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RESIDENCE PATTERNS AT THE ST. REGIS RESERVATION

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This paper presents a discussion of residence patterns and mobility at the Akwesasne (St. Regis) Reservation, located in Franklin County, New York. It will raise issues having a potential effect on the outcomes of census-counting. The paper begins with a brief portrayal of several aspects of traditional Mohawk culture which have significant connections to modern behavior. It next presents a review of current residence patterns at St. Regis and discusses their interrelationships with social and economic conditions. In the final section of the paper, specific longitudinal histories are offered to demonstrate various residence options.

The Akwesasne (St. Regis) Reservation was established for Mohawk Indians between 1747 and 1755. It began as a Catholic mission, under the administration of French Jesuits from Quebec. St. Regis was an outgrowth of an earlier mission site

called Caughnawaga, situated just outside the city of Montreal (Fenton and Tooker 1978:473). St. Regis is located on 14,640 acres of land in Franklin County, New York on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River, 80 miles southwest of Montreal and 30 miles north of the Adirondack town of Malone, New York. The Reservation is international since the Canadian-U.S. border bisects the original land area. The Canadian portion covers approximately 9115 acres, consisting of mainland in Quebec adjacent to New York State (see attached map) and several nearby islands in the St. Lawrence River in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The administrative organization of St. Regis is therefore complicated and, as will be discussed below, this complexity has a bearing on the problems of arriving at an accurate census. The current official population figures for St. Regis are: 3100 in New York State and 4,353 residents in Canada.¹

Residence patterns at St. Regis are quite fluid and complex. They entail extended family domiciles, inter-household mobility, occasional or patterned off-reservation employment and living

arrangements, and temporary out-migration with frequent returns to a permanent reservation home. However, before proceeding to a discussion of residence patterns, it is advantageous to briefly outline the reservation's historical and cultural background. This background has relevance for St. Regis today since cultural values and behaviors have persisted and provide some of the explanation for contemporary residence patterns and adaptations to modern social and economic conditions.

The Mohawks are one of five indigenous Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. At the time of European contact in the 16th century, they occupied and hunted on land in what is now eastern New York State, western Vermont, and southern Ontario. The Mohawk were the easternmost members of the powerful League of the Iroquois. They quickly became involved in the Dutch, British and French fur trade and the resulting intertribal and international struggles for control of this trade.

The Mohawks were traditionally sedentary, village-dwelling people. Their economy was based primarily on horticulture, planting crops of corn,

beans and squash. A division of labor existed with work roles assigned according to gender. Women's work centered on food production and distribution. They planted, tended and harvested the crops after men had prepared the fields for planting by cutting and burning existing trees. Women were also responsible for managing households, preparing food and caring for children. Men's additional economic activities included fishing, hunting and trading with other Amerindian groups and later with Europeans (Thwaites 1896, vol. 14:235, vol. 15:155).

Mohawk villages were composed of residences called "longhouses" which were large, multi-family dwellings. Longhouses were rectangular structures built of wooden frames with bark and branches for covering. The interior was subdivided by partitions into separate family units. Communal life was oriented toward a central row of hearths, each hearth shared by the families living on either side. Longhouses varied in size, some extending more than two hundred feet in length with perhaps ten hearths, thereby accommodating some twenty families (Tuck 1978:325-328). The longhouses were located near

each other in a concentrated area which was surrounded by wooden palisades erected for defensive purposes. The fields for farming lay outside the village enclosures. In the 17th century, at the time of European exploration, there were three major Mohawk villages and a number of smaller, less permanent settlements (Fenton and Tooker 1978:466).

Of particular relevance to the current situation were the traditional living arrangements and attachments of members to their households. The families living in the longhouse were related to each other by matrilineal ties within the organization of a kinship system based on matrilineal clans. Each longhouse was owned and controlled by a matrilineage, under the direction of a resident female leader or matron (Lafitau 1974:69). Post-marital residence was matrilocal; the couple and their children therefore became part of the wife's maternal group. (Thwaites, vol. 44:307; Lafitau:342) Mother and daughter formed the most important kinship bond, enduring through close proximity, cooperative labor and the symbolic value of matrilineal descent. Sons had strong emotional

bonds with their parents and siblings but moved out of the family longhouse upon marriage. However, since most people married within the village or one nearby, frequent visits supported all kin ties.

Young husbands were loosely integrated into their wife's household. Several cultural features converged to produce this result. First, men's economic activities removed them from their houses and villages for extended periods of time. Fishing, hunting and trading usually involved a small group of related men who travelled on distant expeditions throughout the Northeast. This pattern existed long before European arrival but became more time-consuming after contact due to increasing native involvement in the fur trade. Secondly, warfare similarly took men away from their home communities. And warfare also intensified beginning in the 17th century. Lastly, the confederacy councils of the Iroquois League were another locus of men's activities. League meetings too occurred with greater frequency in the post-contact period due to the volatile economic and political situation in the Northeast. In addition to these historical and

cultural factors, a final influence on men's residence was the fact that Mohawk marriages were somewhat unstable, particularly in a couple's early years. Such instability contributed to the lack of integration of husbands into their resident households.

The village community was stabilized by the presence and leadership of the matrons and their daughters. The household focus on matrilineal ties was augmented by increasing male absence in the historic period of trade and intertribal conflicts (Rothenberg 1980:68). Households were based on women's economic control of production and distribution of the crops and housewares produced by women and of the fish, meat and trade goods brought in by men (Brown 1970; Bonvillain 1980). Men contributed primarily to the households of their wives and children but also maintained close ties to their own mothers and sisters, to whom they could always return in the event of a failed marriage.

Many aspects of traditional Mohawk culture have continued to the present day albeit transformed in modern circumstances. The matrilineal clan

structure still exists although rules of marriage exogamy no longer apply. The position of lineage and clan matron continues to confer status and prestige on the women holding these titles. These roles have important social and ceremonial functions. Continuity in status and respect also exists for the male hereditary clan chiefs although for these people as well their actual roles have become mainly symbolic. However, both the elder women and men are respected advisors and are usually heads of large extended family households which are the focus of visiting and temporary or permanent lodging by many of their children, grandchildren and lateral relatives.

Current residence patterns demonstrate the persistence of traditional Mohawk behavior, influenced also by modern needs stemming from social, economic and educational decisions. Settlements on the reservation in New York are scattered, with no discernable community focus or increased density toward any center. In the Canadian portion of the reservation, there is a denser concentration at the administrative core of

St. Regis Village where the houses are small and closely spaced along several marked streets. The Canadian Band Council office, a village school, community center and Catholic Church are located there. In New York State, the Tribal Council office, community center, library, health clinic, and other public buildings are situated along highway route 37, but they do not form a contiguous administrative center and are not near residential housing. Most houses on the reservation are surrounded by land which is often planted with small vegetable gardens or simply used as family space. New houses are sometimes built on family-owned land by the younger generation as they establish their own dwellings.

A common household unit is composed of three generations, i.e. an elder couple or parent in cases of divorce or death of one spouse, one or more of their adult children and their younger grandchildren. Depending on the ages of the people involved, one or more great-grandchildren may also be present, making up a four-generational household. These extended family units result from various life

situations. They are not, however, aberrant or unusual forms but rather display cultural continuity with traditional Mohawk social structures.

In most cases, the house and land are owned by the eldest member. The adult offspring living in the parental home will usually inherit the property, although disputes with siblings who live elsewhere are fairly common. Several factors help determine which child will remain in the family home.

Relative age, gender and marital status are primary considerations. Daughters are more likely to occupy the house with their elder parent(s) while sons eventually move to their wife's house or set up their own home and family. Unmarried daughters with children are especially likely to remain in the household. In contemporary Mohawk families, there are competing tendencies, one toward the traditional norms of the extended family and the other toward neolocal residence after marriage. However, young people rarely move out of the parental home unless they are married or in a stable conjugal relationship. Therefore, an unmarried daughter with her own children is unlikely to set up an

independent household, certainly not while she herself is relatively young. In fact, the occurrence of single women as heads of households almost always results from a divorce in a situation where the couple had resided independently and the wife has remained in the house rather than returning to her parental home. Increasing age, numbers of children and availability of space are factors in these decisions.

Young couples often do not set up their own households immediately after marriage but rather reside for various lengths of time in the home of one of the spouses, more frequently the wife. At St. Regis, most official marriages take place sometime after the birth of a first or second child. Therefore, the new wife has often been an unmarried daughter with a child and has remained in her family's home, constituting at least a three-generational unit. In sum, then, patterns of parenting and marriage contribute to household composition.

In some cases, the eldest member of the household has previously lived elsewhere with

her/his spouse but upon the latter's death has moved in with one of their adult children. Therefore, single people, whether elderly or young, very rarely live alone but rather remain with or return to a close relative. Overall individual and community patterns, then, demonstrate a great deal of fluidity and inter-household mobility. The household remains a stable living unit with generational continuity even though individual members may come and go.

In recent years, increasing numbers of young people have continued their education in colleges in the United States and Canada. The State University of New York at Potsdam and St. Lawrence College in Canton, New York have especially attracted students from St. Regis, partly because of geographical proximity and partly because of well-developed programs for Indian students. These students usually live on-campus during the school year but return to their parental homes in the summer and frequently on weekends throughout the year. Furthermore, they return home after graduation unless they have married while at school.

A crucial factor having an impact on household

membership and mobility is employment. In this area, gender-related patterns differ. Women are employed in factories, offices, hospitals, schools, etc. near to St. Regis or on the reservation in tribal offices, schools or other businesses. Jobs, therefore, do not interfere with a woman's continual residence at St. Regis. Working women, whether married or not, who have children are likely to want to live with or near close relatives, especially mothers, so that reliable child-care can be available. Some young women do leave the reservation to work in cities in New York state, such as Syracuse, Rochester or Buffalo, where they get jobs in factories or as live-in child-care workers. These women are usually not married. If they are mothers, their children are left with aunts or grandparents at St. Regis and the women return home every weekend. In the cities, they live in small apartments with other women from the reservation who are in similar circumstances. These are clearly temporary arrangements, tied to work which is itself occasional and unstable. Work on or near the reservation, however, is more long-term and

frequently represents personal and/or professional commitments. Most St. Regis women are employed at some time in their lives. For some women, employment continues throughout their adult years until they reach older age, while for others it is temporary, part-time or sporadic.

Employment for men follows a different course and has even greater bearing on the complexities of residence. The majority of Mohawk men are employed as ironworkers in building and bridge construction in many cities in the Northeast, travelling hundreds of miles to work in New York City, Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Boston and elsewhere. These jobs have been available for a large percentage of men from St. Regis and the Mohawk reserve of Caughnawaga since the late 19th century. The men travel to their jobs where they set up small apartments with co-workers from the reservation. They return to St. Regis each weekend and when not employed. The work is relatively steady but most men are not employed during the entire year. Once a building is completed, they may not find another job immediately or may choose not to work, depending on

work conditions, seasonal considerations, economic necessities or personal inclinations. But in any case, they consider their homes to be at St. Regis. If married, their wives and children remain there.

In a study of Mohawk ironworkers from Caughnawaga, Mitchell (1960) documented the men's work patterns and lifestyle. Most of his description is consistent with the experiences of St. Regis men as well. An important point of divergence, however, is that many workers from Caughnawaga have migrated away from the Reserve with their families and have set up permanent households in the borough of Brooklyn in New York City. This area has, in fact, become an Indian community in the city. Workers from St. Regis have not followed this pattern of out-migration, preferring the weekly trips back to the reservation. The apartments which they rent in the cities are temporary, often sparsely furnished by the landlords. The men travel, live, work and socialize together during the week but are clearly oriented to their families and home on the reservation.

Freilich (1958) has suggested an interesting

analysis of Mohawk employment patterns, associating the current situation with traditional male roles in aboriginal Iroquois cultures. He draws a parallel between the modern ironworker who travels far from home and works with a small group of men and the traditional Iroquois hunter, warrior and trader who similarly was absent from home communities on distant expeditions. Freilich suggests that modern Mohawk interest in ironwork is due to the persistence of cultural norms. Although current work patterns are compatible with traditional behavior, Mohawk men are also attracted to ironwork because of relatively high wages, union benefits, and the ability to leave and return to jobs with a fair amount of security. Economic and cultural considerations, then, result in residence patterns which show continuity with the past. If the men are unmarried, they return to their parents on weekends or when temporarily unemployed or injured on the job. If married, they return to their wives, whether living in their own home or with her natal family.

As was mentioned above, the Canadian-U.S. border traverses St. Regis and divides this

reservation into two administrative sectors. From the people's point of view, however, it is one community. People have relatives, in-laws, and friends in all areas of the reservation. The border has no relevance to daily life except for interactions with governmental and tribal agencies. Residence choices, therefore, ignore the international border. People move back and forth from one side to the other depending on their circumstances and relationships. In the past, decisions to enter legal marriages were sometimes influenced by considerations of citizenship. The Canadian Indian Act of 1876 contained a provision, in effect until 1985, that a Canadian Indian woman who married a man who was not a Canadian Indian lost her status as Indian. She lost her rights to land on reservations and her rights to health care and other treaty-guaranteed benefits. Her children also were disenfranchised. Because of the detrimental consequences of this law, many women from the Canadian side of St. Regis were reluctant to marry men from the American side. However, this problem did not interfere with the establishment of

stable conjugal relationships without formal marriage. Elimination of the legal restriction on Canadian Indian women in 1985 means that marriages can take place without loss of status. Residence for these couples and their children shifts between parental and independent households in the United States and/or Canada according to the same norms as described for other people at St. Regis.

A few examples of life histories will illustrate the flexibility of residence patterns at St. Regis. These cases are not unusual, but rather are representative of many families. Household A is headed by an elderly man whose wife died many years ago. He owns the property and previously owned two additional plots, one adjacent to his and another situated across the road. Each of these plots has been given as inheritance to two granddaughters, each of whom is the eldest daughter of A's own two daughters. The granddaughters built houses on their land and live there with their families. One of A's daughters lives in the house with him. Another daughter and two sons live independently with their spouses and children in homes not far down the road.

The adult daughter living with A has five children. She was unmarried until the birth of the last child. The husband moved into Household A but died shortly after the marriage. A's daughter has always lived in the home. Her children (four daughters and a son) remained at home until their own marriages. One daughter stayed in the household until after the birth of her two children. She then married her boyfriend and they all moved in with the man's mother. A short time later, the husband died and the wife (A's granddaughter) shifted residence back and forth between her mother-in-law and her own mother in household A. She now has married a non-Indian man and lives in a town near St. Regis. The whole family makes frequent visits to the reservation and stays in household A.

A's daughter's son is an ironworker and continually returned home on weekends. He then married and moved to the house of his wife's parents. This marriage has failed and the son has returned to household A. The other three grandchildren of A have now married and set up independent households, one on land given to her by

A, and the other two on land elsewhere near their husbands' families. A's adult daughter who lives with him will undoubtedly inherit his property.

Household B is headed by a married couple who recently bought their property from the husband's maternal aunt. Mr. B, now in his sixties, had worked as an ironworker for most of his youth, always returning to his parents' home when not employed. Later, he married a non-Indian woman and took a factory job in Rochester, living there with his family for several years. He and his wife were divorced and Mr. B returned to St. Regis, staying with his parents and then with his aunt. Mr. B subsequently met and married Mrs. B who had previously lived with her own parents. In her younger years and after the birth of her second child, she was briefly married to the child's father, living with him in his house. After the divorce, she returned to her mother but, due to conflicts between them, she established a small house with her two children. Since the B's marriage, they have lived in their own home, along with Mrs. B's two daughters and the three children

of Mr. and Mrs. B. Mrs. B's eldest daughter had a child and shifted residence between household B and the home of her boyfriend's parents who live on Cornwall Island, part of the Canadian section of St. Regis. A few years later, the relationship ended and the woman and her son continue to live in household B. All of the other children of B also live at home. One daughter is in college at Potsdam but returns to St. Regis on most weekends and all vacations.

These longitudinal histories are typical of the generational depth of most St. Regis households. They also indicate the scope and flexibility of residence options. Important themes are the continuity of one's kinship alliances and the ready availability of living quarters with close relatives, especially parents. People may live temporarily in more distant cities, particularly as necessitated by employment, but there is always a sense that "home" is at St. Regis. Men who work during the week in other locales rarely set up comfortable housing for themselves there. They take small suitcases with a few changes of clothing back

and forth between their St. Regis homes and their sparsely-furnished apartments.

Other causes of inter-household mobility are to be found in personal situations. People shift in and out of marriages and relationships which may or may not lead to setting up independent households on the reservation. However, if these relationships end, the parental home always provides residence for them and/or their children. This cultural style ensures a great deal of continuity and emotional security for people whose lives may be in flux for personal or economic reasons.

Note:

New York figures are taken from the Legislative Manual, prepared by the Department of Social Services, NYS, amended from 1980. Canadian figures are taken from "Indian Registered Populations" in Indian Affairs, Revenues and Governance, Department of Indian Affairs, Canada, December 31, 1987. This source lists an additional 1,334 persons as St. Regis Band members living off the Reserve. The New York State listing does not include off-reservation tribal members.

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