

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY CHRONICLE

VOLUME LXVII · NUMBER 2 · WINTER 2006



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY CHRONICLE · LXVII · NO. 2 · WINTER 2006

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US ISSN 0032-8456
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VOLUME LXVII 2005-2006

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An otterskin “woompa” bag of the type used in Ojibwe *midewiwin* ceremonies. Princeton Collections of Western Americana, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of Mrs. Lawrence Hoguet.

Full Circle
*FROM DISINTEGRATION TO
REVITALIZATION OF OTTERS KIN BAG USE
IN GREAT LAKES TRIBAL CULTURE*

ANTON TREUER

OTTERS KIN BAGS, like the “woompa” bag in the Princeton University Library’s Western Americana collection, have a long and storied use in Great Lakes tribal cultures, especially among the Ojibwe.¹ Their use has been primarily vested in the medicine dance ceremony, called *midewiwin*. Although the bag in Princeton’s collection has a geometric beadwork design and could be of Ojibwe, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Menomini, Dakota, or even Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) manufacture, most of the otterskin bags acquired by museums and those still in use today were made from skins trapped and decorated by the Ojibwe Indians of the central and western Great Lakes region.

Early references to the midewiwin society in the journals and documents of French and British explorers, traders, and missionaries suggest that the ceremony had its genesis prior to the arrival of whites in the region.² Some scholars, such as Harold Hickerson, have argued

¹ The “woompa” bag in Princeton’s collection was once owned by Ramsay Crooks (1786–1859), a partner of John Jacob Astor and the founder of Astoria. He may have acquired the bag while working as an Indian trader in the Sault Ste. Marie area. It was the gift of the family of Lawrence Hogue, Crooks’s great-great-grandson. A similar “Mide-society medicine bundle, of otter pelt” was acquired by the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in 1846. See Peter Bolz and Hans-Ulrich Sanner, *Native American Art: The Collections of the Ethnological Museum Berlin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 60.

² Samuel Pond, *The Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834* (1908; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 93–96; Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* (1929; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), 86–97; Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. Lascelles Wraxall (1860; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 43–49. Other early studies of the Ojibwe, including those by W. J. Hoffman and William W. Warren in the 1800s, affirm the accounts in these more readily available texts.



Details of the beadwork on Princeton's "woompa" bag.



that midewiwin originated after contact with Europeans; but these assertions are suspect for three reasons.³ First, Hickerson was writing for the Indian Claims Commission, established by Congress in 1946 to hear tribal cases against the federal government concerning ceded lands and monetary reparations. Historical briefs were used to support the government's contention that various Indian groups had only recent and therefore limited use of the lands they claimed, and thus deserved only minimal compensation. Second, if midewiwin was a new ceremony, we would expect early missionaries to have expressed great concern over the creation of a society that drew new and potential converts away from the faith. The advent of other religious societies after European contact, such as the Ghost Dance, received much attention. Yet there are no references to the creation of midewiwin in European missionary or explorer texts. Third, and most important, the tribal cultures of the Great Lakes, in their own oral histories, place the creation of midewiwin at a very early time, prior to contact with Europeans.

Nearly every tribe in the central and western Great Lakes region actively participated in midewiwin throughout the entire fur trade era and the early reservation period. In the eastern and central Great Lakes and in some of the northern reaches of Canada, where early Catholic (especially Jesuit) missionaries had notable success in converting significant portions of the native population to Christianity, most of the early mission work was done in tribal languages. Therefore, cultural loss was not accompanied by loss of language and oral history. Places like Wiikwemikong on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, for example, have relatively high fluency rates even today, but no active practice of midewiwin in many decades.

Surprisingly, the midewiwin and other Ojibwe societies and religious ceremonies remained vibrant well into the twentieth century, despite persistent government efforts at assimilation. Every major Ojibwe community had at least one active lodge. It was not until after World War II that most of the lodges in the upper Midwest started to fold. Today there are still several active lodges, primarily in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and all traditional practitioners travel to those places in order to participate.

³Harold Hickerson, *The Chippewa and Their Neighbors: A Study in Ethnohistory* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1970), 51–63.

Understanding the process that led to erosion of traditional Ojibwe religious societies is important, both for providing direction to Ojibwe people in the future and for evaluating the history and integrity of French, British, and American government policies, past and present. Although the most dramatic and obvious decline in traditional religious societies of the Great Lakes Ojibwe took place around World War II, the source of that decline can be traced to the earlier missionary and assimilation programs devised and supported by the governments of the United States and Britain/Canada. Although missionary efforts have been constant, and their effect is clear, it was the educational initiatives that had the greater negative impact on tribal cultures.

Captain Richard Henry Pratt, superintendent of the first residential boarding school for Indians in the United States, established at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879, summed up the idea behind the policy when he said, “Our goal is to kill the Indian in order to save the man.” The schools were in fact designed for exactly that purpose. Students spent half of the day working at hard labor and the other half receiving an English-language-only education. Punishment for use of tribal languages was often severe.⁴ Conditions were so harsh and rigid at the boarding schools that many students died, and many more suffered from various diseases, such as trachoma and tuberculosis. Some of the schools, like Carlisle and the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, kept their own cemeteries.

In some families, as many as three generations were sent to the residential boarding schools, and the effects were pronounced. The erosion of tribal languages in North America can be directly attributed to the sustained assault of America’s Indian education policies. In addition, tribal family structure and health were damaged. Most people learn how to be parents from their experiences as children. When children were confined in unnurturing, military-style boarding schools, they lost the chance to inherit parenting skills from their extended families. Regardless of how well-educated these children became about the English language and the history of the United States and Europe, they knew nothing about how to get along in the world

⁴See Jim Clark, *Naawigüzis: The Memories of Center of the Moon* (Minneapolis: Birchbark Books, 2002); Anton Treuer, ed., *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales & Oral Histories* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

socially. The widespread patterns of social dysfunction so typical in most Native communities today can be directly attributed to boarding school policies.

Often, when children graduated from the boarding schools, they could not find economic opportunities in Euro-American society. So they returned home, only to confront the fact that they could not recognize their own parents and could not speak their language. With the attendant feelings of dislocation and hopelessness came abuse of alcohol and inability to integrate into any family or society. Participation in and understanding of traditional religious culture and society dwindled as the social, physical, and spiritual health of the community declined.

Assimilation policies did not stop there, of course. The U.S. government continued to pursue assimilation and integration of native peoples on a political level, funding relocation programs to move as many people as possible from rural reservation lands to urban areas. There too, Indians found few economic opportunities, greater dysfunction, and dislocation from tribal cultures.

John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945, brought many changes to Indian Country, including the crucial end to the policy of allotment (by which tribal lands were privatized and made available for sale to non-Indians) and a slow dismantling of the boarding school system as Indian America's dominant educational paradigm. However, the seeds of assimilation had been sewn deeply, and the escalating domination of the English language and church religion continued. These effects became most manifest, ironically, when things started to change. When the sense of loss was combined with the empowering sentiment for self-determination at the heart of the civil rights movement of the 1970s, with its attendant respect for cultural differences, the stage was set for a genuine revival of Native traditions.

While attitudes in Washington, D.C., continue to swing between assimilation and self-determination, some important developments have occurred in the Indian communities of North America. Most notable is a growing awareness and appreciation of the importance of tribal languages as the bearers of culture and spiritual opportunities. Several midewiwin lodges, including those still active today at Bad River, Wisconsin, and Lake Lena, Minnesota, revitalized their societies and resumed their ceremonies. The number of participants there

and in other communities with active lodges has increased. And along with growing participation in traditional societies like midewiwin has come an accelerating demand for the sacred items whose use is vested in those ceremonies. Such is the case with otterskin bags like the one in Princeton's collection.

With the resurgence of traditional Ojibwe societies has come a greater interest in cultural and academic understanding of these practices within and outside Ojibwe communities. There have also been renewed calls for repatriation of sacred artifacts associated with them. Otterskin bags like the one at Princeton still have a role to play in advancing our understanding of the Great Lakes people, culture, and spiritual revitalization.