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Mary Winder: A Full Life With Land Claim At Its Center

By Susan Hébert George

In an era when minorities were allotted few freedoms, Mary Cornelius Winder (Wolf Clan) came of age. In 1920 at age 22, she threw off the confines society sought to inflict upon her and began what would become her lifetime crusade — winning recognition of the Oneida Nation’s right to thousands of acres of its ancestral lands guaranteed to the Oneida people in the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua. Mary had inherited this mission from her father, Wilson Cornelius, and she in turn would pass it down to her daughter, Gloria, and grandson, Ray Halbritter.

“The story of Mary Winder is the story of the Nation,” said Ray, Nation Representative. “It’s because of my grandmother and my mother that I came back and became involved in the land claims and continue to carry on the struggle today.”

For 30 years, until the time of her death on June 11, 1954, Mary sent a



Circa 1945: Mary and Samuel Winder, Sr. Children left to right: Vernon Hill Chrisjohn, Doreen Hill, Romona Winder, Deanna Hill, Judith Hill Chrisjohn, Dolores Hill and Elizabeth Winder (all Wolf Clan).

series of letters, petitioning the government on behalf of the Oneidas to give back their land. She persistently wrote Washington, asking the federal government to redress the egregious wrongs perpetrated against the Oneidas.

While carrying on this relentless campaign urging the government to honor its treaties with the Nation, Mary simultaneously juggled a busy personal life. She was a mother, a storekeeper, a gardener, a crafts-woman, a mid-wife, a neighbor and a

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friend. She had 11 children, suffering the excruciating loss of two of them in childhood. She also raised three additional children after their mother's death. Mary Winder was a woman of many different facets, and she touched many lives with her warmth and kindness.

As a child, she had very little formal education, attending school for only three years. Her first language was Oneida; she never spoke English until she went to school. The little girl who was Mary Cornelius, born April 27, 1898, accepted responsibility at a very young age. Her grandmother was blind and required help, and Mary was sent to live with her. By the time Mary was 9 years old, she was helping her grandmother find herbs to use medicinally, especially for rheumatism.

"In those days many people, including non-Indians, sought out my great-grandmother's remedies," said Gloria. "My mother came to know a lot about natural medicines both from her grandmother and her father, who was a medicine man."

Medicine was not the only knowledge Wilson Cornelius shared with his daughter, Mary. He had imbued in her his determination to regain Oneida lands. Wilson was an educated man, and he wrote many letters to Washington asking the federal government to restore the Oneidas to their homeland.

"He wrote many letters to Washington asking for the land back, despite Washington's denials and non-response. He never gave up," said Ray.

Mary was to follow her father's



Mary Winder (seated on left) during a mock wedding at the 1933 New York State Fair. William Rockwell, Oneida chief, standing far left.

example and keep the quest for the land alive. And as she grew into adulthood, she too would begin petitioning the government. But before she took up her mantle as the driving force to reclaim Oneida land, her personal life was evolving.

She was in Germany when the country was on the brink of the first World War. Europeans were enthralled with Indian culture and customs during this period, and Mary, donning traditional clothing, joined a traveling exhibition with others from Onondaga. She was a young mother at the time, and she had taken her infant daughter on the boat with her. But it was another child who haunted her voyage and stirred all her maternal instincts.

"My mother said she kept hearing a baby cry," recalls Gloria. "She searched and found the baby alone, wet and hungry. My mother changed

him and nursed him. She continued taking care of this child for the remainder of the crossing. The baby's mother would leave him alone and never took him out of the room. My mother would go and tend to him as soon as she heard the mother leave."

Another mother sought Mary's help while she was in Denmark. Mary enjoyed walking in the various villages the troupe visited. In one instance, she became friendly with a woman who had a little boy. The woman begged Mary to bring her child to America, hoping he would have a better life.

"Of course, my mother couldn't take the boy — all kinds of paperwork would have been needed," said Gloria. "But she thought about that little boy for years afterwards, especially during the war."

When war erupted, Mary was

in Germany and all Americans were ordered to return home. She and her group were slated to sail on the Lusitania, but missed the sailing and left on her sister ship, the Mauritania. This fateful switch proved providential, for the Lusitania was sunk by a German U-boat during its crossing.

After she returned to the United States, Mary's life revolved around her family, but her desire to regain the Oneidas' homeland still burned. In 1920, she wrote a poignant letter in simple prose asking the Indian Bureau how much money Washington owed to the Oneidas for the use of their land. Mary received no satisfaction from the bureaucrats. Undaunted, she continued her quest.

During this time, Mary not only was rearing her children, she also was managing her own little grocery store on the Onondaga Reservation, where she lived along with many other Oneidas. She allowed her customers to buy on credit, because Mary realized money was tight. When the Depression struck, the store closed. "My mother took the book listing the outstanding accounts and burned it," said Gloria.

Her generosity was well known among the people at Onondaga. Travelers from Canada, parents and children, found respite at Mary's home. She often would harbor wives and children during family disputes. Gloria remembers her mother making beds on the floor in the upstairs loft from blankets and coats for their unexpected guests.

"One boy from the Mohawk reservation came and stayed with us for a whole summer," said Gloria. "We didn't know him. I think people at Onondaga directed him to our house



A photo taken at the New York State Fairgrounds. Mary Winder (third row, center): on her left, Chapman Schanandoah (Wolf Clan).

because my mother had a reputation for sheltering people in need."

The house that proved a safe haven for Mary's family and others who sought refuge was a log cabin on the Onondaga Reservation, which originally belonged to Mary's grandmother. The cabin, which was moved to Oneida land by Mary's grandson, Barry, and can still be seen today, was enlarged over the years with wings added on either side. In this home, Mary gave birth to her children. After each birth, her husband recorded the child's name and the date on the mortar cementing the logs together.

Although the home radiated warmth from the inhabitants within, there was no electricity or running water, no luxuries. The family used oil lamps to illuminate the rooms and wash boards to clean their clothes. There was an outhouse in the backyard. "It was a different life in those

days," recalls Gloria.

The outside of Mary's home was a profusion of colors. Punctuated with dark green woodwork, the house was well tended, boasting such an abundance of flowers that a painter was tempted to take up his brush and try to capture the resplendent colors dotting the landscape, recalls Gloria. "My mother loved flowers," said Gloria. "It was a beautiful place. One day a woman from Syracuse University stopped and asked if she could have permission to paint it — it truly was lovely. She came and sat for several days in the driveway, painting."

Pink sweet Williams, bright yellow daffodils, fragrant white lilies of the valley, rows of red, white and pink peonies mixed with a bounty of roses, and morning glories graced one side of the house, with two large maple trees completing the scene. On the oppo-

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site side was a lush grape arbor with benches and a huge vegetable garden, said Gloria. In the back yard, gladiolus bloomed as did lilacs, both purple and white. The front yard had a white picket fence with an arched entrance gate and a flagstone walk leading to the front door.

Luella Derrick, whose father was Oneida, remembered spending many hours in Mary's garden and home playing with Gloria when they were children. She fondly recalled watching Mary making baskets and learning the skill from her. Mary also found time to practice and teach other traditional crafts, and every year she attended the New York State Fair and was a charter member of the Six Nations Agricultural Society that runs the Indian Village at the event. Mary sold her crafts at the village, often driving with Luella's family to the fair.

"She was so well liked and loved in the neighborhood," said Luella. "To me, she was like a second mother; I loved her."

Saturdays would find a group of eight or nine neighborhood children at Mary's home where she would hold Sabbath lessons, said Luella. Religion was important to Mary, who was a devout Seventh Day Adventist, added Luella.

According to everyone who knew her, Mary was a woman of firm convictions. She was never afraid to tackle any problem, and she exuded self-confidence in any situation, said Gloria. Throughout the years, she continued writing letters to Washington about the return of the Oneidas'



1948 Coney Island, N.Y.: Evelyn Webster Goulet (Turtle Clan) and Mary Winder.

land, turning first to a friend and later to Gloria for help.

Brenda Bush (Turtle Clan) remembers Mary visiting her home for just this purpose. Usually, when Mary came to Brenda's house, Brenda and her sisters would gather around for some conversation and fun. "On the days she came for my mother to help her write the letters, she'd kindly tell us she was visiting on business, and

we should go play," said Brenda. "My mother was happy to help. Mary was her best friend."

Throughout her life, Mary elicited love and respect from all who knew her.

"She was always there for us," said Luella. "First when we were little and later as we grew, she would always make time to talk to us."

Offering any of her time was quite



Julia Carpenter Cornelius, Mary Winder's mother.



Joseph Cornelius, Mary Winder's paternal uncle.



Wilson Cornelius, Mary Winder's father.

a feat. Mary's myriad responsibilities seem dizzying by any standard — particularly the demands of caring for a family of 11 children. For example, Mary baked 24 loaves of bread a week for her family, and homemade breads were not the only baked goods the family enjoyed. Gloria recalls walking down the road and smelling the scent of hot biscuits emanating from her home. Mary also made all the children's clothes, even cutting

down coats to fit the younger children. Gloria said she never had a new coat until she was 8 years old. "My mother let me pick out a coat from the Sears catalogue," said Gloria. "I can still see it — it was bright blue with flecks of white and all the buttons were covered with fur."

At 11, Gloria was the eldest child at home — all her older sisters were married. She and her mother enjoyed a close relationship, becoming trusted friends as well as mother and daughter. She would often ask her mother questions while the two were busy with kitchen chores. During these work/talk sessions, Gloria and Mary discussed many things. It was from her mother that she learned the paramount importance of the treaty cloth allotted annually to the Oneida people from the federal government, as required by the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua.

"My mother explained to me that a certain amount of cloth was allocated to each of the Six Nations of the Confederacy," said Gloria. "However, each year the price of the cloth would rise, so the allotment would shrink.

But my mother told me that regardless of how small the pieces of cloth became — even if it became the size of a postage stamp — that we were to claim the cloth. It was tangible proof that the Federal treaties were in full force."

Between the sewing, baking and sundry household chores, there was never a lack of work for Mary, but somehow she found a way, and the time, to travel, working tirelessly toward winning recognition of the Nation's right to its ancestral lands. It was her continued fervor that justice be served that caused Mary to leave her home and family in the care of her husband as she traveled to Washington, Chicago, Canada and Wisconsin. Even trips to Utica were difficult, as Mary had no car.

"I used to give Mary rides to see the lawyer in Utica who was working on the land claims," said Luella. "My father, who was born on the Oneida Territory, would go, too. He was with Mary in Washington when they testified to forbid states to impose

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restrictions upon Indians' fishing and hunting rights."

The federal government had a history of trying to get rid of not only Indians' rights, but Indians themselves, said Gloria. "We used to call us the 'vanishing Americans,'" said Gloria, referring to forced assimilation and the practice of sending children to Indian boarding schools, two imposed measures. "They [the federal government] would even refer to us as aliens in our own country."

The federal government's affront to Indians was continual, said Gloria. One blatant instance was the building of the dam on the Onondaga Reservation, where many Oneidas were living. Half of the reservation was taken over by the government to build the dam

for a reservoir behind the dam that was never filled, never used. This practice was not exclusive to Onondaga, for the Seneca Nation would suffer the same fate with the Kinzua Dam.

In 1943, Mary wrote to the Indian Superintendent in New York stating that the Oneidas were tired of being without a homeland. It was this continual tenacity that would prove providential in the fight for the Nation's land. Mary wanted federal intervention on the Oneidas' behalf, helping them to regain their land. The superintendent's answer was succinct — neither he nor the BIA could intervene.

Undeterred, Mary urged the Oneidas at Onondaga to form an organization which would allow the Oneidas to put in a land claim with the Indian Claims Commission. The commission required a formal organization to be in

place before a claim could be filed.

Sixty Oneida families living on Onondaga met and decided to put in a claim for their ancestral lands. Meetings continued throughout the 1940s. At each one, a hat was passed for donations to buy stamps to continue the writing campaign. "Mary knew the Oneidas had a legitimate, logical claim, but also knew she needed solid supporting information," said Ruth Burr (Turtle Clan Mother), who was a secretary for the organization.

"Mary decided to go to Washington to research our treaties at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office," said Ruth. "She spoke to anyone who would listen, but unfortunately her pleas fell on deaf ears."

In 1948, Mary Winder wrote again to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The letter requested payment or return of the land New York State had illegally taken from the Oneidas. In her letters, Mary cited the Nation's allegiance with the United States in its wars, and asked for help re-claiming Nation lands. The appeals proved fruitless once again.

Through it all, the relentless family obligations and land claim struggles, Mary kept a sense of humor, said Gloria, and a sense of fun. Gloria recalls weekend camping trips her mother planned for the family on a hilltop clearing near their home. Carrying bedding, blankets, pots and pans, the family climbed to the top of the hill and situated themselves for the trip's duration.

"We'd build a campfire at night, and she'd tell us ghost stories," said Gloria. "We didn't have a tent; we'd



William Winder and Janice Beauvais Winder (both Wolf Clan) with Thelma Hill Cornelius (Turtle Clan) and Harold Leslie Cornelius (Wolf Clan).



Gloria and Karen Halbritter (both Wolf Clan).



Sam Winder Jr., Ray and Barry Halbritter (all Wolf Clan) and William Beglen. Gloria Winder Halbritter and Ramona Winder Beglen (both Wolf Clan).

lie there looking up at the stars. In the morning, she'd cook fried potatoes for breakfast and then we'd carry everything back home. These are some of the best memories I have of my mother."

A woman who defied definition, Mary Winder came by her staunch characteristics naturally. It has long been a truth in Haudenosaunee culture that the women play a prominent role. Long before the Europeans came to this country, Haudenosaunee women enjoyed respect within their community. Traditionally, Haudenosaunee women chose chiefs and owned their land and retained custody of their children in disputes. Unlike their European counterparts at the time of the first contact, who were regarded as no better than chattel, owning nothing, not even their children, Haudenosaunee women had high status in their culture, which continues today.

With this strong history behind her, it is little wonder Mary confronted injustice with a stalwart heart. In the last years of her life, she moved to a farm near Bath, N.Y., and grew potatoes and other vegetables. She died from lung cancer at the age of 56, three years after the land claim was officially filed. She is buried at Onondaga. But the work she began has continued.

The Nation eventually won the land claim initiated 30 years before. However, at the time the claims were originally filed, the Oneidas did not understand it was only for a monetary award, said Gloria. The quest Mary had started was always about reacquiring the Oneida land. In the 1970s, the government offered the Oneidas \$3.3 million to settle the land claims

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forever, money that was to be divided among three groups of Oneidas — the Nation in New York and the tribes in Wisconsin and Canada. “There was a line in the proposal which stated that even in the future if the settlement is found to be in error, it could not be addressed again,” said Gloria. “The money was far too little, only a drop in the bucket when you divided it up three ways. Besides we weren’t interested in money; we always wanted the land.”

And it is the land that the Nation continues to fight for today. Ray recalls asking his mother what it was that his grandmother wanted. The answer never altered: land. The struggle was passed down to him — a struggle for the land.

Ray’s memories of his grandmother are second hand, for she died when he was a small boy. Yet, this woman he barely knew lives for him through family recollections, he said. Ray

believes his grandmother would be proud that an “Oneida way” has been found to deal with the land claims settlement creatively, without conflict.

“She would be happy that we’re reacquiring our land,” said Ray. “This reacquisition has not been done in poverty. We are now able to develop our lands and care for our people in a way we weren’t able to for centuries.”

The story of Mary Winder is the story of the Nation: Both confronted adversities and enjoyed successes. Although Mary never saw her work come to fruition, her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and all the faces yet unborn will reap its rewards. To hear her story is to feel her presence, for her spirit was indomitable and her hope eternal.

“She was ahead of her time,” said Ray. “She was like someone in an age of darkness who kept the light burning, protected the



Ray, Karen, Gloria and Barry Halbritter (all Wolf Clan).

light, and kept it from being expunged at great personal sacrifice. Now we all are enjoying the comfort of that light, and we owe much of it to Mary Winder.”



Mary Winder



Liz Winder Robert (Wolf Clan).