

A Visit to Otstungo

By Skip Barshied

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A few days ago, I stood with my friends Ron, Dan and John on a unique and sacred piece of ground. My companions came from the Six Nations Reserve in Canada. My only other visit to that ancient Mohawk village site was at least seventy years ago. Now I stood on a site entwined in my friends' culture but vastly separated from mine. However, we shared a reverence for the piece of soil. The time of occupation was separated from us not by days, months or years, but by centuries. This place had been invaded by generations of area boys, collectors, and yes, by archeologists also. All gleaned from the shallow soil beneath the forest trees that which had remained from a culture that was much different from ours. Those bits and pieces now lie in private collections and museums. Can we, on this spring day as we visit here, revive in our mind's eye a time when these artifacts were part of everyday life? Can we sit in the shadows of the long houses and peer inside as the smoke and sparks reach upward from the fire pits as the evening meal is prepared?

The cooking pots with their decorated rims were made here. Those who fashioned them learned from those who had carried the craft from previous generations. Now as we hold the shards of those vessels we see what today might be called "folk art", and that they are. Doubtless, those decorations made a severe lifestyle just a little less severe. Why were these designs scribed in every day utensils? Certainly it was not to try for a blue ribbon in the next craft show. I believe it was in some way a labor of love. As the evening meal is over, one of the fragile pots is dropped. The fragments are swept into the dying fire or dumped into a refuse pit. There they will survive to be found centuries later, and marveled at.

As the evening shadows fall, the old men and boys gather beneath the pines. As has been done all through time, the old men related stories of the great hunts now over, of the biggest fish speared and (of) corn, beans, and squash crops both big and small. It was a time to produce their pipes from wherever they had been hidden for safekeeping. One of the men told about a favorite pipe that was hidden so well it was never recovered. Perhaps someday it will be found again. The old men remembered many pipes that were cast away when broken. It was late in the fall now and the owls were calling to one another. We will find that pipe with the face of an owl on it. It is the pipe to smoke tonight. It slips from fingers not to nimble and falls against a stone. Was the old man sad when the special pipe was broken? The fragments were found many years later to help form a bond between two cultures that bridged the centuries.

Now it was time to leave Otstungo. We take a last look over the high bluff to see the Otsquago Creek flow much as it did centuries ago when this was a thriving Mohawk village. We walk across the adjacent fields, past the Schuyler family cattle, to our vehicle and re-emerge to the 21st century.



Figure 1. The owl pipe

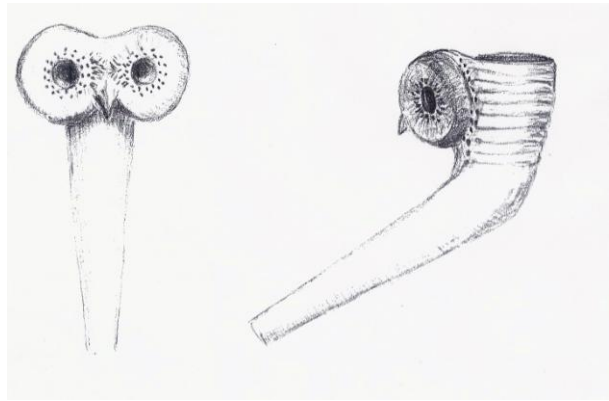


Figure 2. Artist's interpretation of the original pipe.