

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

North American Indian Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 289

DEFOREST MONROE ABRAMS

Interviewed

by

Jay Toth

on

May 27, 1979

DEFOREST MONROE ABRAMS

Monroe is a 31 year old Seneca Indian. He lives at Coldsprings on the Allegany Reservation in New York. As a child he would work on his grandmother's, Yandee, farm, located on Snow Road. When he left his grandmother's farm, he would walk home through the woods and work on their farm. His father's farm was located at the crossroads of Old Route 17 and Old Route 280.

At the completion of the Kinzua Dam, the Corps of Engineers convinced his father to move because of possible floods once every hundred years. Their new government house was the first completed. They moved in on May 7, 1964. At the time, Monroe attended school friction between whites and Indians and the public school was at its peak. Monroe found himself caught between the two factions. Monroe and two other friends always had a dream of becoming tribal president.

College was also a hassle for him. Once he was strapped to the dorm wall and had the hell beat out of him. He was only one of two Indians at Ithica College.

Monroe had cared for his diabetic father. His father had lost both legs. After his father's death, Monroe lost his only purpose in life. Monroe's only income is making beads.

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INTERVIEWEE: DEFOREST MONROE ABRAMS

INTERVIEWER: Jay Toth

SUBJECT: Indian life, Seed Dance, Strawberry Dance, Kinzua Dam, Green Corn Dance

DATE: May 27, 1979

T: This is an interview with Monroe Abrams for the Youngstown State University Program on the North American Indians by Jay Toth on the Allegany Reservation in Steamburg, New York on May 17 at 7:00 p.m.

We are going to start with your family history as far back as you can remember.

A: I remember my grandmother. While we used to call her by her Indian name, Yandee, I really don't know what that meant, but we used to call her just Grandma. I used to work over at her place because she had a pretty good farm. I used to work with her. Well, she had some cows, some chickens, and a couple of horses. The horses were used for plowing up the field.

J: Where was the farm at?

A: It was called Snow Road. She kept some pigs, too. Yes, we used to slaughter the pigs in the fall. The cows were kept around for the milk and butter that we could make from it. The chickens we used for chicken meat and for their eggs. At my dad's place, my dad had his own farm, we had a couple of cows, a couple pigs, and some chickens, but didn't have any horses. We kept that for our own food and stuff. On weekends, or during the week, my dad would take my brother and myself over to my grandmother's place and she would tell us to weed the garden or whatever.

T: You did chores for her?

- A: Yes, she was getting up there, up there in age. After we had done the chores that she wanted us to do, we would walk back through the woods and get our own chores done, because we had to weed our garden and stuff.
- T: Your farm was located where the Kinzua Dam is now at, your father's farm?
- A: Yes, on the hill at the old intersection at Old Route 17 and Old Route 280 on the north side.
- T: How did they notify you that they wanted you to move? Do you remember the whole story behind that?
- A: The Corps of Engineers had told my dad that we had to move because there was land all around us that was below 1365. This land, itself, was above 1365. He could not stay there because the Corps of Engineers said that there would be a flood every one hundred years and when that flood happened there would be no access to the place up there. So, that's how come they forced my dad to move. What good would it do for us to have moved because after the dam was put in that flood would not happen for at least one hundred years? Well, it was kind of dumb of my dad. He would probably still be living up there.
- T: Do you remember the hassle that went on about building the dam? Can you recall any incidents?
- A: Let's see. I was the first one who moved in after the house was finished, that was May 7, 1964, or was it 1965, either 1964 or 1965. But they had to make a special trip, the school bus, because I was the only one here. My parents were packing things at the old house, and the school bus had to make a special trip. They had arranged it, I guess, I don't know, for them to come and pick me up down here.
- T: How old were you at that time, about sixteen or seventeen?
- A: That was during my high school years.
- T: What do you recall of school? What was school like?
- A: It was a hassle. The Indian kids, they said I was bright. I guess I always got pretty good marks in school. I had some white friends that were also in this special class that I was put in for people who had the capabilities to learn a little bit quicker. I had friends in that class but there was always tension because I was an Indian and I had these white friends, and the Indians didn't like it. The white kids then had to hassle with them because I

was Indian. They could accept what I could do with my mind and they accepted me as a friend. There was always just a little friction like that, the one group against the other.

T: What did you do after you graduated?

A: I went to college. I worked construction that summer and then went out to college and came back and worked construction again, and got myself a car. Then I had to axe that in 1967. That kind of just tossed my mind to the arrow, "What the hay is going on?" When I went to school they used to harass me because I was the only male Indian on campus. There was a female there who was a grade ahead of me. The white people there, one time they strapped me up. There were five of them, they strapped me up against the dorm wall and beat the living hell out of me, because I had talked to, what he said, was his girl friend. There was tension there too between my own self and the university.

T: After you left there, where did you continue out to.

A: No, I stayed there for three and a half years of accounting. I had my fill of accounting, so then I switched my major to business administration because the accounting courses and the business courses, some of them coincided. I would not be set back in my grade level. I had taken some night courses over at Cornell out of my own money. When I went to school I had won scholarships and the Seneca Nation had given me some money, and I had the New York Aid to Indian Education. So I had at least about four different scholarships. I was making, when I was going to school, towards the end there, \$500 a semester just by going to school. That was after everything was paid for, my tuition, my books, room and board, laundry, special classes, and college fees. After everything was paid for I still had \$500 coming in cash. But I would not get that until towards the end of the semester. I had the whole shot paid for. But I had also started taking night courses at Cornell and that was out of my own money, out of the money I had saved up during the summer from working in construction, and working at school and working outside of school; I paid for these courses.

T: Do you feel your education has helped you any?

A: No, but I haven't really tried either, not in the way of working or looking for a meaningful job for myself. I am just more content using my hands.

T: You mentioned to me once that you wanted to be somebody. I can't recall the exact words that you used.

A: Was it the president of the Seneca Nation? You mean to have a name for yourself? Well, I've already got a name for myself. I know my handicrafts. People come to me, I don't go to them.

T: And what do you feel? Is there a problem? Do you feel there is any turmoil inside of you at this particular time? How do you feel inside right now as far as life is concerned?

A: I really don't know what to make out of it. Like this is the first time I have ever been put in this type of situation where I have really no one to turn to. It has always been my father and my mother before. My mother died, and that same year my father had his leg amputated. That was the year I had come home from school and had taken care of him because there was no one else. But, during all the time I had been here taking care of him, I didn't have to worry about anything except taking care of him because he was footing the bills and making sure I kept the house running right. Then everything fell onto me. That is what the elders had told me at my father's funeral.

T: Let's talk about Handsome Lake Religion, okay?

A: All right. Well, to start off, they didn't need him. He had to have a quorum of the elders. That means that as soon as everybody gets together, they can start, because once the elders are there the people should be following. Then the speaker will get up and he will give the blessing, blessing everything, a welcome blessing. He will tell the people that are there why they have met and what will be coming up. He will give this blessing of every living creature and everything on earth from the smallest up to the stars. He will name them. After the blessing is done, another speaker will stand up and tell the people, or remind the people, why they are there and this is what has to be done. Then he will list the things that have to be done. After he's done another speaker will stand up and tell the people the timetable for these things to happen. All these people are elders and speakers.

T: What are the names of all the ceremonies that take place over the year? Like the New Years Festival, the New Years Dance, do you think you can name them?

A: Then will come the Seed Dance. That is where a collection is taken up from the people by some of the elders and messengers of the elders. They gather in seeds and then at this Seed Dance they will pass out these seeds. They will distribute these seeds to the people, like bean seeds, corn seeds, cucumber seeds, and onions. That's the Seed

Dance. It's like a blessing for the seeds. They tell the people that this is what had been gathered up from the people to give back to the people, but in an even distribution. The elders knew each one who had attended the Seed Dance had gotten his share of all the seeds that had been brought in, and it was their duty to plant those seeds. Okay, that is the Seed Dance.

Next comes the Strawberry Dance. That's the blessing for strawberries. That means the seeds that have been given out should be in the ground and should be starting to grow. This is the time that the Creator has said that everything is okay that is inside the ground now. It is to give thanks for the strawberry that is the spring tonic, strawberry juice. That is why they pass around the strawberry juice to everybody in the Long House on the Strawberry Dance day. That is just to give a blessing for the seeds that had been put in before, or should have been put in that started to grow.

Next comes the Green Corn Dance. That is when everything that had been planted should be ready to harvest. That gives a blessing to the green corn to show the people that things are getting ripe now and they better watch it to make sure that everything is right. That is what the Green Corn Dance is about. It lasts four days. The first day will be the blessing day and children's name calling day. That's when they name the newborn babies. The second day is what they call the Great Feather Dance day. The third day is what they call the Drum Dance day. In the olden times they used to have the bow and arrow. That is what the leader of the dancers had held in his hands to show he was leading the warriors down to pick out the ripe produce of the seeds that had been planted. On the fourth day, they have what is known as the "dish bowl game." That is where they have eight peat stone pits. On one side is a light color and on the other side is a dark color. This is like a little gambling game.

T: Your father had a part in this religion, what did he do?

A: He was the head speaker. He spoke on all of the reservations, even the one out in Michigan and Minnesota. He had spoken at all the six nations in New York State and quite a few, or most of the nations up in Canada. So he was internationally known.

T: Who takes his place now, or who will take his place?

A: All the elders have been meeting to see who is eligible. It does come down by clans.

T: What clan do you and your father belong to?

- A: Well, I belong in the Blue Heron Clan. The clans go through the mother's line. My father was a Beaver, so it would have to go through the Beaver Clan for the next speaker. The elders and the clan mothers have to meet together to see who is eligible and who is willing to learn what my father had been teaching all this time. Each time my father taught, he was like a schoolteacher telling his students, now this is the way it is. He was teaching them the way it should be. So far there aren't really that many people who are really eligible on this reservation. But, if they cannot decide on a person to be asked to learn, they will have to switch it to another clan so that maybe their clan mothers can figure someone who is eligible and willing to learn.
- T: You mentioned once that the treaty is set up so that any ceremonies not attended the reservations will terminate? It that how it goes?
- A: Well, no. The way my father used tell me is that once there are no ceremonies at the Long House and the government checks into what is supposed to have happened, like the Strawberry Dance, or any other of the dances, the Green Corn Dance, and any of the rites, if they are not held at the Long House, that is when they will board up the Long House and terminate the status of the reservation. Because they might say they might be Indian, but they don't know the Indian way.
- T: Do you feel the Long House is growing smaller?
- A: This past year it has really lost quite a few people that were the elders of the Long House. But there has been quite a few of the younger, or say college age people now starting to take interest back into the Long House and are trying to learn about the Long House again. My cousin down here, and myself, he has learned a lot of songs in the Long House. He is always looking for maybe a new face in the crowd that is anxious to learn. He is willing to share what he knows about the ways of the Long House, and the same with myself. They have lost a lot of the elders, but they are gaining a lot more of the younger people. It is like a switchout. But time will only tell.
- T: There is a thing I want to talk about because I wasn't here for it and if you don't want to talk about it we won't. It is about your father's funeral. Amylee told me about it and I was kind of upset about it. Can you tell me about it? Can you tell me who came and what took place?
- A: After the person has died and has gone to the funeral home and has gotten fixed up, they are supposed to be

brought back to the house because that is where the person's heart is at, at his own home. In the Indian way he is supposed to stay, after he has come back to the house, there for two days and two nights. On the third day his family, his friends, and the people around him puts his body to rest because there is nothing left except for this spirit. On those two nights they will have a wake. They have night watches to make sure nothing happens to the body during those two nights. It is like a bodyguard. A wake is where the family of this person will stay awake that whole night and at midnight they will have a brunch, but they also take a plate of everything that is served, a plate of a little dab of everything that is served, to the people that are awake at that time. They will take that plate and place it by the casket and if he, that person that died, smoked, they will light up a cigarette or a pipe, or cigar, or whatever he smoked, and place it by the casket. That is his share of what everybody who is awake. I'll stay awake until daylight, and then at daylight, they will start to cook breakfast for all those who have stayed all night, people might be coming and going during that time, but for the people who had stayed all night, they have a breakfast set up for them. The person who had died gets a share of that breakfast too, or the things that he liked for breakfast. That goes on a second night too. It is like a serving of food for a loved one to have while the rest of the ones that are alive are having their meal.

On the third day they usually have a speaker that comes down. When the casket arrives at the house there is a speaker that will talk to the spirit of the one who had died. The speaker tells the spirit of the dead person, his body has come home to the place in his heart where he will stay for two days and two nights and on the third day all his friends and the people who knew him will put that body to rest here on earth because his spirit has left his body and is going on a trip. He will be traveling. That is what the speaker will tell them. When the casket first arrives at the house, he will tell the spirit not to be scared, and not to hurt anybody, and not to stay hostile because everyone there knew him and loved him and they want to make sure that his journey will be starting off right. Okay, that is the first time the speaker talks. Then, on the third day, after his final breakfast, the speaker will come in, and they usually have a group of people there too, like the family and his friends. Like with my father, it was the elders of the Long House that were there too. The speaker will tell everybody around the casket that this is his last morning at his home. His body will have to leave the home now, but it will go down to the Long House where everybody will say their last farewells. He tells them not to be afraid. He is starting his last journey but he is doing it alone. He is our leader because

he has left this world and there is no one on this world to help him. He is by himself, but we are wishing the spirit the best of the journey and this is the only way we here on the world can show you that we do care for you.

It is like a plane. Here is the world and here is the spirit up here and his body is on this world, but the spirit is up here. They look up into the spirit and the people on the world tell the spirit not to be afraid, don't get hostile or whatever, but this all the people here on the world can do to show the spirit that they care.

That is at the house, and they take up the casket and take it down to the Long House. Then other elders will be coming in. With my father, there were people from Canada, Syracuse, and all the local elders from around here that couldn't make it to the funeral. The head speaker will first greet the people and thank them for coming because this will show the spirit that the people that the people here care.

T: You speak of a journey, can you clarify the journey to wherever?

A: To the Happy Hunting Ground (Laughter). No, what they say is, when you die you are alone. You have your one place, but you have many paths in front of you. It is yours and your job only, you are the only one to know, to choose, which path you want to take. You can make it rough or you can make it easy for yourself until you see the Creator. All those paths go toward the Creator and some of them are rough and some of them are easy. That is only up to that one person to choose which way he wants to take. What they say is, that is your last decision before meeting the Creator, which way you want to meet him. It can be easy or it can be rough. It is only up to you.

T: What do you see in the future for this particular reservation?

A: It will get better. Just like what I was saying, more of the younger people are getting interested.

T: We had a problem with the lease, has that been settled?

A: I was showing Amylee last night about this one article that came in the press. Read this.

T: "With the archives come a photograph, above, showing that the signers of the 99 year Indian land lease agreement is loaned to me several years ago by one of my Seneca friends and I have held on to it, waiting for just the

right moment to release it as a news photo. Now that the negotiation on the Solomac Indian lease agreement has resumed, in a meeting starting Monday this week in Gimmersintown between the representatives of the city and the Seneca Nation, it is hopeful that some headway will be made this year on the drawing up of new lease agreements between the nations and some three thousand property owners in the city." Well, if you have a lease, you are not property owners, you know?

A: Except for their houses, they own the house but not the land.

J: Right. "It is only twelve years before the 1892 Indian lease expires. February 19, 1991, is the date by which the new lease agreement is to be enacted, increasing present lease payments to the Senecas. Most property owners pay one to five dollars a year for the land on which their houses are constructed. They own their houses but they do not own the land, for this has been given to the Seneca Nations by our first president, George Washington, after the Revolutionary War. The Seneca's Alleghany River and a mile on each side . . . I will write more on that chapter on the Seneca history in my next column. But for today, I thought that you would appreciate seeing this photo of the signers of the 1892 agreement. How dignified are the Senecas in the photo above. Note the starched white collars, black ties, neat black suits, and vests. At least three of the Seneca's delegation wore shiny gold watches and chains looped around across the chest. There were two Seneca women in the photo, one with a small child. Presumably, they are wives of two of the signers. Note the varieties of hats worn by the men. Most men have mustaches and two have beards. The location of this group is in doubt, although it is believed that the Senecas have an office on Main Street. I am told that the photo was taken in front of the steps leading into the second house.

Bob Ho's father helped to identify Willam C. Ho, his father who was later to hold an office of the Seneca Nation presidency for many years. Ho says that Bob's grandfather is the young man, about 30, who stands hatless.

What was Salamaca like in the 1890's? Population was about six thousand, and most men were employed by the Erie Railroad, furniture factories, tanneries, or saw mills. According to Salamanca his own Tom Hogan the governor reported in the Times today that by 1890 Salamanca had a system waterwork costing \$50,000, sewers, natural gas, and a plant for manufacturing and eliminating gas, substantial churches, and a high school costing \$40,000."

Do you feel that they should continue the lease?

A: On a shorter time basis.

T: Do you feel maybe they should limit the number of whites on the reservation? You know, one of their ideas was to plant a seed and once you get the roots started like a tree it sort of takes over. Wasn't that the idea originally behind the lease, though they did not make that public?

M: I really couldn't say. I don't know. Seems I could check around and see what documents they have at the nation's office and stuff.

T: You know I heard, last time I was here, that the whites say that if the lease is not renewed, they would burn down their houses before they would give them over. Is that the way it went? Isn't there bad thoughts between the whites and the Indians here?

M: Some yes, that is with any opposition groups. They always have some people in there that fanatically expound on the opposition. It is just like one bad apple in the barrel doesn't make the whole barrel bad. A lot of what people talk about is, say maybe one person might say something good about the lease, they will forget that, but if another person, who really does not like anything, he will do anything fanatically possible to oppose that lease and that is the one they will talk about. It is like with the newspaper. You never hear about the good news that has been going on, all you hear about is the bad news.

T: The last time we were here you and I had some students down. Bob Ho had said that they were troublemakers. Can you recall that incident?

M: Yes. What I had learned from that confrontation was that the group that Amy had here on the reserve had left some of her maps to the city of Salamanca. Amylee had written it up in . . . Well, if you knew Amylee it would seem funny. The Park Place was like a place where you had topless waitresses, and the Phoenix Hotel, you can get rooms cheap, really cheap, if you know the people. (Laughter) The best place to eat would be at the best and most expensive place at the Hotel in Dudley. She had maps for her students and the clean-up crew down at the community center had found a couple of those and they took it in the wrong light. They didn't take it humorously, they took to mean that she was putting down the Indian people here and trying to bring in other people to show the people that she had brought in that Salamaca is a hit town. (laughter) And the Indian stand for it. I think that is why Bob Ho would have went on the other side there.

T: So in other words, he doesn't want the outside world to know what is going on here?

A: Yes, he is like that. There is a lot of talk around here about him being "addicted". (Laughter) If he pushes himself too far, he will find that the Seneca Nation is not a dictatorship; it is not an authoritarianism, and is not a monarchy; it is a democracy, the people say.

T: He just got off an embezzling charge?

A: Yes, \$10,000 or something like that from the Seneca Nation and using it for his own personal use. A friend of mine just down the road here, Bradley, he was the one that testified against Bob Ho. Bradley, since Bob Ho hasn't gotten off yet, he still cannot find a job around the reservation locality, either here or out there. He will be working off the reservation for awhile. But, Bradley has got a pretty bad name too. He went to Attica State Prison. You probably heard of Attica? He went there for five years, well, four and a half years for passing bad paper. Then, he has been an alcoholic, been in a lot of fights, but now he has gone into AA. He has gone into consultation with different, well, you might say, psychologists, sociologists, to find out where his head is at, for him to know where his head is at. But that was the guy who testified against Bob Ho. Bob Ho is supposed to be so pure and everything. But yet he still owns a trailer court in Salamanca, quite a bit of land, several houses, a mistress here and there, and yet he gets off. But one thing about Bob Ho too, he does have the cash that he did hire a really nationally wide noted lawyer. It takes a lot of cash. Must be nobody does walk because Bob Ho is still running this side of the nation.

T: When is the reelection up again. How long do their terms run?

A: Two years, but they're trying to get it in for four years now for the president and two years for the councilors.

T: Do you think Ho will make it next time?

A: He can't make it as president. Another person will be president, but he will probably be elected treasurer again because the treasurer and the president, it is like a parasitic relationship. The president has the say, but it is the treasurer that makes the move. He will propose, he will make propositions to the president, and it is only up to the president to say what will go up to council. But then the treasurer and the council are supposed to be pretty close together too. So the treasurer can induce councilors to see it his way and to override

what the president wants.

J: What are the eligibility requirements for the president?

T: For the Seneca Nation?

T: Yes.

A: I think it has been adopted as the same for the United States. You have to be 35, be an enrolled Seneca. When I was going to grade school, there were Mojohn, Gary Gordon, and myself. All three of us had one dream where I would be president, and Mojohn would be treasurer, and Gary would be our secretary because he had to keep us in line. (Laughter) If the paper work didn't get out nothing went out. Mo is out in Denver now, and Gary took the path up. Mojohn still remembers that, but he says he wants to do it in a different way. That is why he took the job as the coordinating director.

T: So in other words, he is planning to come back with experience?

A: Yes.

T: That is not a bad idea.

A: He has had that dream for about nine, ten years. Like now too, a lot of those middle-aged people will be drinking and stuff and going out. They ask me now and then, "Why don't you try running for president once?" (Laughter) It goes back to that dream as me as president. How did you know I wanted to be president?

T: You should try it for the heck of it. You will never know.

A: It is worth a try. But what would I do if I did become president?

T: Be president.

A: Like Bob Ho, right?

T: Hey, I did not say that, I said do this! (Laughter)

A: But right now I am almost certain that, it has been eating at me to get my dad's will through because my dad did have some money in the bank, but I cannot touch it until it goes through probate and testing. But the bills keep coming in.

If I really work at it maybe I can make it, maybe some days \$25 doing bead work other days \$10. Besides that, I drink

too much. (Laughter) Or, maybe not enough otherwise I would not have to worry about it. I would be taking my own road.

Anything else?

T: No, that is pretty good. Can you think of anything?
Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW