

THE ONEIDA

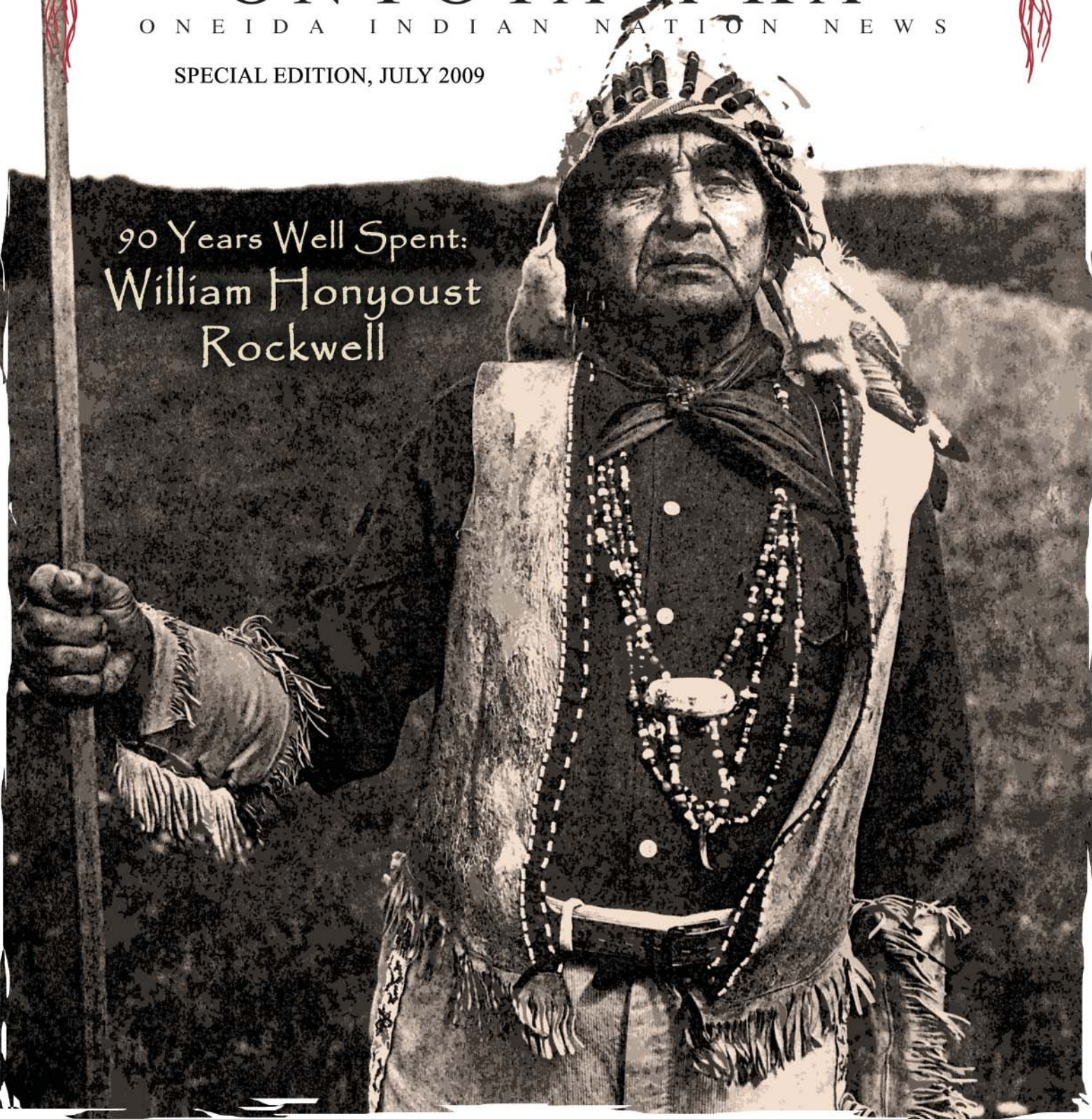


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ONEIDA INDIAN NATION NEWS

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90 Years Well Spent:
William Honyoust
Rockwell





Events experienced in childhood can resonate throughout our lives. And justice, or the lack thereof, can reverberate on a seismic scale unto the generations. William “Bill” Honyoust Rockwell (Bear Clan) --1870 to 1960 -- articulated his own feelings on these matters when, in his writing, he recalled his childhood on the 32 acres to which the Nation’s land had been reduced:

“Many of my people died with a broken heart. Pains of sorrow and grief took them to their graves. I was old enough to remember the kindly old men and women, how gently they would lay their hands on our heads, because they loved us so. And when they would turn away, their eyes were filled with tears. Some would cry with sympathy for us and the future generations who were to lose the human freedom God gave the red-skinned children.

The men also with a look of great concern would talk of the changes taking place. As they would look out over a great stretch, not a tree left standing ... Not only that, the land, as far as they could [see], was no longer theirs and ours.”

Bill Rockwell would spend many years fighting to hold on to the meager acreage remaining of the Oneidas’ ancestral lands. His tenaciousness eventually paid off in court in 1919 when, more than a decade after the turmoil

and litigation over the land began, the 32 acres remained in Oneida hands, as it does today.

But there are numerous other facets to Bill Rockwell’s long life, and they are more than worth the journey of discovery, too.

Let’s start with his mother’s esteemed lineage, which hails back to Polly Cooper.

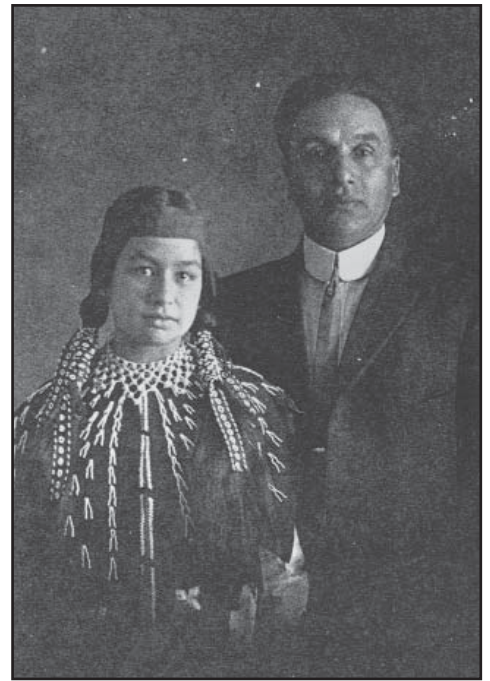
Bill was born May 10, 1870, to Margaret Honyoust in a log cabin on the 32 acres. His maternal grandmother was also named Margaret, née Charles, who married Peter Honyoust. Margaret, the elder, was the daughter of Moses and Katy Charles, who was the daughter of Job Antone and Polly Cooper.

Confused? Bill himself elucidates Polly Cooper, his great-great-grandmother in his writings thus:

“George Washington is called the father of this country. An Indian woman of the Oneida Nation should be called the mother of this country. Her

name was Polly Cooper. She cooked for Geo. Washington and his staff of officers when they were located [in] Philadelphia. Polly Cooper would not accept cash payment for her part in the Revolutionary War. Isn’t that just like a mother in doing for her children? ... So the wives of the officers invited Polly Cooper to take a walk downtown. As they were

looking in the store windows, Polly saw a black shawl on display that she



Bill Rockwell with unidentified woman.

thought was the best article in the window. When the women returned to their homes, they told their husbands what Polly saw that she liked so well. Money was appropriated for the purpose of the shawl. And it was given to Polly Cooper for her services as a cook for the officers of the 13 colonies’ army. When I was a boy, I often heard people speak of Polly Cooper.”

He is quoted in Utica’s *Daily Press* April 14, 1956 edition, recalling the story again, stating his forebear’s contribution to the Revolutionary War, her refusal of monetary payment, and her reply as to what compensation she sought. Polly Cooper replied to this query, according to Bill, thus:

“Nothing, I am fighting just the same as you for Human Freedom.”

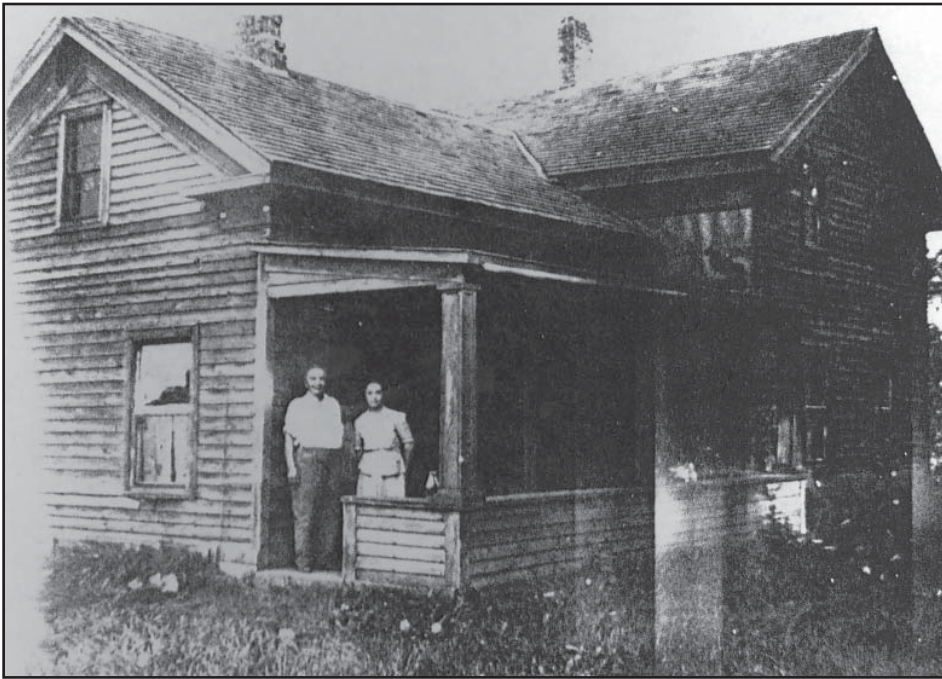
More than a century after his antecedent’s declaration, Bill found himself in his own fight for his and his people’s rights to their tribal lands.

First, some background. Nefarious events that affected the Oneidas were afoot beginning in the 1800s. For brevity’s sake, a synopsis of one of the complicated matters follows.

In a deal with a local nonnative man in the 1880s, Bill’s uncle, Isaac Hony-



Bill Honyoust Rockwell at the Madison County Centennial in 1906. (Photo source unknown)



Bill Rockwell with an unknown woman standing on the porch of his home on the 32 acres.

oust, mortgaged the 32 acres. This man (Philander Spaulding, who gave Isaac a mortgage for \$1,250) eventually signed the mortgage over to Patrick Boylan, who willed it to his wife Julia upon his death. Thus the beginning of the infamous Boylan case takes seed.

Julia Boylan's lawyer started statutory foreclosure proceedings to recoup the debt that had risen, according to her, to \$1,650 with interest. This was 1905. The property was auctioned off and purchased for \$1,250 by an individual who then transferred the deed to Julia Boylan. The Oneidas did not accept this situation and sought legal redress.

The Honyoust family contested Boylan's rights to the land. Oneidas had owned the land collectively as an Indian tribe, not individually, in accordance with their customs. The state's attorney general, William Schuyler Jackson, stated on Oct. 28, 1907, to New York State Gov. Charles Hughes: "It is my opinion, if the band is dispossessed under a sale in the pending suit, that act would constitute a violation of Indian rights."

Ignoring the New York Attorney General, the state courts decided that

the foreclosure would occur, and a deed for the land was made out to Boylan, giving her the Oneidas' land.

On Nov. 30, 1909, the Oneidas were ejected from their homes on the land. Bill Rockwell put the poignant circumstance this way:

"In 1909, my poor old helpless aunt Mary Schenandoah – on the day

following after Thanksgiving she was carried out and dropped in the highway which is now Route 46. Mary Schenandoah was carried to the road five times because she managed to return to the house each time. She was picked up bodily and dropped so heavily into the roadway she was not able to walk back to the house again that was her home. My uncle William Honyoust was treated in the same way. He kept returning to the house that was his home also. Seven burly sheriffs kept putting these two defenseless Indians out in the road until they were completely exhausted so they could not return to their home. The horse William Honyoust owned was turned out of the barn. Our furniture was thrown out to the road. Finally it was carted away into a lot by the woods by a white person."

The Oneidas petitioned the state asking for protection and recompense for lost property, "as well as the indignity suffered," through their lawyer George Decker. After the state legislature's refusal to intercede on behalf of the Oneidas, Decker decided to pursue a different tack. Citing *Heckman et*



Chief Rockwell (pictured here on the left at the New York State Fair) suggested to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey that the State Thruway be named "Iroquois Trail".

Oneida, N. Y.
Feb. 19, 1908.

Mr. Keppeler,
Ruch + Judge Olin,
New York.

RECEIVED
PAPERS
JOSEPH KEPPeler
COLLECTION
FOL. R. C. No. 1

Dear Sir -

My tribe
have been holding councils
for four or five weeks, until
last night when they employed
me to look after our minor
claims. I wish to call upon
you now for letters of introduction
to President Roosevelt or his
secretary as we talked of at
Samanadoah's home at Oneida

Castle. I ^{have} a very interesting matter to
bring before the "big white chief"

I am taking up the work on my
own expense as I am sure we are
intitled to a redress.

Being such a hurry I did not take time
to write to Samanadoah for your address etc.
trusting this will find you so as to enable me
to go to Washington with the desired letters
by the 28th of this month. I have an engagement
in Oneida 26th any time after that I shall
be ready to go.

If you could possibly arrange a date
of my meeting either the President or his
secretary, so much the better.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Very Respectfully,

W. Hornoyost, Rockwell.

al. v. United States, a Supreme Court decision finding that allotments to individual Cherokees sans federal consent were void, Decker wrote to the U. S. attorney general, July 3, 1912:

"The court in that case distinctly held that tribal Indians are under the protection of the United States government and are entitled to the active intervention of the federal government.... In the case of these Oneidas we consider that inasmuch as they have been evicted from tribal lands under process of state courts, it is the state which must answer."

Decker's argument was effective, and the Boylan case entered the U.S. District Court, with the United States suing as plaintiffs on behalf of the Oneidas, becoming the *United States v. Julia Boylan and Anna Siver Moyer* (the woman who purchased the Honyoust home at auction and then deeded it back to Boylan). Finally, after two and a half years of litigation, Judge George W. Ray found that the U.S. recognized its 1794 treaty obligations to the Oneidas - a relationship he interpreted to be that of guardian to ward --and that they as an Indian tribe retained the ancestral title to the 32 acres and had not "abandoned their tribal relations."

In an appeal by the defendants to the circuit court of appeals the next year, the court decided that the Oneidas "constitute a distinct tribe or nation, and exclusive jurisdiction over them is vested in the federal government which may maintain actions in this behalf." Further, "in the absence of federal legislation authorizing it, a mortgage executed by a member of the Oneida tribe of Indians in New York on his interest in the tribal lands [is] held invalid, and a decree of a state court foreclosing it and making partition of the lands [is] held null and void."

In a last-gasp effort, the defendants went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court declined review because the request for it was filed too late, and



ITHACA—THANKSGIVING SQUASH. Chief William H. Rockwell, Oneida medicine man, shows Mrs. Marion John Miles and her papoose an ancient Indian-type squash used for Six Nations Thanksgiving feasts probably 4,000 years before the Pilgrims landed. Stripes on the squash determine the fall moon when the Indians should celebrate in gathering the harvest for the long winter moons ahead.

Clip from an unknown newspaper dated November 1949.

the circuit court of appeals decision stood. The next year, Bill Rockwell took back possession of the land.

During the more than decade-long fight for the land, Rockwell actively sought outside help. In a correspondence with Joseph Keppler* dated 1908, Bill Rockwell asked for an introduction to President Theodore Roosevelt, stating he had been instructed at an Oneida council meeting to represent the Oneidas on their claims. (*See letter previous page*)

Bill Rockwell also petitioned and visited New York State Gov. Hughes

in Albany. He also gave witness in the Boylan case, explaining that regardless of where else he lived for purposes of his work, he always maintained his home was on the 32 acres.

And he worked in many venues. As he testified, it was a necessity to leave the 32 acres and find employment. Bill Rockwell traveled widely for his tool makers' trade: Syracuse; Rochester; Niagara Falls; Amarillo, Texas; Omaha, Nebraska; South Dakota; Denver; and Schenectady.

On the witness stand, Bill Rockwell was asked under cross examination

during the Boylan case, "Where is your home?" He answered: "That [the 32-acres] is my original home."

The next question asked him where his home was currently. He replied that since the eviction he had none; even though he had been living and working in Rochester for four years, Bill Rockwell testified his residence in Rochester was only temporary.

The cross-examiner persisted, asking: "Your work has been elsewhere?" To which Bill Rockwell responded "Yes, sir."

Another query from the attorney: "And you have lived elsewhere?" Bill Rockwell: "At times yes."

Attorney: "You simply went back to visit?" Bill Rockwell's response: "I lived there. My goods are there."

These heartrending responses offer insight into the man Bill Rockwell was and into the Oneida Nation whence he came. And the fight for the land paid off. After the decision was handed down in favor of the Oneidas, Bill Rockwell lived on the 32 acres with his family for the remainder of his life.



A newspaper image of Bill Rockwell.

Beyond the Land Claim

Before he engaged in the fight over the 32 acres, Bill Rockwell endured much personal loss. He buried two wives, marrying for a final time in 1917. He also had three children, Henry, William Jr. and Edna. While none of his children were on the Oneida membership rolls because their mothers were not Oneida, his family has come full circle and today several of his descendants are Oneida Members.

Myriad facts are known about Bill Rockwell, including his attendance at Union College in Schenectady where he studied bookkeeping. He is also listed on the rolls of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institutes in Virginia under the American Indian student files. According to the records, he attended the institute from November 1892 to October 1894 and went on to become a machinist, a tool maker and an Oneida chief (in 1906).

As chief, Rockwell declared war on Germany during World War I and II (this time including Japan). He and



Undated and unknown newspaper.



IT'S AN OLD AMERICAN CUSTOM.—Continuation of a tradition which began with an Indian-White Man treaty in 1794 was carried out yesterday at the home of Chief William Rockwell of the Oneida Indians. Pictured above as he measured the annuity cloth granted the "early" American by the U. S. government for services rendered is the chief with Mrs. Marion John

Miles and her six children. This week the Chief had 248 yards of unbleached muslin to distribute to 127 of his people. Interested spectators above, as each received allotments, are, left to right, John, Jeanette, Robert, Shirley, Richard, and Penny Lou in the arms of her mother, and the Chief.

Unknown newspaper dated Sept. 30, 1955.

other chiefs representing the Iroquois Confederacy announced their intentions to enter the Second World War on the radio as guests on "We the People," speaking from the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C., according to an undated Associated Press story.

(His son, William Jr., enlisted as a flying cadet in the Army Air Corps. Upon earning his silver wings, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant as a flying pilot, as noted in the *Oneida Democratic Union*, Aug. 8, 1943.)

Although he was in favor of backing the United States in its wars and proud of his forbear Polly Cooper's aid to Wahsington's troops, he harbored another sentiment, as well. In a May 10, 1957, interview with an unknown newspaper, marking his 87th birthday, he recalled the Oneidas' contributions to the War for Independence, adding:

"How quickly the friendship of

the Indians was forgotten by the whites afterwards."

To remind the government of its commitments to the Oneidas and their treaties, Bill Rockwell was adamant that the agreement made under the Treaty of Canandaigua in 1794 was adhered to by the United States. Treaty cloth was sent to the Oneidas (and others in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy) each year by the United States according to the terms of the treaty.

In a 1958 interview in an unknown newspaper, the reporter wrote that "he [Bill Rockwell] used to get as much as 15 yards of sheeting. By now the amount has dropped, and this year he anticipates a mere three yards of calico."

Further, according to the article: "The latest payment is overdue and, if it doesn't come through, Rockwell will go to the courts and find out why."

In another undated clip from an unidentified newspaper, Bill Rockwell again spoke of the treaty cloth and of a

problem he encountered with the Bureau of Indian Affairs as to its distribution.

The paper stated: "The bureau had planned to send the cloth to Buffalo and have a tribal representative come there and pick it up. The chief [Bill Rockwell] wrote a letter to President Truman, which got results, as the cloth arrived in Oneida."

A *Utica Press* article dated Jan. 2, 1953, noted: "The Iroquois recently voted a flat refusal of the government's offer of a lump sum payment of \$150,000 cash to settle the permanent pension agreement and end the payments ..."

Bill Rockwell added: "We don't particularly care for the cloth. It's too small an amount to be of much value. We just don't want to break the treaty which to us is a symbol of our ancestors' desire and effort to provide for their posterity."

That year's allotment went to 126 Oneidas in the area, who received a total of 180 yards to be divided amongst them. Again Bill Rockwell offered an acerbic aside: "It was not only made up of mill ends last year, but it was very poor quality as well."

And the previous year's allotment had a mix up in the bill of lading, forcing Bill Rockwell to pay the freight on one of the bolts. Unhappy with paying the bill, he wrote to both the railroad and the federal government until he was reimbursed the shipping.

At some point he assumed the name Lone Bear, as is noted in news articles from 1950 onward. He chose the name, he said, because his mother came from the Bear Clan.



Chief Bill Rockwell, Lone Bear.

A Man of Diverse Talents

Throughout his long life, Bill Rockwell prided himself in his Oneida heritage and traditions. In the 1920s, he held the Iroquois Indian Primitive Industrial Exposition on the 32 acres. He was the secretary and treasurer of the exhibition and an organizer of the event, which featured Indian dancing, food, a beauty and bow and arrow contest, a lacrosse game and beadwork and basket-making demonstrations. According to an *Oneida Dispatch* article dated Sept. 19, 1924, the second annual exhibition drew more than 1,000 people. A *Democratic Union* clip from Oct. 4, 1927, marked the fifth exhibition that still attracted 1,000 attendees and held similar demonstrations to those noted in 1924.

In 1932, Bill Rockwell became actively involved with the New York State Fair, according to a 1960 article in an unknown newspaper. For the 1932 fair, he carved a 16-foot peace pipe with a 23-inch bowl. A Sept. 6, 1932, article described the pipe as made from an apple wood tree that Bill chopped down on the 32 acres.

On the stem he carved a bear, wolf, turtle, beaver, eel, deer, snipe and hawk. The pipe was functional and could be used for smoking. After the fair, it was trucked to the Indian village at Cornell University, according to the report.

Indian Pipe 16 Feet Long Shown at Fair

Chief Rockwell Carves
Symbols on 23-Inch
High Bowl

Six months ago Chief William Rockwell, West Road, near Oneida, a member of the Oneidas started to lay plans for an exhibit at the Syracuse State Fair that would be different. He searched his farm over and cut down an apple tree and also a bass tree. These were moved to his garage. With them he made an Indian peace pipe, 16 feet long, with a bowl that is 23 inches high and with a 16 inch bowl opening.

The bowl is made of apple wood, the trunk of the tree, while the stem is that of the bass tree. On this huge stem has been carved the symbols of the Oneida tribes, the bear, wolf, turtle, beaver, eel, deer, ball players, snipe and hawk. The carving is well executed and the animals stand out in bold relief.

And the best part of the unusual pipe is that it can be smoked. Chief Rockwell guarantees that it will be a cool smoke. In the outer rim of the huge bowl he has installed a regular pipe bowl and from this is a copper tube that runs hidden through the log to the mouth piece. This is stepped down by Elm twigs to reach the usual size for smoking.

From the Indian village at the State Fair, the pipe will be transported on a truck to the Indian village at Cornell University where it will have its permanent resting place.

Several hours each day has been spent on the pipe by Chief Rockwell, he often arising at 4 o'clock

in order to get in some bits of hazardous work, before his onlookers became to numerous.

The work has been closely followed by Dr. Erl Bates of Cornell, a State authority on Indian affairs.



VALUABLE HISTORICAL PIPES

Chief W. H. Rockwell, an Oneida, exhibits two pipes on exhibit at the Indian Village at the State Fair. The upper pipe, the Sioux Pipe, was smoked in pow-wow after the defeat of General Custer. It's valued at more than \$5,000. The big one was carved by Chief Rockwell and it was a year in the making. It's called the Six Nations Council Pipe.

Undated and unknown newspaper clip.

The pipe was only one article Bill Rockwell exhibited at the fair. Several of his paintings were also displayed over the years. But artistic endeavors alone did not define Bill's involvement with the annual event. He also was elected secretary of the Six Nations Indian Agricultural and Home-makers' Society. In this role, Bill helped to arrange exhibits at the Indian Village at the fair.

Driven with Ambitions

Retiring from his toolmaker job at age 73, Bill Rockwell remained active. Even into his 80s, he was completing his Oneida-to-English dictionary and writing a history of the Oneidas and the Six Nations.

In a May 11, 1959, article from an unknown newspaper, details of his daily life were put forth thus:

"Yesterday [Bill's 89th birthday] the popular Oneidan celebrated his birthday, and took time out from his gardening and tree cutting for an appointment with one of his sons who took him and Mrs. Rockwell out to dinner.

"Mrs. Rockwell described her husband's physical condition as 'marvelous.' She said he was 'feeling wonderful.'"

The next year, as he celebrated his birthday, he chastised the State of New York for "displacing the Indians by the Niagara Falls power project act, calling it "an injustice."

Bill Rockwell railed against the removal of the Tuscarora from their lands, saying, "Indians have as much a place in God's creation as anyone else," according to a *Syracuse Post Standard* article on May 10, 1960.

On July 30, 1960,

Chief William Honyoust Rockwell, Lone Bear, passed away. His eulogies were replete with his accomplishments over the many decades. From fighting for the Oneidas' 32 acres to meeting with New York governors to speaking before state and congressional committees on Indian Affairs, and lecturing on Indian customs, Bill Rockwell lived a full life.

At the time of his passing, Bill was survived by his wife, May, his three children, seven grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. They, and all of his descendants, have much of which to be proud.

**Joseph Keppler, Jr. was an avid collector of Indian artifacts, promoted Iroquois lacrosse teams and was also elected honorary chief of the Seneca. His "Iroquois Papers" are part of the Cornell University Library collection.*

Special thanks to Becky Karst, daughter of Martin Johns (Turtle Clan), for sharing her research for this article.

www.OneidaIndianNation.com

Undated and unknown newspaper clip.

Chief Observes 89th Birthday



WILLIAM ROCKWELL

At 89, Oneida Indian Chief William Rockwell is still leading an active life.

Yesterday the popular Oneidan celebrated his birthday, and took time out from his gardening and tree cutting to keep an appointment with one of his sons who took him and Mrs. Rockwell out to dinner.

Mrs. Rockwell described her husband's physical condition as "marvelous". She said he was "feeling wonderful."

Chief Rockwell, who is also Ohgwallie Ha or Lone Bear, is a descendent of Polly Cooper, a famed Oneidan who once served as cook for General George Washington.

Lone Bear was born May 10, 1870 in a log cabin only several hundred yards from the house he lives in now on the West Rd.

He was feted Saturday night by friends at a party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Garlock.

The veteran chief grew up around Oneida. His home was built for him by his father. He recalls that during his younger days before it was plastered and finished on the interior, sometimes 20 or more of his people would stay there. "One winter years ago, it was so cold, we took turns getting up all night to keep the fire in the stove going so we wouldn't freeze," he recalled.

Today, the house is spotless and well furnished. Mrs. Rockwell said proudly that her husband did most of the work of the remodeling.

The chief has long been active in the Six Nations Council. Each year he takes an active part in the Indian Village at the State Fair. Recently he took part in the annual Maple Syrup festival held on the fairgrounds that was attended by Governor Harriman.

Chief Rockwell suggested to former Governor Thomas E. Dewey when the state Thruway was opened that it should be called "Iroquois Trail." The name has since been suggested by others.

Chief Rockwell has two sons, Henry Rockwell, who resides on the Onondaga Reservation, and William H. Rockwell, Jr., connected with the Detroit Conservation Department, and a daughter, and several grandchildren.