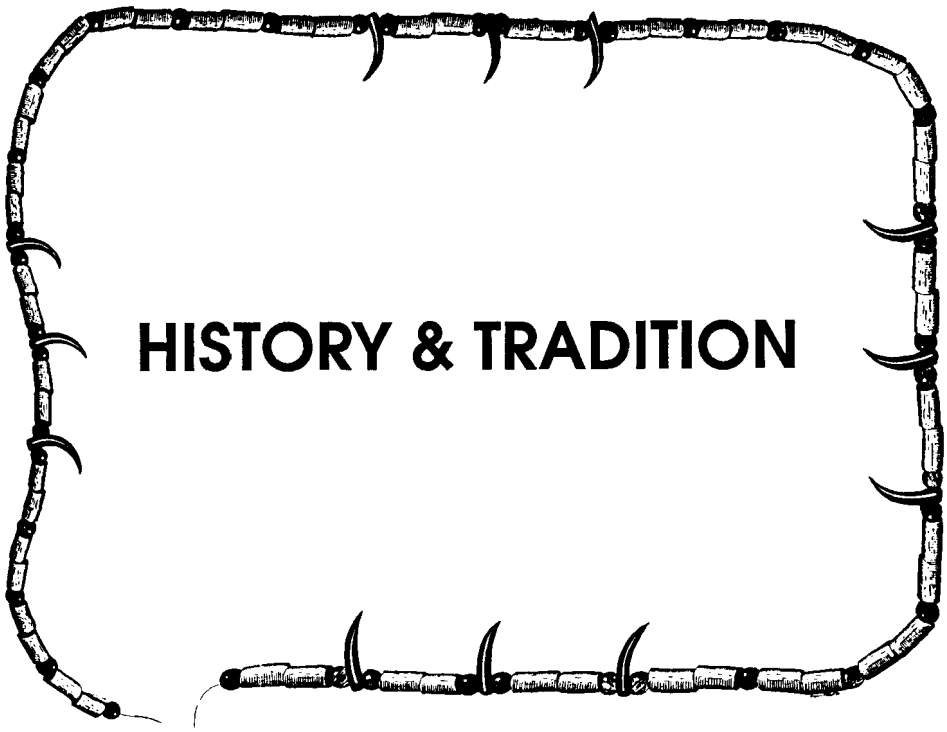

Women in Huron and Ojibwa Societies

BY MARLENE BRANT CASTELLANO

Native women of the past are a shadowy lot. One remembers their handiwork, quill and bead and buckskin pieces reserved in the museums, but what of their personalities? Very few portraits have been left to us except by the ethnographers, who were more interested in kinship and customs and manner of dress than in portraits of individuals.

What we can piece together is a composite portrait of Native women of a particular tradition or a particular time. Such composite portraits are not inconsistent with the images Native women in the past held of themselves, for they did not seek notoriety beyond the bounds of their community. Their accomplishments were not of the sort to bring them fame. They seemed content to form the backdrop against which the men played starring roles. Yet they commanded a respect and wielded an influence which might be the envy of a modern advocate of women's rights.

The coming of European settlers drastically altered the lifestyle of Native women. New elements of material culture were introduced; the cycle of economic activities was changed; alien laws were imposed. Perhaps the most significant change wrought in the lives of Native women was the introduction of new standards by which they were judged, standards which bore little relation to the measures of excellence by which they had hitherto gained esteem, to which their lifelong education had directed them.

Under the impact of these disorienting experiences, the majority of Native women became, for generations, very private persons, attending to their traditional tasks, largely invisible to the mainstream of Canadian society.

In recent years Native women have emerged from the shadows to voice their concerns, to exercise their talents in a public way, to demonstrate the wit and courage which has always been part of their tradition. This essay selectively illustrates this transition among one small group of Native women, those of the Kawartha district.

Both the Iroquoian and Ojibwa women who called the Valley of the Trent their home during these early periods belonged to societies which glorified the male roles — those of warrior,

hunter, councillor or shaman. Women took on those domestic, supportive duties which have been defined through history as "feminine." The major differences in occupation and prestige between women in the two culture groups stem directly from the differences between agricultural and migratory hunting and gathering economies.

The Huron people lived in villages organized on the basis of clan membership. Descent was traced through the female line and transmission of titles and rights followed the same course. The Huron dwelling was the longhouse, constructed of bark slabs tied on a wooden frame, 90-100 feet in length and 20-30 feet in width, with doors usually at the ends. The longhouse was divided into four or more pairs of compartments, each pair separated by a central passageway and served by a common fire for heating and cooking. The occupants of a longhouse were the descendants of a senior woman, her unmarried sons, her daughters, their husbands and children. There must have been variations on the rule that a husband took up residence in his wife's longhouse, since a man chosen as councillor served his mother's clan and he would necessarily reside at least in the same village as his constituents. Property belonged to the family and the practice of storing winter supplies in a single compartment at the end of the longhouse rendered the designations of items as individual or nuclear family property largely meaningless.

Mothers continued to wield considerable influence over their daughters after marriage and the intensity of this relationship was increased by the prolonged absences of the men pursuing hunting, warrior and even political activities away from the village. Women who remained at home were responsible for the stability of the food supply. The crops which they cultivated, especially corn, not only provided insurance against the uncertainties of the hunt, they also constituted an important trade item in relations with the Algonkian people further north who had easy access to meat and furs. Pinning family and residential structure to relationships among women served, then, to provide the greatest economic security and the greatest family stability in a culture where men were highly mobile and engaged in hazardous pursuits.

The importance accorded to women in Huron society was reflected in a variety of ways. The Hurons were said to rejoice at the birth of a girl. When injury was done to an individual the criminal was required to compensate the victim's family for the loss. The price levied to compensate for the loss of life was greater for a woman than for a man because, it was argued, a woman was less able to defend herself and was more valuable because of her reproductive capacities.

Young women were accorded the same sexual freedom as men and little emphasis was placed on the distinction between married and unmarried states. Rather, the society recognized a growing commitment between a man and a woman which became stable with the birth of a child. Separation seldom occurred after the birth of a child, although it was recognized that either partner had the right to terminate the marriage. Where a marriage was threatened, the relatives and friends intervened to heal the breach.

If a young girl who had many lovers became pregnant, it was customary that all the men involved claimed the child and the girl had the option of choosing her husband.

In addition to the tasks of food production, preservation and preparation, and the domestic chores related to child care, hospitality and clothing making, Huron women participated in many activities practiced primarily by men. They gambled; they belonged to curing societies; they participated in ceremonies, including those confirming political appointments.

The picture of Huron women which emerges is far from the myth of female dominated matriarchy which has been attached by some to Iroquoian society. Still, it is clear that Huron women of the seventeenth century enjoyed respect and autonomy which was not yet dreamed of by their white female contemporaries.

If the dominance of Iroquoian women has been exaggerated in history and myth, the submissiveness of Ojibwa women has been similarly exaggerated, affected by the image of the warrior's woman walking docilely two steps to the rear.

The Ojibwa people were migratory hunters and gatherers.

courtesy KANIEN'KEHAKA RAOTITIOHKWA CULTURAL CENTER

They followed a seasonal cycle of activities in which the social unit varied from a single nuclear family to a band consisting of up to fifteen or twenty families. Bands harvested the resources of a particular area and gathered each year at familiar sites. For six to nine months in the winter, nuclear families lived in isolation from each other. The scarcity of game made dispersion desirable so that hunters would not be in competition for the big game and fur bearing animals on which they depended. Family hunting territories were demarcated and fear of retaliation through sorcery was an effective restraint on violations of territorial rights. In March and April families came into closer proximity as they gathered maple sap from groves which often were owned by women in particular families. Although families might share a tent during this season they carried on their economic activities independently.

In summer up to fifteen or twenty families might gather around a favourite site to fish, gather berries, hunt small game, and engage in ceremonial and social exchanges. In August families went to the wild rice beds to harvest grain. In October individual families left for duck hunting, and by November they dispersed to their traditional family hunting territories.

The economic unit maintained throughout this cycle consisted of a hunter and his dependent relatives. Dwellings were wigwams or tents suited to the needs of a highly mobile nuclear family. Although relationships with more distant relatives persisted in the band or might be established with members of neighbouring bands, the intensity of these contacts was diminished by separation during much of the year.

When a young couple married, they established an independent household and though the marriage might have been arranged on the initiative of parents, the rule was that once the young people established their independence in a separate household they were no longer subject to controls from their families of origin.

In Ojibwa society there was a clear distinction made between male and female roles and public recognition went almost exclusively to the activities of men. The exploits of the hunter, warrior and shaman were celebrated in stories told in the lodge. The legends recording encounters with the supernaturals deal with the affairs of men. The role of women was to send men on their journeys with proper ceremony, to welcome them back with appropriate mourning or rejoicing, to hear and applaud the accounts of their achievements.

Ojibwa women were more, however, than passive complements to the life of their men. They were essential economic partners in the annual cycle of work. They were needed not only to perform the normal domestic chores of cooking, sewing and child care, but their skills were also essential to weave the fish nets and paddle the canoe during the duck hunt, to construct protective fur robes and roof the birchbark wigwam, to tan the hides and harvest the rice and maple sap.

It was the recognition of their economic contributions which gave rise to the one rigid prescription imposed on Ojibwa women: that they should marry. A bachelor girl was regarded as anti-social. She was the subject of gossip for thinking herself too good for any man. Since men were prevented by their training from practicing women's work, the lack of a female partner worked economic hardship on a bachelor.

The very fact that Ojibwa society's expectations and rewards were focused so predominantly on men meant that women were free to deviate without censure from the normal course mapped out for them. If, once married, they found that state uncongenial, they had to the right to terminate the union and seek another mate. They could, alternatively, shun the protection of any man and follow those masculine pursuits which were necessary to survival. Especially if a girl was the only child, a favourite or eldest child, she might be taught masculine skills of hunting or doctoring by her father. Women could acquire supernatural protection or power necessary to the practice of shamanism. If they chose to join a war party, it was assumed that they had had a vision to protect them in this pursuit and they were accepted as warriors, not as abnormal women.

While most traditionally feminine activities were carried on quietly without fanfare, some women were known to have

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exceptional talents and to follow their vocations with energy and devotion, in the same manner as men called to a particular career. One such renowned woman was known in her region for the quality of her crafts and the beauty and intricacy of the songs and dances she composed. Still, this fame did not alter her lifestyle or her status within her own lodge.

The nineteenth century saw the advance of settlement in Upper Canada, a succession of treaties and land surrenders to which the Mississaugas acquiesced, and the virtual disappearance of the migratory tribal lifestyle of the Native people inhabiting the Kawartha district. By 1830 an official reservation policy had been articulated, the objectives of which were to collect Indians in considerable numbers, settle them in villages, introduce them to agricultural practices, and instruct them in religion.

The transition to a sedentary life on reserve land had a shattering impact on all Native groups, but the effects were particularly disruptive for migratory groups like the Ojibwa. Men whose education from infancy was directed to preparing them to assume the roles of hunter, warrior, visionary, saw the opportunities to exercise these skills shrink into virtual non-existence. While the role of men underwent drastic change, Ojibwa women retained much of their traditional role. They cared for the children, processed the materials available for family use, and added colour and beauty to the daily round of subsistence work through the creation of handicrafts.

Traditional Native standards of behaviour and excellence were progressively eroded with the spread of Christianity and increasing social and commercial contact with European settlers. A succession of laws was passed, designed to promote the "gradual enfranchisement of Indians and the better management of Indian lands." An Indian Affairs administrative structure was established, and reservations became cultural fortresses within which Native languages and Native customs were preserved in isolation from mainstream Canadian society.

In 1868 the first legislation touching Indians was passed by the Canadian Government; in 1968 Native people became involved for the first time in a national dialogue with the Federal Government and the Canadian community. The intervening period has been called a century of neglect. It was a time when Native women were essentially remote and silent, emerging only sporadically to explore the bright lights of the city which promised joys but seldom delivered them.

The drama of women who left the protection of reserves and met a tragic fate in the city, as portrayed in the play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, has tended to create a stereotype of Native women, as those whose souls have been destroyed by white contact. Again the exaggeration of one facet of the Native experience has tended to obscure the reality. The majority of Native women did not disintegrate. They bent their energies to surviving, as they had always done, although the boundaries of their world had diminished. For many Native young people today the associations which have the deepest meaning are the ties they have with these survivors. The grandmothers maintain that unbroken lineage of loving, courageous, resourceful and creative women who carried the responsibilities of full-fledged human beings in tribal society, who won the respect of the most observant European immigrants, and who during a long and difficult period, kept alive in their communities a sense of continuity with the past and hope for the future.

Native women of today are breaking their silence to lobby for improved social conditions, to protest the injustice of white man's law, to practise and teach Native arts, and even to run for public office. They are not breaking from traditions, as some have suggested. They are women who share the same concerns as their mothers and grandmothers before them. They are actively engaged in the protection of the quality of family life, in wresting necessities from a harsh environment, and by infusing beauty into daily experience. Contemporary Native women have simply accepted the reality that achieving these traditional goals in modern society requires that they put aside their reticence and work out their destiny in public as well as private endeavour.

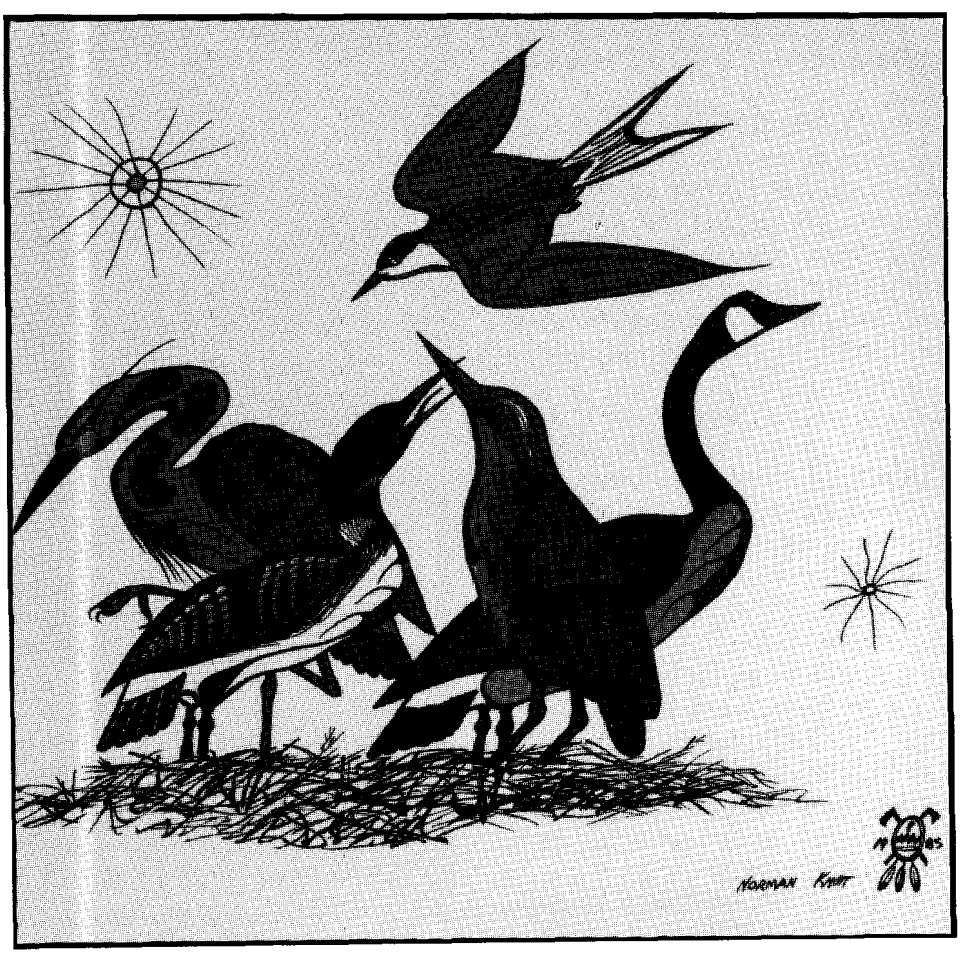

Illustration **NORMAN KNOTT**

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