
The Man of the Lake and the Mountain A Story from Potton about Truth and Reconciliation by Janet Chandler Allingham¹

Henry Wheeler (1900-1966) was of Abenaki descent. Or so we were told years after his death. He lived most of his life in the Leadville area, close to the shore of Lake Memphremagog, not far from the base of Owl's Head Mountain.

We first met Henry in 1960, the year we purchased a cottage on the lake. He had "dropped down" to meet the new family from the city. Henry introduced himself as someone who could do odd jobs on the property. At the time, we thought we were self-sufficient, wondering how we could possibly need his help around a little cottage. In time, however, we came to value his knowledge and abilities. He knew, for example, when it would be safe to put in the dock ("If it goes in too early, it will float down to Magog."); he knew how to rebuild the steps on the steep bank; and he could re-route the water if a rainstorm began to wash out the steep access road off the Mountain House Road. Later in the summer, with a twinkle in his eye, he asked why we were fishing off the dock: "The fish have all gone across the lake by now," he informed us. Then, pointing southward he announced, "There's a lot of fine liquor in these waters," thereby introducing us to the region's history of bootlegging. Playing "cat and mouse" with the local game warden sounded almost as thrilling!

¹ Janet Chandler Allingham is a new member of Potton Heritage. She acknowledges the editorial assistance of Helen Rossiter in writing this article. Janet currently lives in Ottawa, but says that Potton has a special place in her heart.

Soon we began to look forward to Henry's visits. A weekend without the tap of his boot on the back porch was deficient. "We never saw him at all" we moaned, when it was time to pack up. Our parents' trust in Henry grew to the point that they allowed us to accompany him to a deer yard, deep in the woods. We followed him along the path, single file, speaking in low tones as he did, proudly wearing our very own red and black plaid jackets ("from Giroux's"), "just like Henry's".

Years later, Henry may have lost his life in a hunting accident close to that deer yard. It happened long ago, but I can still feel the void his death left in our lives. The following summer, a local resident questioned his burial in the Mansonville Protestant Cemetery: "He should have been buried in the Leadville Cemetery; closer to the lake ... After all, he was part of that lake."

In January 2017 I began to write about Henry for a Sesquicentennial essay contest sponsored by the Townshippers' Association. By now, Canadians were living in the aftermath of the *Truth and Reconciliation* Commission's report, and interest in and understanding of Canada's First Peoples was growing. The writing project rekindled my interest in Henry. I remembered that a neighbour, who had grown up in Mansonville, had once remarked that Henry was "an Indian". "You can tell from the way he walks in the woods," she said. True, there had been many clues: his knowledge of the lake, the woods and their inhabitants; and his skill at hunting and fishing. There were darker memories, too, which today suggest a marginalized existence: his tiny house, and the boxes of food and clothing that city people brought out to him.



Daniel Haché | La route des eaux abénaquises
Photo Serge Normand, 2017

Investigation of the question led to an Abanaki historian in Vermont: Bea Aldrich Nelson. Her answer was immediate: "Yes, the Wheeler family is Abanaki." While her response confirmed what I knew in my heart, she had also shed light on our own status: if Henry and his family were of Abanaki descent, then were we not *settlers*? Like other settlers in history, we lived on the best land in the vicinity — the shoreline of Lake Memphremagog and, like Champlain in the early 17th century, we depended on Indigenous skill and know-how. It was an astounding parallel.

Bea Nelson has suggested that Henry was possibly unaware of his Indigenous roots. Down through the years, she said, it was often safer not to know, especially in Vermont where "Indians" were all too often sterilized. Many Abanaki families hid and, eventually, lost their true identity. Speaking to Bea had also opened the door to a profound truth: some families in Potton are descended from Canada's First Peoples.

Was Henry Wheeler an Indian? The truth is that he was, at the very least, of Abanaki descent. This truth should be acknowledged. One way to honour him, and other Abanaki who inhabited (or still inhabit) Potton, the

traditional and unceded territory of the Abanaki, is to reference Article 13 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (1995):

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places, and persons...



Paul Straton
Totem
au quai de
Vale Perkins

Archives
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It's only right, for example, that communities across the country are beginning to add Indigenous names to geographical locations. The Grand Council of the Waban-Aki support such initiatives. Honouring Abanaki history in Potton through the addition of indigenous names to signs is the work of *reconciliation*. Adding the name "Walowadjo" to signage for "Owl's Head", the most prominent geological feature of Potton, is one place to start.