

The Resilient Lives of the Oneida Tribe

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Summary:

The Oneida Tribe is a very traditional and proud tribe. The Tribe assures that the history of the tribe will be forever lived through education and stories. When the tribe started running their own Casino, many tribal members were worried that the honor of their tribes culture was at risk. After much debate and talk within the tribe, the realization of how important the casino was to their tribe outweighed all worries. Funding many programs through the casinos revenue allowed the Oneida tribe to give back to its members. Was the culture of the Oneida Tribe ever at serious risk of corruption? How important was this casino to the people of the tribe?

Background:

The Oneida Tribe is a very proud tribe with a rich history, famously recognized as being America's first Indian ally. The Oneida Tribe fought alongside the United States in many key battles during the Revolutionary War, and the relationship between America and the Oneida Indian Nation is very special because the Oneida Tribe is the only Indian Tribe that is recognized by America as helping them jointly win a battle. The Oneida people originally settled in upstate New York, where they once had over six million acres of land. After being forced out of their land by the state of New York, the tribe was forced to relocate, and so they headed west to Wisconsin.

During the tribes first years in Wisconsin, the Oneida people controversially negotiated with two local tribes to attain a large amount of land. The two local tribes felt as though their land was unfairly taken from them, and after much debate and persistence by the two tribes, the Oneida people were eventually forced to settle with a lot less land than they had once acquired. After a long struggle to attain land, the Oneida Tribe finally had a chunk of land in Wisconsin that they could call their own. The tribe had a fresh start in a new place and they now had to start planning for the future and the well being of its people. During the first century or so on their new land, the Oneida Tribe was very poor, with unemployment being a huge setback for the tribe. With no economic direction, the tribal leaders had to take action to try and better the lives of their tribal members. After much thought and debate, the tribe decided to go in a direction where they could both make money, and create employment opportunities for its tribal members, so they smartly turned to Bingo and gambling (Lindsay).

After the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in 1988, the Oneida Tribe was finally able to start their own Bingo and gambling empire, thus creating thousands of jobs and vastly boosting the tribes economy. With casino revenues rolling in, the tribe could now fund tribal programs that helped the well being of its people and have a strong government that they could be proud of. This did not sit well with everyone though, especially the older and traditional tribal members, who resented the idea of gambling. Many debates and arguments ensued between the new and old generations of the tribe; but the pros of having a casino greatly outweighed the cons, leaving the older tribal members without much of an argument. Why was having a casino so important for the Oneida people? Has having a casino ever threatened the culture and traditions of the Oneida people?

Findings:

The Oneida Tribe came to the aid of America during the Revolutionary War and helped them win many key battles, including The Battle of Oriskany and The Battle of Saratoga. America paid their dues to the Oneida people after sacrificing many of their tribal members while helping America in battle. On November 11, 1794, the Treaty of Canandaigua was signed and passed starting a sovereign relationship between the Federal Government of the United States and the Oneida Tribe. This treaty included many great things for the tribe, including five thousand dollars, which compensated the Oneida people for the destruction of many of their important facilities in 1780. The treaty also promised the Oneida people that the American government would rebuild there gristmill, sawmill, and church (Oneida).

The Canandaigua Treaty is very unique because it is considered the United States' oldest international agreement still in effect today. The treaty was agreed upon between the Grand Council of the Six Nations and the President at the time, George Washington. George Washington's official agent, Timothy Pickering, signed the treaty on the President's behalf. Immediately after the treaty was passed and established, Pickering rode to the sacred ground of the Oneida People in upstate New York and made sure that America acknowledged the sacrifices made by the Oneida people in aid to the US in the Revolutionary War. On December 2, 1794, America gave the Oneida people their own Veterans Day to commemorate these sacrifices, which is still celebrated today.

During this same time period in the late 1700s, the Oneida Tribe was struggling to hold on to their land. The tribe agreed to lease portions of their land to the state of New York because the state needed to keep up with the rapid growth of its white population. The state tricked and persuaded the tribe into thinking that they were only leasing the land, but in actuality the state had a buy out clause written into the agreement that allowed the state to buy and keep the land. The state of New York continued to not pay attention to federal legislation and they started negotiating with tribal leaders for land, which was illegal under federal law. New York continued taking land from the Oneida people and by the War of 1812, the Oneida people went from around six million acres of land to 4,500. Williams and Jedidiah Morse, two white missionaries, believed that the white people of New York would continue to take the tribes land. The two designed a plan that included that the Oneida people wanted to move west to new land. In 1821, a group led by Eleazar Williams arrived in Green Bay and negotiated with the Menominee

and Ho-chunk for land (Oneida).

Soon after arriving the Oneida people were forced to negotiate for land, and in 1821, the Oneida tribal leaders controversially negotiated with the Menominee and Ho-Chunk Tribes for 860,000 acres of land. Soon after the Oneida Tribe attained their land from the Menominee and Ho-Chunk, the two tribes immediately spoke out with frustration and confusion because both tribes felt that their land was unfairly stripped away from them. The two tribes argued that neither of their chiefs was present during the initial meetings between the three tribes. This conflict caused turmoil and debate for nearly the next decade, and in the years 1831 and 1832, three compromise treaties were passed by the federal government, which initially awarded the Oneida Tribe roughly 500,000 acres of land. This still did not sit well with the Menominee and Ho-Chunk people and after much debate and persistence by the two tribes, the state of Wisconsin and the federal government decided to give both tribes back a majority of their land. This decision made in 1838 unfortunately took away over eighty percent of the land that was once awarded to the Oneida tribe, leaving them with roughly 65,400 acres to live on.

For the next hundred or so years, the tribe struggled to build a strong economy, and job opportunity throughout the tribe was a huge problem with over sixty percent of the tribe being unemployed during that period. It wasn't until 1934 when the Indian Reorganization Act was passed that the tribe really took form, and they started their new reorganized tribal government and re-wrote their tribes constitution. Now that the tribe's government was re-organized, the Oneida Tribe needed to find a solution for its unemployment issue throughout the tribe.

To meet the needs of the growing reservation the Oneida people had to take action, and so they turned to Bingo. When Purcell R. Powless was elected as one of the lead officials of the Oneida Tribe, he adopted the responsibility for making the tribes Bingo hopes into reality. Since Bingo was already very popular among the Oneida women, the tribe naturally thought that they could turn this into a strong business. With the help of Powless, the tribe was able to just that, and in 1988 the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed allowing the tribe to start their own Bingo Empire on their land, and in 1990, the governor of Wisconsin allowed the Oneida Tribe to start a class III gaming casino.

After the opening of the Oneida Bingo and Casino, the lives of the Oneida people changed forever. With casino revenue pouring in, the tribe could now focus on living a healthy and driven life. The tribe could now put a health care system in place and build building for their elders. The casino also gave its tribal member employment opportunities, which was a problem among the tribe.

Job opportunity is another important commodity that the Oneida hierarchy wants their tribal members to receive. Along with the Oneida Farm and Apple Orchard, the Oneida people of Wisconsin have many other enterprises in place that create many job opportunities for tribal members, with the main one being the Oneida Bingo and Casino. This 65,000 Square Foot casino is the main source of revenue for the tribe, bringing in around 200,000,000 dollars per year, as well as providing the tribe with 1,300 jobs. The tribe puts the revenue earned by the casino to good use, and building structures such as the Oneida Community Health Center wouldn't be possible without the success of the

casino. The Oneida tribe of Wisconsin has a great understanding of economic growth, and they believe the more jobs that they are able to create for their tribal members, the quicker their economy will grow.

When the Oneida Bingo and Casino opened, many felt as though it was more of a curse than anything. Tribal members were curious as to where the money was going. With huge chunks of casino revenue coming into the tribe, this caused opportunity for corruption throughout the tribe, and this made the tribe very wary of the whole idea of the Casino. Where the Casinos revenue was a huge debate among the tribe and this caused dismay throughout the tribe for many years. In the late 1990's, the tribe decided to make their casino revenue records public so the tribe could now see where the revenue was really going. This eased a lot of frustration within the tribe and made the Oneida people a lot more at ease.

The Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin has formed a corporation that focuses on boosting business and economic diversification within the tribe, called the Oneida Seven Generation Corporation or the OSGC. The purpose of the formation of this Corporation is in the name, making sure that the Oneida people will remain strong and sufficient for the next seven generations. So far this corporation is responsible for building two parks, the Oneida Business Park and South Packerland Drive, and Bellin Health Systems, which is a health center that has a state of the art Oncology Center (OSGC). Along with building these parks and the health center, the OSGC also is working on a project that is focusing on making their environment more sustainable. The corporation plans on building a Renewable Energy System that will use electricity from

waste and other recycled materials. The corporation has also built a 23,000 square foot facility that has its own connecting casino, restaurant, Mobil Gas Station and retail convenience store. With the formation of joint venture partnerships and relationships with project developers, this corporation has the potential to be a very important asset for the Oneida people. The OSGC has set very high goals and is on the right path to achieve those goals in the upcoming future (Lindsay).

The Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin is very involved in their surrounding community. The tribe has many systems in place that are designed to better the lives of their tribal members such as an affordable health care system. The tribe has invested a lot of time and money into ensuring their tribal members have affordable health care because they believe, “the future of their tribe requires healthy citizens”. With the construction of the Oneida Community Health Center, the tribe now has a state of the art medical facility that is highly accessible and affordable. This health center has a very simple mission statement, which states, “We provide the highest level of quality, culturally sensitive, holistic, and preventive health care”. With a phenomenal health care system in place for their tribal members, the Oneida people also wanted to have a system in place that taught their young children the importance of growing their own healthy food. In 1994, the tribe bought and started a 2400-acre farm, which included around 4,000 apple trees. This farm has been host to thousands of school field trips and has had a huge educational affect on the tribe’s youth population. The Oneida Farm and Apple Orchard doesn’t only create an

educational opportunity for its youth, but also job opportunities for the tribe's adult members (Lindsay).

Conclusion:

The Oneida people are a very resilient and prosperous tribe. They were forced out of their sacred land in New York, being forced to relocate to Wisconsin, where they rebuilt their tribe and became stronger as a whole. After having to negotiate for their land with local Wisconsin tribes, they were finally able to have land that they called their own. After needing job security for their tribal members, the Oneida people came up with a plan and prevailed in the world of gambling (Oneida).

Many Oneida tribal members were not exactly excited about the opening of their tribe's casino. With corruption such a huge possibility, the tribe wanted to make sure that the integrity of the tribe's culture stayed in tack. At time people were frustrated by the fact that they didn't know where the revenue of the casino was going. The tribes culture was never at risk, it is said that the Oneida people were the kindest people in the Midwest, welcoming anyone into their community, no matter their skin color. It was part of their culture to house, feed, and cloth those in need, and the tribal members were always known for keeping that part of their culture alive (Lindsay).

The Casino changed the lives of the Oneida people forever, by bringing in such large portions of money, the tribe was able to fund things that they never would have been able to before the opening of the casino. Building hospitals, health clinics, elderly homes, houses, and so much more, the casino was always worth having for the tribe. The tribe was only wary because they felt as though their treasured culture may have been at risk of corruption. The casino allowed the tribe to be proud again and regain their

confidence as a powerful tribe. The comfort of having long term income for the tribe allowed the tribe to start business' and invest in business' that they couldn't afford before the casino. The debate of culture vs. gambling always floated around the minds of the Oneida people, but with the casino funding so many good programs and allowing the tribe to grow, the possibility of it hurting their culture was not a huge problem. The Oneida people were very confident in the honor that each tribal member bestowed on their tribe, and believed that the tribal members would see all the good that the casino created for the tribe, which in turn gave the Oneida people someone to lean and depend on.

Resources:

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