

APRIL SPEAKER - ALISON NORMAN

HISTORY OF WOMEN OF SIX NATIONS OF GRAND RIVER RESERVE

"I love women's organizations like yours. There are echoes between what you do and the Haudenosaunee women of the Six Nations of Grand River reserve near Brantford, Ontario – women who get things done," Alison began. She described the impact the women on the reserve have had and still have, although not as much in the forefront as in the past, on the reserve's strength and longevity. Six Nations, one of Canada's largest First Nations in terms of population, is the only reserve in North America where all six Haudenosaunee nations live together.

Alison has a unique double perspective. She's a historian at the federal government's Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs department and also a founding member of the Mohawk Institute Research Group, headquartered at Six Nations Grand River, and is co-editing a book on the history of the Mohawk Institute. In these days when the First Nations object to "appropriation" of their story by non-Indigenous Alison is an exception. It's probably because for close to 25 years she has immersed herself in "reading, interviews, researching every document I could find" and because she approaches her study from a desire "to help with "truth and reconciliation." She made contacts through doing genealogical research for members of the reserve.

The Six Nations Haudenosaunee consist of the five tribes of the "Iroquois-speaking Confederacy" –Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca –and Tuscarora. They first lived in Upper New York State. "His Majesty's most faithful allies" in the American Revolution they migrated to Canada afterwards. Many who primarily were farmers settled on the fertile land alongside the Grand River in southwestern Ontario. Alison described the important traditional and current role of Six Nations women. The founder of the confederacy is female, "Sky Woman" who fell down from "Sky World". Women had power in all aspects of life: arranged marriages, appointed and on occasion ousted, "dehorned," clan chiefs, symbolically removing the horn signifying power from their headdress; inspired "necessary wars" to repopulate the community with captives following decimating disease and/or malnutrition, and controlled crop growing. "They controlled the village, everything inside the palisade wall; the men were outside, hunting and fishing. The chief crops-corn, beans, squash – were called "The Three Sisters."

Grand River was distinctive among Indigenous in women being leaders. Alison said it may have been due to their having control over food cultivation, essential for everyone's wellbeing. "Starting in the late 1800s there was a declension of their power," Allison said. The 1876 Indian Act replaced clan mother appointment of a clan chief with elections. Their cultural and educational influence was diminished by missionaries. But the women continued to be in the forefront of community life: teaching, temperance and benevolent societies, hospital visits.

Wanting to be a registered nurse, Six Nations' Edith Anderson Monture (1890-1996) was rejected by Ontario nursing training schools. She didn't give up; she went to a U.S. nursing school where she graduated first in her class. She served as a military nurse with the U.S. Army in the First World War. Susan Hardie (1867-1961) taught for 50 years, until she retired in 1936, at the Mohawk Institute on the reserve, which she'd attended as a student.

Susan Goldenberg