

# Oneidas hope the future will bring them together

ONEIDA — Maise Shenandoah, the Wolf Clanmother of the Oneida Indian Nation, scoffs at the idea that life will change for her and her people when they become multimillionaires.

"We're not looking for riches," she said in her log cabin trading post among a display of crafts and Oneida artifacts. "We look at this victory as a way for all the Oneidas to be united, to come back together on our own land."

The victory she referred to was won earlier this year in the U.S. Supreme Court in a test case on Oneida land claims. The court ruled that a treaty transferring land from the Oneidas to the state in 1795 was illegal.

The implication of that decision is that the Oneidas still may own 7 million acres in New York, an area from the St. Lawrence to Pennsylvania that is twice the size of Connecticut.

Eventually, when those claims are settled, the Oneidas are expected to end up with millions of dollars and a large, new homeland somewhere in Central New York.

For Shenandoah, it's the answer to a 200-year-old family dream that dates back to her ancestor, Chief John Skenandoah. He, more than anyone else, is credited with convincing the Oneidas and other tribes to fight on the side of colonists in 1777.

But after the British were beaten, the state signed the treaties that separated its former allies from their land. The Oneidas had only a few dozen acres left in 1900 when her grandfather, Wilson Corenelius, began writing to Washington asking that his people's land be returned.

He insisted that the Oneidas were a



**CLOSEUP**

Craig  
Brandon

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Oneida Indian Nation**

sovereign nation and that their land could not be taxed and that millions of acres still belonged to them. He died long before anyone in Washington took him seriously and most of the Oneidas sold off their land and moved to a reservation in Wisconsin.

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But Chief Skenandoah's granddaughter and the others who stayed in New York expect to see his dreams come true.

Only about 800 Oneidas live with Sheanadoah in or around the 32 acres south of the city of Oneida. Others live near Syracuse, in Canada

and on the Wisconsin reservation.

Shenandoah, whose high position in the tribe allows her a say

in the choosing of chiefs and the naming of children, said Oneidas have

maintained their culture, their language, their ceremonies and even their songs. Now, she said, all Oneidas would be able to share in that culture.

"Our people will come back and be able to work," she said. "We want to be self-sufficient. We're tired of people on welfare and not having jobs. Now there will be no end to the possibilities. My dream is that we will build a museum to put all the artifacts on display for people to see."

Just a few yards from Shenandoah's



HALBRITTER

trading post is the brand-new barn-like building that houses the Oneidas' current major source of income. It's the bingo hall where 400 people a night come to gamble. It would be illegal anywhere else, but here the courts have ruled it is on the land of a sovereign Indian nation, outside the borders of the United States and its laws.

Just inside the door of the bingo hall is the office of Ray Halbritter, the official spokesman on the tribe. He, too, talks about dreams.

He envisions a living Oneida Indian village, complete with authentic long-houses, that would be built somewhere on the new land. It would be an accurate representation of what life was like in Central New York about 1600.

"Visitors could come and live there," he said. "They could go on a three-day hike with a guide who could tell them about the plants and the medicines in the forest. The Indians who chose that way of life could live close to the land."

Halbritter also envisions a Native American University on the new Indian land that would be open to people of all races who wanted to study the culture of the Oneidas.

But besides protecting Oneida culture, he said, the museum village would be a major tourist attraction, certain to bring money into the area.

"All of the money we get will be spent on the local economy, just as we did here," he said, indicating the

bingo hall. "Our payroll is \$17,000 a week. We give away \$40,000 to \$60,000 a week in prize money. All of that money goes into the local economy." Half of the 100 people who work in the bingo hall are non-Oneidas, he said.

Halbritter, who has a business degree from Syracuse University, has a deep commitment to the fight for the Oneidas' land.

He has attempted to calculate what those seven million acres of land are worth and what his people will seek as compensation for them.

"When you try to work it out on a calculator you run out of zeros," he said. "You end up with an E for error."

The Oneidas haven't yet decided how much land and how much money they want, he said. The various Oneida factions still are trying to work out a united proposal. Halbritter said they all expect that there will be many millions of dollars at the end of the road. But more importantly, he said, they want to keep a very large piece of that real estate to call their own.

"We don't want to take away anyone's land," he said. "We, more than anyone, know that is wrong. These people are our neighbors. But we might obtain it in pieces. Land is for sale every day. We could obtain it where we could."

Halbritter said rather than marking off a huge portion of the state and handing it over to the Oneidas, they would be willing to accept smaller pieces that could be consolidated into a unit in later years.

"Oneidas are taught to think of the future in terms of seven generations," he said. "There are a lot of things we still have to consider. We have to consider what the impact will be on the environment. Whatever we do, we want it to be compatible and in harmony with nature."

They don't want to rush into any hasty deals with the government, he said. They made that mistake 200 years ago.

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