories and it's like, "Wow, we have this history that is from the WPA that is really a phenomenal chunk of history to have about our people."*

HOST: The stories that Danforth was reading from both the WPA, and the interviews conducted by Gordon McLester were showing an important point of view. These were vital pictures from the community's perspective that the rest of the country needed to see.

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *When my son was growing up — he’s 21 now — and he was in grade school, and they had Native American History Month. So, they had this Native packet, and he came home, and he gave it to me. He was like, “Mom, check it out.” I was mortified because of the images and the information that was taught in the packet. And I was just like, “whoa, this needs to change.” And I think that was part of the fight that drove Loretta and Gordy—was that they too had to deal with public education that wasn’t teaching the correct history of Oneida... what our true history was—the good, the bad and the not so pretty.*

I also need to help change to make sure that I don’t see another Native packet come home with this horrible, stereotypical Indian man on it.

HOST: More work remains to be done. Danforth Anderson has committed herself to what Gordon McLester started: the series of video interviews with elders about their lives.

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *There’s all these pieces of history that we have. And so, I think that’s what I really appreciated about his videos, was it fills a gap of information about people’s lives. His goal was to create this database. You could look up an elder’s name. So, if it was your grandmother or your great-grandmother, you could just look up their name, and their video would pop up and you could hear your grandmother, giving you her, you know, wise words of wisdom.*

[Archival audio from Gordon McLester’s original interview with Gladys W. Smith]

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *What were your responsibilities or chores, if you will, when you were living out in County Age? That you can remember, a typical day.*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *Boy’s work.*

GORDON MCLESTER (ARCHIVAL): *And that was what?*

GLADYS W. SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *Cutting wood. Trying to milk colts. Helping make hay. Doing field work, you know. Cause mom and dad always had these cash crops – beans and beets and carrots. I liked to work outside, so I didn’t get stuck in a house.*

[News Montage featuring COVID headlines.]

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *At Saint Mary’s Hospital in Green Bay, doctors are sounding the alarm.*

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *COVID-19 cases are increasing.*

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *The Oneida Nation has said those numbers are part of the reason why the August Pow Pow has been canceled.*

HOST: A pandemic can wreak havoc on a community. And a people's sense of their identity and traditions. During the height of the COVID pandemic, we spoke with Betty McLester and her daughter Jennifer Webster at home in Oneida.

JENNY WEBSTER: *My name is Jenny Webster, and I am tribal council member, and I am serving my third term on Tribal Council. And I am Gordon McLester's youngest daughter. Oneida started watching the pandemic in January of 2020. That's when it hit the Washington state area, the nursing homes. So, we kind of started to watch that. And we knew that something like that – that could devastate the tribe, you know, that could wipe us out.*

So, we were kinda watching it and then of course it spread across the country. And by March 20th is when we had to shut down our casino. We had to lay off over 500 employees. Luckily, we had a plan in place, never thinking we would ever have to use it. We did a stay-at-home order. You can only control the tribal businesses, but you know, Highway 54 is kind of a main thorough thru to Green Bay. So, it's not like we lived in a bubble, there was people coming and going.

And then, some of the elders were starting to pass from COVID. Those with, you know, maybe heart issues, lung issues, you know we've got a high population of diabetes on the reservation. And so, we were so scared as to how many people would be affected by this.

HOST: COVID threatened traditions that had been vital to the Oneida community for generations, like the Oneida Singers, a group from the community who would often sing at funerals. They would sing hymns in both English and in Oneida.

Oscar Archiquette was a member of the Singers, and decades later, so were Gordon and Betty McLester.

BETTY MCLESTER: *I've been a member since, oh, 1980. My husband and I started singing then. And, of course, you know, we didn't know what we were doing when we started, but over the years, you know, we got accustomed to it, and it was always fun. It's always a nice group. And a lot of times we would fill up the van and go to other cities for funerals or special occasions where they'd ask for the Singers. You get 18 people in a van; it gets pretty rowdy. They were mostly all elders, too.*

HOST: The pandemic disrupted that tradition, too. And then COVID hit the McLester home.

Just before Memorial Day in 2020, Gordon McLester passed away, from COVID. It was a terrible time, his daughter recalls.

JENNY WEBSTER: *'Cause we didn't really know what to do or what we could do... We did a drive-thru funeral. We had a tent there with the family, with the urn, some flowers... And then, of course, ended up providing everybody with ground baloney sandwiches. Kind of, that's a thing here in Oneida is to have ground baloney sandwiches at funerals. You know, you provide sandwiches for the family at the wake. My niece just calls them 'dead man sandwiches.' That's just how she grew up. We had probably five or six people making sandwiches. It just felt so appropriate because that's what dad would want.*

HOST: Gordon McLester had devoted many years to the stories of Oneida, and to their songs. A favorite was the Te Deum.

JENNY WEBSTER: *I remember when dad passed, I ran into one of the elder singers. He said, “We couldn’t gather, we couldn’t go to the funeral because everybody’s trying to be safe.” He said, “So I went outside,” and he said, “I sang the Te Deum for your dad.” He said, “Nobody around, but I was thinking of your dad.” And I just thought that was so sweet.*

HOST: First, Gordon McLester. Then in early 2021, Loretta Metoxen died. Oneida history itself seemed in crisis. Filmmaker Michelle Danforth Anderson had worked closely with both of them.

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *Loretta was on the Business Committee when I first met her. I’ve met a lot of elders over my lifetime and sometimes in the back of my brain, it’s like, “Oh, I would not wanna make that person upset at me.”*

So really, she was just a feisty lady, and she just had this energy about her that was just... she liked what she did. You just knew that she just loved being Oneida and everything that they had fought for – the Oneida people, for our government, for everything, because, you know, she lived it.

The one thing that Loretta told me is that you know you’re truly assimilated when you tell their version of our story. I’ve never forgotten that she said that.

HOST: Metoxen’s words also resonate really strongly with me... And show the priceless nature of what Gordon McLester, Loretta Metoxen, and others like Oscar Archiquette and the WPA interviewers did to preserve the original stories of the Oneida in their own voices.

When the pandemic eased, Jenny Webster started going back into the office. Sometimes she heard the team uploading her father’s video interviews onto the Oneida YouTube channel, and she’d hear her his voice.

JENNY WEBSTER: *What’s really weird... Now, I’m on tribal council. So sometimes a question comes up at work, how did they do this? What did they do? What were they thinking? Oh, let me go ask my dad, you know? And now I can’t, and it’s kind of like I wish I would’ve asked him everything before he passed. He had so much information. We would get together on Saturday mornings, it would be our Saturday mornings ‘go out for breakfast.’ So, it was always the Saturday morning history lesson for Jenny.*

HOST: In Oneida, like in other Native traditions, music and stories are intertwined with action. Her father’s path with the WPA stories influenced Jenny Webster to work with the tribal council. So did the rediscovery of the Oneida WPA notebooks in the 1990s, deep in storage in the Anthropology Department at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

JENNY WEBSTER: *I was probably 12 to 15 when the WPA stories came unearthed and there was a lot of talk about it. And I never really understood what that was until my later years, and then seeing some of the documents. It's just really nice to go back and read what was happening in Oneida then. What was their relationship with Green Bay? What were people dealing with? What was their life like? Just being able to hear those stories again was... it's just refreshing because you know the struggles that your ancestors had to go through, for you today.*

MICHELLE DANFORTH ANDERSON: *I think what I really learned from Gordy is just don't give up. You know, like, if somebody says no, it doesn't mean no. It just means we'll move on to the next thing or move on to an altered project, and you figure your way around.*

I look at life like a river and there's always gonna be boulders. And it's your purpose, and it's your vision to figure out how to navigate those boulders, so you can keep moving forward. Gordy and Loretta have given us these tools and now we have to keep going forward with them and navigate those rocks.

HOST: Next time on The People's Recorder: a naturalist signals a new way of looking at the land in the WPA Guide to Wisconsin. Aldo Leopold's writing paved the way for environmental awareness that has grown important for our very survival.

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The episode was produced by Spark Media. You can learn more by following us on social media at @peoplesrecorder. This is Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.