

Finding One's Way: the Story of an Abenaki Child

Louis walked home from school slowly, fighting back the tears, still upset about being teased at school for saying he was an Indian. He was eleven years old, too old, he thought, to be crying, so he just stuck his hands deeper in his pockets and put his chin down and held the tears back.

It was cold and rainy, the kind of gray day that, if you feel sad, only makes you feel sadder. Pretty soon it would turn even colder and the snow would come. Lake Champlain would freeze and the world would be white and beautiful again. Winter was Louis' favorite time of year. He would spend his free time with his father or his grandfather fishing through a hole in the ice. That would be fun. But right now he was still stinging from the insults that the three boys had hurled at him on the playground as they were leaving school.

"If you're an Indian, why don't you wear feathers and walk around half-naked?" One of them had asked him, and the other boys started laughing.

"Where's your wigwam, Louis? Out in the woods?"

Before Louis could think of an answer, the second boy shouted at him.

"You're not a real Indian, Louis, you don't even look like one."

Another of the boys had started whooping and screaming and dancing around in a circle, imitating something he had probably seen on television or at the movies.

"Hey, Louis, look at me," he shouted. "I'm a wild Indian. Watch out or I'll scalp you."

All the boys laughed even harder, and started shouting and whooping together. Louis felt like punching them all in their mouths. It would serve them right, he thought. But he also realized that would only be acting as they expected -- 'like a wild Abenaki.' How many times had Louis heard someone say that before! He hated that, as much as anything.

Besides, Louis was no fool. If he punched one, it would be three against one, and he would end up on the bottom. So he walked away, hearing their laughter. One of them called out after him.

"Hey Louis, we know you're not really a wild Indian. You're just a sissy squaw."

Louis felt the tears come into his eyes and broke into a run. It wasn't the first time he had been teased. But that didn't make it any better. It made it worse. When would it ever stop?

Last week, the day before Thanksgiving vacation, the teacher had told the children in Louis' fifth grade class how Indians had helped the Pilgrims survive during their first winter in New England. Everyone knew the story, but it seemed the teachers told it every year just the same. The Indians, the Wampanoags, the teacher had called them, had shared their food with Pilgrims. When Spring came, they helped them plant squash and corn. They were friendly Indians.

One of the girls asked the teacher if there were Indians in Vermont too. The teacher said there were Abenaki Indians in Vermont, but they had not been friendly Indians. They had fought with the early settlers and sometimes burned their barns.

Louis had summoned all of his courage and raised his hand. The teacher called on him.

"I'm an Abenaki Indian," he said out loud, hardly believing that he had spoken the words, but feeling secretly proud.

His teacher had looked surprised and said, "Really, Louis! Whatever makes you say that?"

Then the bell rang and class was over. Louis wished he hadn't said anything, and he noticed that some of the other kids in the class gave him a strange look as they all picked up their things and headed outside.

That was last week, and Louis hadn't really thought about it over vacation. He had eaten turkey with all of his relatives at his grandmother's house on Thanksgiving Day and then watched a little of the football game on television. On Saturday, he and his father went deer hunting. Louis' father was also named Louis, so sometimes his father and mother called him Louis Junior. Louis liked to go hunting with his father, and he wondered what it had been like a long, long time ago when his Indian ancestors hunted with bows and arrows. He knew that some people still hunted with bows, but the bows they used now were funny looking ones with wheels and pulleys. Louis had seen pictures of old bows in a book that belonged to his father.

Louis and his father didn't see any deer the whole day, not even any tracks, and his father seemed angry.

"Too many does killed last year," he said. "If they keep on shooting the mothers there won't be any deer left."

Now they would have to go all winter without deer meat, and Louis was old enough to know, that meant practically no meat at all. They'd eat perch and chickens, and maybe his father would shoot some rabbits. But he would miss the deer meat. That was his favorite.

On Sunday, Louis went to Mass at the Catholic Church. Afterward he went back to his grandmother's house and had left-over turkey.

When Louis went back to school on Monday, he was relieved that there was no more talk about Indians. But, after school the boys had confronted him and started their teasing.

Louis was almost home now -- cold, wet, and feeling miserable. He walked into the kitchen and threw his books down on the table. He felt like never going back to school again.

"What's the matter, Louis?" his mother asked.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Then go out and bring in some wood for the stove."

Louis did as he was told. He went out to the wood pile and brought in an armload of wood, put one large log in the stove and the rest in the woodbin next to it. Then he went upstairs and dropped down onto his bed. The boys' words came back to him. "If you're an Indian, why don't you wear feathers and run around half-naked?" "You're not a real Indian, Louis. You don't even look like one."

He stood up and walked over to the mirror, and stared into his dark brown eyes. His hair was light and curly.

His little sister walked into the room and Louis saw her reflection in the mirror. She was six years old. Her name was Delia, the same name his grandmother had. He thought to himself that his sister didn't look much like an Indian either, none that he had ever seen on television, anyway. Her hair was even lighter than Louis' and her eyes were gray, almost blue.

Why did things have to be so confusing, Louis wondered. He knew he was an Abenaki Indian. He had gone to a community dinner out in Highgate with a lot of the older Abenakis living around Highgate and Swanton. His older sister, Mary Ann, had been given a card when she was fifteen that identified her as a member of the Abenaki Nation of Vermont. His father and mother both had cards like that too. They told him more than once that he ought to be proud of being Indian.

"People around here weren't always proud of being an Indian," his father had told Louis. "But with you youngsters things will be different."

[Illustration: "Abenaki Identification Card."]

Right now Louis didn't feel proud at all. He only felt confused.

At supper that night, Louis sat quietly while Delia and his younger brother, Frank, chatted merrily away. Louis hardly touched his food. He was still thinking of what the boys had said. Finally he decided to say something.

"Dad?"

"What is it, Louis?"

"How come you and Mom and Grandpa all tell me I'm an Indian?"

His father looked at him, waiting to see if Louis was going to say anything more. Then he answered.

"Because your mother and I are Abenakis, Louis. So you are an Abenaki too. Why do you ask?"

"Well, some boys were teasing me at school. They said I wasn't a real Indian, they teased me about not living in a wigwam or wearing feathers." Louis decided not to say anything about the half-naked part.

Louis' father looked at his wife and then back at Louis. His eyes seemed sad and then far away. He was thinking about when Mary Ann had asked him the same sort of question. He did not speak for what seemed a long time. Louis began to feel sorry that he had said anything about it. Finally his father answered.

"There will always be some people, Louis, who will try to make you ashamed of being an Indian, even when you are older. Others will say that you are not full-blooded." He paused again and looked at his wife. "People have said the same thing about me and your mother. But we know who our ancestors are, Louis. We know that they were the first people who lived in this land. We know they were Abenakis and we will never forget that." He paused again.

"You should have known my grandfather," he continued. "His name was Mitchell. He could still speak the Abenaki language a little bit and made baskets out of strips of wood that he would cut himself, from the trees."

"Really?" Louis asked, his eyes growing wide.

"Really," his father answered. "Your mother's grandfather too," Louis' father stopped. Why, he wondered, had he not said anything about this to Louis before?

Louis' mother turned to her son. With her dark eyes and high cheekbones, she looked like an Indian, thought Louis.

"If you want to know more about Indians," she said, "you should go talk to your Grandma Delia. She could tell you a lot of things. Her father, my grandfather, was the one that made the baskets. He made snowshoes too. His name was Peter. She could tell you about her grandmother too. Everyone said she was a real Indian."

"Did you know her, Mom?"

"No. She was already dead when I was born, but she raised my mother from the time my mother was born. You see, your grandmother Delia's mother died when Delia was still a little baby. So her Grandma Josephine brought her up. I've seen pictures of that old woman and she looked like a real squaw. Your grandma Delia says she used to talk Indian sometimes, but only if she thought no one was listening."

"Who would she be talking to if no one was listening?" asked little Delia, who had been listening all along though she was only six.

"To herself, I guess," Said Louis' mother, smiling. "Or maybe to the birds."

Everyone laughed. Louis was feeling better.

"Well, you should go talk to my father too." Louis' father added. "Everybody knows that he's an Indian."

Louis' grandfather was named Levi, but his close friends called him 'Muskrat,' because he had once been the best trapper anywhere around the Missisquoi Bay. That was when he was still a young man, before World War II, before the Federal government turned the marshes into a wildlife refuge. After that, there was much less trapping, and the men that traded in furs, the ones that Levi had sold his skins to, went out of business. Grandpa Levi knew the river and the marshes as well as anyone alive, and after he had stopped trapping, he had worked as a guide for sports fishermen and duck hunters that would come to Missisquoi Bay at different times of the year.

Louis was always happy when he had a chance to visit his grandfather, who lived by himself in an old house near Highgate Springs, very close to the water. From one of the windows in the house, you could see the Bay, and Louis remembered once when he was looking out the window, he saw ducks fly in low over the water and land silently. It seemed as though there were hundreds of them.

Dinner was finished and Louis helped clear the table. Then he went to his room to do some homework, but he kept thinking about what his parents had told him. He decided that he would not waste any time. Tomorrow after school he could visit Grandma Delia, who lived just down the street. Then on Saturday he would go visit his grandfather. Or maybe his parents would let him go out Friday afternoon and spend the night as a special treat. He would remember to ask them.

That night, Louis dreamed that he found a muskrat caught in one of his grandfather's traps. When Louis went to take it out, it turned into an Indian warrior, the kind that Louis had seen on television. The warrior gave out a terrible cry, and then turned into a crow and flew away to the East toward the sun - now rising and glowing bright orange above the mountains in the morning sky.

PART I

Concept Questions

CONCEPT: Our Treatment of Others; Respecting People and their Feelings.

What caused Louis to become upset after school?

Why did the other boys tease Louis?

What are some reasons why people tease other people?

What were the effects of their teasing Louis?

There is a saying:

"Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you."

Discuss whether you agree with this statement or not, and support your opinion with an example.

CONCEPT: Resolving conflicts.

What means did Louis use to solve his conflict with the other boys?

Do you feel this is an appropriate solution?

What are some different ways that Louis might have reacted?

Does Louis' decision not to fight and his tears make Louis a coward/sissy?

How would you have reacted?

What would likely have happened if Louis had punched one of the boys teasing him?

What is "confrontation"?

Do you feel that this confrontation could have been avoided?

CONCEPT: Expression of Self; Respect for Silence.

What was Louis' response when his mother asked him what was wrong?

Why do you suppose Louis responded this way?

When Louis replied, "Nothing," do you think his mother knew otherwise?

Have you ever been bothered by something, yet kept it inside?

CONCEPT: Dreams as a Subconscious Expression of Ourselves.

Describe the dream that Louis had.

Do you feel that anything in Louis' dream is symbolic of things in his real life?

Discuss possible symbolism for:

The muskrat
Feelings of being caught and trapped
Indian warrior
Crow taking flight
Rising sun

Do you recall any dreams that you have had?

Did the dream have any significance in your life?

CONCEPT: Preferences and Differences.

What was Louis' favorite time of year?

What is your favorite time of year? What things about this season make it special to you?

How did Louis celebrate Thanksgiving?

Did he celebrate any differently than you do?

PART II

Grandma Delia was sitting at the kitchen table when Louis walked in the door. She was peeling potatoes. Grandma Delia was a small woman with wrinkles all over her face and hands. She was plump but not fat, and the big sweater she was wearing made her look round.

"Well hello there, Louis. What brings you around today? All the turkey is gone," she said laughing. It seemed to Louis that Grandma Delia was always laughing or chuckling about something. "What can I do for you?"

Louis was not quite sure how to begin. He took off his coat and mittens and blew on his hands. It was getting colder, but it felt good in the kitchen next to the stove.

"I wanted to talk to you about something, Grandma."

"Well, sit down, then, and help me peel these potatoes. Your Grandpa Joseph is going to be home before long and he'll be wanting his supper."

Grandpa Joseph used to work for the railroad. He repaired the engines. He'd been retired for a few years, but he still liked to drive down to St. Albans in the afternoons to visit the repair shop and talk with some of the men that he used to work with.

Louis sat down and started peeling potatoes. He was still thinking of how to begin when his grandmother said,

"So you want to find out about my Grandma Josephine?"

Louis looked up surprised and Grandma Delia laughed again. "Don't worry," she said, "I'm not a mind-reader, though I could tell your fortune for you if you wanted. Your mother came by earlier and told me about it. I'm glad you came over. "

Grandma Delia wiped her hands on a towel and reached behind her to the counter, picking up a photograph, which she held in front of Louis so he could look at it. It was an old photo, partly faded, but Louis could see that it was a picture of Grandma Delia's house, and standing in front of the house was an old woman, and next to her a girl that looked about the same age as Louis.

"That's right," his grandmother answered, "and that little girl is me. I was ten years old then, and that's my Grandmother Josephine with me. I've lived right here in this house all my life. It was Grandma Josephine's house, and when my momma died when I was a little baby, Grandma Josephine took me and raised me. Then when I married your grandfather, we lived here because Josephine was sick and needed someone with her all the time. She died a year after we married, just after your Uncle Frank was born."

"I didn't know that," Louis replied.

"Well, I guess there's a lot you don't know, Louis. Watch out or you'll slice your finger off."

Louis stopped peeling potatoes. "Mom said that Grandma Josephine was a real Indian. Was she full-blood?"

"Well I reckon she was, far as I know anyway. But you know we didn't really talk that way years ago when I was young. Full-blood, or half-blood or whatever. You were either Indian or weren't, and that's all there was to it. 'Course nobody talked much about it back then, no need to really. We knew who we were and that was all that mattered.

"A lot of us lived right here in Back Bay," she continued. "That's why Josephine and her husband built their house here when they got married. There were other Indian families living here then, just like today."

"Did all the Indians live in Back Bay, Grandma?"

"No, not all of them. They lived all around. Some out in Highgate, up by the quarry, and some were still living out by the marshes, behind the old Slammon Farm. There were still some shacks out by the old hempyard where some Indians lived."

"What's the hempyard?" asked Louis.

"Oh, that's the place out behind the Frontage Road, where the, oh, that's the place where the airport is now! I remember we used to go out there for picnics in the summer. But here in Swanton, Back Bay was where a lot of the Indian families built their houses. A lot of them were just shacks really. They've been fixed up a lot since I was a girl."

"Did Grandma Josephine ever live in a wigwam?" Louis asked quite seriously. His grandmother laughed.

"Well, I guess she might have, Louis, but I never asked her about that and she never mentioned it. She did live in a cave once, though."

"Oh come on, Grandma, now you're just kidding me."

"No I am not, Louis. Your grandmother was born a long time ago, back in the Civil War days. You know when that was?"

Louis shook his head yes. He wasn't exactly sure of the dates, but he remembered learning about it in school. It was a war between the States, his teacher had said, when Abraham Lincoln and the northern states had freed the Negro slaves. "That was about a hundred years ago, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Well, in those days, some of the Indians still traveled a lot from place to place. Josephine's mother had a sister at Odanak, that's an Abenaki village up in Canada, north of Montreal. A real long time ago, some of the Indians from around here moved up there. Some stayed up there I guess, others came back to Vermont. But they used to travel back and forth quite a bit. Anyhow, Josephine's parents traveled all the time when she was a little girl. Up to Canada, or over to New York State. Mostly they used a horse and wagon, but sometimes, she said, they used a canoe. Other times they just walked. Josephine would tell me what it was like traveling around in those days. She said it seemed that the whole world was rivers and woods."

"What about the cave?" asked Louis, not wanting to interrupt.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Delia answered, chuckling again. "Well, Josephine took me one time out to Highgate, way up on the road that goes out past the old quarry up there. She was gathering some wild plants and things like she did every summer, when all of a sudden she looked around and said 'Come on, I'll show you something.' We walked a little further through the woods and then she pointed up and showed me a cave right in the side of the hill. It was a big opening, and the ceiling was higher than this room.

"I stayed in there, one time," she said, 'my whole family.' Well I was like you, Louis. I thought she was kidding. But she wasn't, no sir. She said her Daddy knew about every cave there was on both sides of the border, from Lake Champlain to Lake Memphremagog. That's how they could travel so easily. They were good places to stay while you were on the move if you didn't have no other place, safe and dry."

"Could you show me the cave sometime, Grandma?" Louis asked, growing excited.

"I guess so, Louis, if I can find it. It's been an awful long time, you know."

"What kind of plants was she collecting?" Louis asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Skullcap and yarrow and wild onion maybe. She tried to teach me about all that, but I never did learn too much. She had all sorts of little jars full of leaves, and boxes filled with roots and bark. She'd spend whole days at a time collecting the stuff, and whenever any of us were sick she would fix some tea and give it to us. That's the only kind of medicine I ever had as a child. Sometimes I think it's better than the stuff we get today from the doctor."

Delia stopped suddenly and got up from the table. She walked out of the kitchen and came back with a small basket which she placed on the table.

"My grandma made this a few years before she died. She made quite a few of them, actually, but most of them she sold, and this is the only one I have now. My father used to make baskets too. Josephine taught him how. Taught him how to split the ash real thin, like this here, so that you could weave it. I used to have some of his, but they're all gone now."

Louis looked at the basket. It was round, and flat on the bottom, made out of very thin strips of wood. Woven into it was something that looked like grass.

"What's this?" he asked, rubbing the grass with his finger.

"That's called sweet grass. When it's fresh, it smells as sweet as the spring. Not anymore though, it's too old. Yup, my grandmother could make just about anything with her hands. She made all of her own clothes too," Delia continued. "She'd make them out of flour sacks most of the time, but she had one old dress that was made out of skin, like the clothes the Indians used to wear. She must have gotten it from her mother maybe. Whenever my father shot a deer, he would always scrape the skin for Grandma Josephine and she'd make something or other out of it -- a hat maybe, or a pair of mittens, or some little moccasins for a present. And one time she made my father a vest out of deerskin that he wore almost all the time. He was even buried wearing it."

The front door opened and in came Louis' grandfather.

"Hello, Louis. I just stopped at your mother's, and she said to hurry up home for supper."

"I was just telling Louis about Josephine."

"She was a fine woman," he answered. "One of the most generous women I've ever known. Anyone ever got real hungry or needed anything, they could get some food or whatever just by asking. There were always relatives stopping over, and she had something to give them all the time. She grew a big garden out behind the house, where mine still is, and there was always food on the table. No one ever went hungry in this house. And how many babies did she deliver, Delia? Fifty anyway, I bet."

"Well there were a lot of them. I forgot to tell Louis about that. Your grandmother was a midwife, Louis. One of the finest around Swanton. She delivered half of the babies in Back Bay. Women used to stay at home to

have babies back then, and there weren't any doctors lots of times when the babies were ready. Just one woman helping out another one. Midwives we called them, and like I said, Delia was one of the best."

"They don't make 'em like her anymore," his grandfather added. "Why I never heard her complain a single day of her life, even when she was sick and dying. She was one tough old Indian, that's for sure."

[photograph: "Abenaki Sweetgrass Baskets"]

Louis had put on his jacket and said goodbye. He walked home quickly, thinking that his grandmother was indeed right. There was a lot he didn't know. All sorts of questions about the old Indians raced through his mind. Now he was more excited than ever about seeing his other grandfather. He would find out more from him.

PART II

EXERCISE: Characteristics

Characteristics are terms which we apply to describe the behavior or personality of others. Grandma Delia is often pictured as laughing or chuckling. We could therefore describe her as being 'good natured.'

Below are some characteristics which can be used to describe the nature and attitude of Abenaki Indians:

cheerful	resourceful
helpful	generous
good natured	supportive

Try to find examples from the story where these traits are being described.

Then contrast these characteristics with the description of Indians given by Louis' classmates (as discussed in Part I).

STUDY QUESTIONS

Where are some areas that Indians have lived for as long as Grandma Delia can remember?

Describe the way of life for the Abenaki Indians living around the time of the Civil War.

- What were their surroundings like?
- List some different methods of transportation they used.
- What types of dwelling did they live in?

What are some of the special talents and skills that Louis' ancestors possessed?

PART III

There was already snow on the ground when Louis went to visit his Grandfather Levi in Highgate Springs after school on Friday, and more snow was forecast for the weekend. So Louis' parents had decided to let him stay over night and Grandpa Levi would bring him back to Swanton on Saturday.

Louis walked right into his grandfather's house without knocking, just as he always did, and found his grandfather sitting in the big easy chair by the stove, sound asleep.

Louis put his overnight bag down and looked around the room. It seemed that everything in it was old like his grandfather. The stovepipes from two old stoves bent and twisted up to a hole in the ceiling, where the plaster was falling away. Cardboard and newspapers covered the walls, to help keep the cold out. Except for an old wooden crucifix near the door, and a shelf piled with dishes, the walls were bare. There was an old sink that froze up sometimes in winter, and an old table in the middle of the room, next to the cook stove. On the wall over the door was a shotgun, and two other rifles were leaning against the wall in the corner. Some old traps hung from one of the rafters.

Grandpa Levi was old and poor, Louis thought. Nobody would question that. But it didn't seem to bother his grandfather at all. When it got very, very cold in winter, way down below zero, he would go into Swanton and stay with Louis' aunt and uncle. But otherwise he liked his old house, though most people would call it a shack and wonder why anyone would want to live there. Levi had lived there a long time, and old as it was, it was good enough for him, and that's all that really mattered.

Louis pulled out one of the chairs at the table and sat down. The noise of the chair scraping on the floor was enough to wake his grandfather.

"Well, I guess I fell asleep here by the fire waiting for you, Louis."

Levi stood up slowly, reached over and put a few chunks of wood into the old potbelly stove.

"What did you bring for dinner, Louis?"

Louis knew his grandfather was teasing him. Whenever Louis came stay overnight, Levi always cooked up a stew, and Louis could smell it cooking now.

"I brought some burgers from the restaurant," said Louis, teasing right back, knowing that his grandfather hated the fast food places, and would never eat at them.

"Go on," Levi answered. "You can feed that stuff to the chickens. We'll have some good old stew. Old Tom shot a deer this week and gave me some of it. Let's eat. It's a little early, but the stew's ready and I'm hungry."

Louis and his grandfather ate up the whole pot of stew. It was delicious. They hardly spoke a word the whole time they were eating, enjoying their first taste of deer since the winter before. When they were finished, Louis said,

"Grandpa, did you ever hunt deer with a bow and arrow?"

"Why no, Louis, can't say as I did. I always thought a gun was a whole lot quicker and easier."

"Did your father, Mitchell ever use one?"

Levi looked at Louis, surprised at his grandson's question.

Louis had never asked about Mitchell before. And Levi had never mentioned him to Louis.

"Nope," he answered. "My father always used a rifle too. Matter of fact, that's one of his rifles settin' right over there in the corner. I still use it for squirrel and rabbits. Course, old as I am, I don't get out that much anymore for hunting. But it's a good rifle."

Louis wasn't sure how old Levi was. Nobody was. Someone had looked for his birth record once in Highgate and Swanton, but it couldn't be found. And Levi said he was born somewhere in Canada. In the woods, he said, somewhere around Clarenceville, at the northern end of Lake Champlain. Levi said he was at least eighty, or maybe ninety, and nobody that knew him disagreed.

"How come you're asking me about Mitchell?"

"Because I want to find out more about the old Indians," Louis answered. "And Dad told me that Mitchell was a real Indian."

"Well, so he was," said Levi. "But so are you a real Indian, and so am I."

"Well maybe," said Louis, not exactly sure what Levi was getting at, or even whether he really believed him. That was the problem.

"Not maybe. You got as much Indian in you as anything else young man, and don't forget it. And you be proud of it, you understand?"

"Sure Grandpa, but I mean real Indian, you know, that hunted with bows and arrows and lived in wigwams and stuff like that."

Levi picked up the plates and brought them over to the sink. Then he put another big piece of wood in the fire and settled back down into his old easy chair.

"Well Louis," he said, "You know times change and people change too. They change the ways they live, and the ways they think. The longer you live, the more change you're bound to see. I'd say that was a law of nature. Like when I was a young boy, there weren't no such thing as an automobile, and we didn't think nothing about it. If we wanted to get anyplace, we used horses or we walked. You take old Mitchell; why he probably didn't ride in a car more than two or three times in his whole life. But nowadays, well everybody rides in cars and just takes it for granted. Am I right?"

Louis nodded in agreement.

"And if you don't have a car, people might think you was strange or poor, or both. Isn't that right?"

Louis nodded again.

"Well, okay then, you see what I mean?"

"Sort of, I guess," said Louis, but he really wasn't sure what all this had to do with the old Indians. But his grandfather went right on talking.

"So you see with us Indians, it's the same way. Times have changed, and so have we. But we're still Indians. We don't go around hunting with bows and arrows anymore, or build wigwams out of bark, but we're still Indians all the same. Because our grandparents were Indians, and their grandparents, way back as far as you want to go. 'Course sometimes some of us might have married someone who wasn't Indian, like a French woman or a Dutchman, or whatever. Like your grandmother's mother was French - so your grandmother was mixed. A lot of us Indians are mixed, if you want to look at it that way. But like I said before, you got as much Indian in you are anything else.

"Now old Mitchell, everyone knew he was an Indian. And he lived like one too. He lived in a small shack not too far from here. It's gone now. And about all that old man ever did was fish."

"Dad said he made baskets."

"Well, I guess he made a few if them, and he was pretty good at making snowshoes too, but that was nothing special. Most all of the old Indians could make baskets and snowshoes. But old Mitchell, he was more of a fisherman than anything else, 'Course after they built that auto bridge from Swanton to Alburg back there before World War II, the fishing wasn't so good as it used to be. The currents were all changed. But my father used to still get his share.

"I'd help him with the lines quite a bit. That's how I learned, just by helping him. A man used to be able to make a living catchin' fish nearly all year round, and selling them in the village. We'd get bullpouts in the spring, and bass in the summer, and perch all winter long. Years ago you could still take a few salmon too, but you don't see them anymore. The fishin' ain't so good now anymore. And besides, you need more money these days than you did back then. The price of everything has gone so high.

"I still managed though. Fishing and trapping always got me by. And with Grandma's garden we always had enough to eat. Never had much money of course. Most of the time we were broke. But we got by all right. If I got a deer, we'd have plenty of meat for winter. And we'd share it with others. People did a lot of sharing in those days. And then there was rabbit or squirrel, and muskrat and skunk."

"You ate skunk?" Louis said, making a face and holding his nose.

"Sure. It ain't so bad after it's been cooked good. We used to eat eels too. We'd put out a nightline with a bunch of hooks on it, and pull in about fifteen or twenty at a time. You smoke those up, just like a ham. I tell you, Louis, they make good eating, especially when you're hungry.

"Old Mitchell taught me how to get just about anything I needed out of the lake and marshes around here. And that's how I always got by. But these days people want more things for themselves - electricity, and cars, and telephones and refrigerators. And all those things take money, more money than one man can get these days from fishing and trapping. That's for sure.

"Besides, most of the marshes are in the refuge now, so you can't get what you need like you used to. Mitchell used to get wild rice out of the marshes. He'd get it in the summer and fall, and we'd eat that right through to maple syrup time. I don't know if there's rice still out there, but if there is, the refuge people don't let you gather it. They say they're saving it for the ducks. Ducks have to eat too, of course.

"We used to get a lot of berries out of those marshes, too, mostly blueberries. The marshes used to be filled with blueberries. Still are in some places, like over on Maquam Shore. Your grandmother would pick berries every summer. She'd sell some of those berries in the village and that would bring us in a little money. The rest of them we ate.

Levi was really talking now, and Louis just listened, happy that his grandfather had so much to tell him.

"Now you consider it for a minute, Louis, and you'll see that we were still living like the old Indians you were asking about. Of course we didn't live in wigwams, but we got by just the same way as they did -- fishing and hunting and gathering food whenever we could find it. Of course we had our gardens, like folks still have. But the old Indians used to have their corn gardens too. So you see, some things have changed quite a bit and other things hardly at all. "

Louis had listened carefully to everything his grandfather had said. He wondered why the world had changed so much, and whether it would keep on changing. And he thought that when he grew up, he would like to spend all his time fishing and trapping like old Levi had done.

"Tell you what," said his grandfather. "On the way home tomorrow, I'll show you where the old Indian village was, before the white people settled up here. But you better get to sleep now. It's gotten late, and I'm tired. "

PART III

STUDY QUESTIONS

Describe the setting at Louis' grandfather's house.

Is Grandfather Levi poor?

Do you think that Grandpa Levi considers himself poor? - Why or why not?

How old is Levi?

Why is it often difficult to document Abenaki lives?

What did Grandpa Levi see as being a 'law of nature'?

PART IV

Louis and Levi woke early on Saturday morning, and after breakfast they got into Levi's old pick-up truck and started out to see the site of the old Indian village. They drove back toward Swanton from Highgate Springs, and when they were almost to the village, Grandpa Levi swung the truck right onto a dirt road that headed out along side of the Missisquoi River. In a few minutes they came to the end of the road where it made a loop around a large stone monument, not far from the bank of the river.

"Jump out and have a look, Louis."

Louis climbed down from the truck and walked over to the Monument. It was made out of rough stone, and on the side facing the water, there was a large cross. Underneath the cross was a smooth surface with words carved into it.

Levi had caught up with Louis by then. "What's it say?" he asked. Louis read the words out loud:

"Near this spot, stood the first church erected in Vermont about 1700 by the Jesuit Fathers to the glory of God Almighty for the mission of the St. Francis Indians. Dedicated July 30, 1909, on the occasion of the tercentennial celebration of the Discovery of Lake Champlain."

"That's a mouthful," said Levi, laughing.

"I guess so," Louis answered. "What's 'tercentennial' mean."

[photograph: Jesuit Monument to the St. Francis Indians; Monument Road, Highgate]

[photograph: Church of the Nativity, Catholic Church; Canada Street, Swanton]

"That means three hundred years," Levi replied. "That's what the priest told me once when I asked him. You see, the French discovered the Lake a long time ago, and in 1909, people here had kind of an anniversary celebration, three hundred years after.

"Believe it or not," Levi continued, "I was right here when they dedicated that monument in 1909. I guess I was around ten years old then. There was a band playing, and people dressed up like Indians were paddling canoes on the river. It was one of the best celebrations I've ever seen."

Louis thought about that for a moment. If 1909 was three hundred years, that meant that the Lake was discovered in 1609. Wow, he thought, that was before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock. Then Louis asked,

"Who are the St. Francis Indians, Grandpa?" Some of Louis' relatives were named St. Francis, but he had never heard anyone call them the St. Francis Indians, just Abenakis.

"That's another name for the Abenakis," Levi answered. "Some of the Indians from around here moved a long time ago up to the Odanak Village, up above Montreal on the St. Francis River. Then after a while, the folks around here just started to call all the Indians the St. Francis Indians. The ones up at Odanak are still called that. I got some relatives up there. Years ago, before the first World War, some of them would come down here in the summer and sell baskets and other stuff to the tourists at the old Tyler place, and I used to travel up there once in awhile. But I haven't been there for years and years."

"Is this where the village was?" Louis asked.

"That's right," said Levi. "It was a good place, overlooked the river, and real close to Dead Creek. Plenty of fish and drinking water nearby, and a good place to keep the canoes."

Louis looked around him. The monument was located on flat ground above a high bank of the river. A few hundred feet away, Dead Creek entered the river. Both the Creek and the River were frozen now, and the bright

morning sun was sparkling off the smooth ice. Louis closed his eyes and imagined wigwams all around him, and Indian boys and girls running among them, dressed in warm clothes made from deer skins, playing and laughing.

He wondered why the old village was gone now, and why his family and other Abenaki families lived in different neighborhoods around Swanton and Highgate. On the other side of the road, away from the Monument, was an open field, where Louis could still see corn stubble sticking through the snow. He thought that maybe long ago, the Indians had planted their corn in that same field.

Levi spoke again, interrupting the boy's thoughts.

"When I was younger, we used to have parties here in the spring time. We'd come down to fish, and after we caught enough, we'd boil up a big kettle full of chowder right here by the river. I don't think people have as many parties as they used to. Course now there's TV and movies and that sort of stuff. But when I was a boy we didn't have all that, so we'd get together for parties.

"One time I saw a few men get together out here and make a little sweat hut."

"What's that?" asked Louis.

"Well, it's a way that the old Indian men used to get real clean, inside and outside. They'd cut some young saplings and bend them over to make a little hut, just about chest high. Then they covered the whole thing with old blankets. Meanwhile, they'd been heating rocks in a big fire. When the rocks got hot, they carried them with shovels into the hut, and poured water on them to make lots of steam. They took off all their clothes and sat in that little hut and just sweat all over, and drank a little tea once in a while. When they came out, they looked like they'd been swimming in the river, they were so wet. In the old days, the Indians would fast for a few days and sit in the sweat lodge maybe two or three times, and that's how they cleaned their bodies and even their minds."

"Have you ever been in a sweat hut, Grandpa?"

"Once or twice. It's a good thing."

Louis looked back at the monument. The first church in Vermont, he thought to himself. He had never imagined that the very first church in the State had been built for the Indians. That was really something. But who were the Jesuit fathers, he wondered. He asked his grandfather.

"Well, the Jesuits were the first French priests that came to the Indians," Levi explained. "They would come from Montreal, come right up the Richilieu River to Lake Champlain. And they were the ones that taught the Indians about the Christian religion."

"You mean the Indians didn't know about Jesus?" asked Louis, a little surprised. He had been going to the Catholic Church in Swanton ever since he could remember and whenever one of his relatives was married or buried, there was always a priest there. He had never thought about how the Indians had learned about Christianity, or that there was a time when they were not all Christians.

"Well what did they do before the Jesuits built a church for them?" he asked grandfather. "Did they believe in Jesus?"

"The old Indians did not know about Jesus, Louis. They believed in different gods and spirits that lived in the sky and the water and the forests. My grandfather used to tell me stories about them. He remembered a lot of their names. Some were good and some were dangerous. I don't remember too much of what he told me, though. I was younger than you are now, I bet, and it was a long time ago. The only one I remember is Odzihozo, because he still lives in Lake Champlain."

"Odzi -- what?"

"Odzihozo," Levi said again.

"Is that the name of a god?"

"Well, not a god exactly. I'll tell you who Odzihozo was, but let's get in the truck first. I'm getting too cold out here. I'll tell you about Odzihozo on the way back to your house."

So they got in the truck and started toward Back Bay, and Levi began the story of Odzihozo.

"Odzihozo was one of the first creatures in the world," he said "Before there were any people, Odzihozo lived. He helped shape the mountains and rivers and streams by dragging his body around. Wherever he dragged his body, a river was made. He formed the mountains by piling up rocks and dirt. He shaped all the mountains and rivers around here."

"Is this a true story?" asked Louis, not believing a word of what his grandfather was saying, but enjoying the story all the same.

"I don't think so Louis, but it's a good story. Anyway, after Odzihozo got through making the rivers and mountains, he hollowed out a great big place for Lake Champlain."

"I bet that took him a long time!" exclaimed Louis.

"I reckon it did. But finally he finished making Lake Champlain. And when he looked around at all that he had made, the mountains and rivers and the Lake, he saw that it was all really beautiful. It was so beautiful that he

decided to live right there in Lake Champlain forever. So he turned himself into a rock and that's where he's been ever since."

"You mean Odzihozo is a rock," said Louis, thinking to himself that this was certainly one of the strangest stories he had ever heard.

"He's a rock now. But maybe he'll change again sometime. You never know what's going to happen. Anyway, it's just a story."

"Where's the rock?" asked Louis.

"I don't know for sure," answered Levi. "Somewhere around Burlington, I think. It's called Rock Dunder now. I've never seen it myself, but my grandfather said he paddled by it once."

"Did you say he paddled by it?" asked Louis excitedly.

"Sure."

"You mean your grandfather paddled all the way to Burlington?"

"Well, I guess he did Louis. I don't know if he was going to Burlington, though. He used to paddle all over the Lake when he was young. He'd go down to Otter Creek, down by Vergennes, or over to South Hero, visiting some of his Indian friends, or even over to New York State. In those days people used to go a long distance in canoes and never think anything about it."

Louis was really amazed. The other day, Delia had told him about her Grandmother Josephine who remembered so much of the old ways. And now Levi was telling him about his grandfather paddling all over the Lake. Louis wished he could have known these people and lived when they did, at least for a few days anyway. It would be really fun, he thought.

"Well, here we are," Levi said, pulling up in front of Louis' house. "I can't come in now, but you tell your father and mother I'm OK and I'll see them in a little while, all right?"

"OK, Grandpa, and thanks a lot for letting me stay over last night. I really had a good time."

"Me too, Louis. You come out again soon, OK? We'll be able to do some ice fishing pretty soon if stays cold like this. I'm about ready for some perch."

"OK, I will. Bye."

"Bye, Louis. Remember Odzihozo."

"OK. I will," Louis said laughing. "Bye."

That night at dinner, Louis told his family all that Grandpa Levi had told him -- about fishing and trapping in the marshes, about blueberry picking, about the Monument and the Jesuits and the first Church in Vermont, and about Odzihozo. And he told them about how Grandpa Levi's grandfather had paddled all over Lake Champlain in a canoe.

"That would have been my great-grandfather," said Louis' father. "That would be your great-great-grandfather. I think his name was Mitchell too. That's going back a long way, you can be sure of that."

"Why have things changed so much, Dad?" asked Louis. "How come Indians have changed so much?"

"What do you mean, Louis?"

"Well how come we just don't hunt and fish all the time like Levi and Mitchell used to? How come we don't live at the old village site? And how come we don't have parties all the time?"

"What do you mean, have parties all the time?" his mother asked.

"Grandpa Levi said that when he was younger, the Indian families had parties all the time."

"He did, did he! Maybe Grandpa was exaggerating a little bit."

"Well not all the time, maybe," answered Louis. "But lots of times. Like in the Spring down by the river."

"Well times change, Louis," his father said again. "People don't do that kind of thing anymore. Once in a while maybe, but not as much even as when I was a boy."

"But why not?" Louis wanted to know. "And why don't we just hunt and fish all the time?"

"Because there are laws now, Louis. You know that. Today the state says we have to have licenses to hunt and fish, and there's only certain times when it's allowed. When Grandpa was a young man, fifty or sixty years ago, things were different. There weren't so many people, and even if there were laws, the wardens weren't so strict about it. People all knew each other then, and didn't bother about it as much. But now it's all controlled.

"Besides, it's pretty hard to earn a living fishing and hunting these days, with the season so short anyway."

"I think I would have liked it better the way it used to be," Louis answered.

"Maybe so," said his father. "That's a hard thing to decide."

"You know what, Louis?" his mother said, "You ought to talk to your Uncle Frank. He's a member of the Tribal Council. He could talk to you about the problems with hunting and fishing. And maybe he could tell you why things have changed so much since the old days."

PART IV

Study Questions

Where was the first 'church' in Vermont?

Who was it dedicated to?

Who are the St. Francis Indians?

Why was the area around Swanton and Missisquoi a good area for the Abenakis to live?

What was the purpose of a sweat hut?

What purpose did Odzihozo serve to the Abenaki people?

What are some of the questions that Louis needs to resolve?

Part V

Louis had called his Uncle Frank on the phone on Sunday. He told Louis that he'd be glad to talk to him.

"In fact," he said, "why don't you meet me at the ASHAI Office after school tomorrow? I have to be there for a Tribal Council meeting. I'll get there early and we'll have a talk. How about five o'clock, OK?"

"All right."

"You know where the office is, Louis?"

"Sure."

"OK, then. See you tomorrow."

Louis decided to walk to the ASHAI Office from his house in Back Bay. He walked down to the Village center, all decorated now for Christmas, and down to the bridge across the Missisquoi. There was thin ice above the falls, but the rapids were still churning away and Louis stopped to watch. When it got too cold on the bridge, Louis headed past the big grain elevator and up Depot Street to the old railroad station.

Above the door was the large sign that said ABENAKI TRIBAL HEADQUARTERS. Louis walked inside. He saw his uncle standing by the wood stove at one end of the large room. Frank was Louis' mother's oldest brother. He was a big man, and he and Louis had always been good friends.

"Hi Louis. Come over and warm yourself up. You're on time. I just got here myself."

[photograph: Abenaki Tribal Council/ Abenaki Self-Help Association; Depot Road, Swanton.]

People were busy in the office. So after a few minutes at the stove Frank said, "Let's step back here into the Chief's office so we can talk."

Louis sat down on a big couch and looked up at a large painting on a wall. It was an Indian woman paddling a dark canoe out of some tall wild rice into the open lake. Beside it was a large map of the Swanton-Highgate area.

"Well, Louis, what have you been up to lately?"

"Oh, just school mostly. But I've been talking to Grandma Delia and my Grandpa Levi."

"How's Muskrat these days? I haven't seen him in months."

"He's doing OK," answered Louis. "Same as always. But we were talking about how he used to fish and trap all the time and how he earned his living that way. And well, I was sort of wondering why the Indians don't live like that anymore."

"That's not an easy question Louis. Muskrat is kind of unusual that way, you know. Most people don't live like he does, not nowadays."

"But that's what I mean. Why are things so different now?"

"Like I said Louis. It's not an easy question. Things have been changing for a long time and for a lot of different reasons. You see that book shelf over there? Since I've been on the Tribal Council, I've been reading up on

Abenaki history. One of those books was written by a couple of professors at the University down in Burlington. It tells all about the old Indians, and about the Abenaki Self-Help Association too. And that big one there with the black plastic binding - that's a petition we had written for the Federal Government. It's got a lot of our history in it, too. "

"So what do they say?" asked Louis.

"A whole lot. But I guess basically what it comes down to is that the Indians lost all the land to the early white settlers."

"Here, you see this map..." Frank continued.

He had opened one of the books to a map that showed the whole Missisquoi Bay area.

"One time, all this land belonged to the Abenakis. We didn't own it exactly. Indians never owned the land. But we used it and had always lived here. There was plenty of fish and game for everyone. When the first white settlers came here, before the American Revolution, some of them even signed a lease with the Indians for the lands near the river where they wanted to take timber."

"Really? A lease?"

"Yup, here's a copy of it right here. It's called Robertson's Lease."

Louis looked at a copy of the lease, written in large, old-fashioned kind of hand-writing.

"They got the original up in Canada, " his uncle continued.

"And there's another old copy down at the University Library in Burlington. See the date there, 1765.

"I guess the Indians figured they could keep control of the land. But after a while, as more and more white people began to settle here, the old Indians were forced out. They fought sometimes, but they really couldn't do much about it. And the English fought pretty hard. They even sent a raiding party up to Canada, to Odanak, and killed off a lot of warriors up there. Women and children too. Roger's Raid that was called.

"We never learned about that in school. They just talk about how the Indians raided white villages."

"Yeah, when I went to school, the only thing they ever said about is Abenakis was that we were all wild, bloodthirsty savages. They don't really tell the other side, how the Abenakis were fighting to save their homeland. But it was the same all over the country. Indians were just pushed out, or killed."

"So what happened?" Louis asked.

"Well, the Indians just left Missisquoi. That was the name of the old village."

"You mean over by the monument?"

"That's right. Some went to Canada. Others just stayed around here in the woods. It was still mostly woods then, of course. There weren't many farms back then. And little by little, they learned to get along with the new settlers. But that meant changing the way they lived. The older Indians died off, and the younger people growing up were able to change. At first, a lot of Indians still traveled about quite a bit. But gradually they settled down in the new villages."

"You mean new Indian villages?"

"No Louis, I mean the villages that the settlers were building. Like Swanton, and Highgate and Sheldon and Franklin. And over on the Islands and down around St. Albans Bay. The Indian families settled down too, eventually, all over this area.

"Most of the men still hunted and fished a lot, but they started taking other kinds of jobs. Some helped build the first railroad tracks. Some worked in quarries. Others got jobs as farmhands or working on the roads, just whatever kind of work they could find. None of them had ever been to school, of course. So they worked as laborers mainly.

"Well, as years went by, Indians became more and more like everybody else, at least on the outside. It didn't happen all at once, but only gradually. They stayed together though, and helped each other get by, just like we do today. And sometimes they didn't even tell anybody that they were Indians, 'cause it would just mean trouble."

"Why?" asked Louis.

"Because people didn't always like the Indians. They just didn't want them around."

"That sounds pretty dumb to me, " said Louis.

"I agree with you. But lots of people are like that. They just don't like folks who are different. Doesn't matter if they're Indian or French or Chinese or whatever. Some people are just that way. Some Indians too, I'd have to say.

"Anyway, a few years back, 1973 or '74 I guess it was, some of us decided we ought to do something about being Indian. I mean we could see things was just getting worse. It was like Indians had never existed, even though we'd been here all along. That's when some of us decided to form the Abenaki Tribal Council and choose a Chief, to see if we couldn't improve our situation. Indians were doing the same all over the country. And we finally decided to try something right here.

"A long time ago, the Indians here, the Abenakis, probably had some kind of council and Chiefs, but mostly the Chiefs were just chosen in times of war. Otherwise, it was just heads of families that decided things.

"And most of the time, families just got by on their own. They had their own hunting territories and they lived together in small groups. That book there calls them 'family hunting bands'.

"Anyway, when we got the council going again, it was pretty hard at first. Indian families had been used to doing things on their own for such a long time, it was hard to get people organized. That's one of the reasons we started the Self -Help Association. It's helped people get organized. We still have a lot of work to do. And as more of the old people like Muskrat pass on, the job's only going to get harder. It's going to be up to you young people. Otherwise the Abenakis could be forgotten again."

"Hey, Frank! It's time for the meeting," someone called from the other room.

"OK. I'm coming! You better head for home now Louis. You can take a couple of these books with you if you want, but make sure they get back here."

"All right. I'll see you Uncle Frank. Thanks."

Louis took the books under his arm and stepped out into the cold air. The sun was setting now and the chill made Louis pull his overcoat tighter around him.

When he reached the bridge, Louis paused as he usually did, to take in the spectacular view from the bridge. Usually Louis liked to watch the water churning over the rocks. Tonight, however, his attention was caught by the sky. He noticed how all the clouds were transformed -- changing their shapes and colors to create this beautiful sunset. Clouds were always changing, Louis thought. But no matter how much they changed, they were always the same thing, clouds. Isn't that what people have been trying to tell me about the Indians, he thought.

Louis continued his walk home, and as he walked, he thought about all the things that he had learned. He decided he would read the books that he was carrying, and prepare a report for his class at school. He felt better now, less confused. When he arrived home, he looked once again toward the sky. The sun set had faded, and there were only a few clouds visible now. But Louis knew that the clouds would be there for always, like the sky and the wind and the river and the Back Bay, all the world around him that he thought was so beautiful sometimes.

PART V

Study Questions

Did the Indians own land?

How might the Indians attitudes about the earth and nature, affect their views concerning owning land?

What happened to the Abenakis as more and more white people began to settle?

What was Uncle Frank's explanation as to why Indians have changed so much over the years?

Why was the Tribal Council re-established?

What was the purpose for beginning the Abenaki Self-Help Association Incorporated? (ASHAI)

With whom does the future of the Abenaki people lie?

What types of things can young people do, to make certain their heritage, culture, and history are not forgotten?

As Louis returns home from his visit with his Uncle Frank, Louis' attention is drawn to the evening sky. What, in particular, did Louis notice about the sunset?

Give some examples of ways in which we can learn lessons through nature.

What do you think the clouds symbolize?

Explain why you think Louis finally felt at peace.

CONCLUSION

The week before Christmas, Louis gave a report to his class in school. He told them all the things he had learned from his grandparents and his uncle. He told them about the old ways, and about Odzihozo, and the first church in Vermont, and how the Indians had lost their land.

He told his class how he hoped that one day the Abenakis would have some land of their own, and that all people would learn to respect each other. He said that he was proud of being an Abenaki Indian, and he knew now that Lake Champlain and Missisquoi were his ancient home.

CONCLUSION

Study Questions

What did Louis choose to do with all the information he had learned?

Why do you think Louis wanted to share this information with others?

If you were in Louis' class, how would you react to Louis' presentation?

If you had been one of the children who had teased Louis, how would you now respond?

What are the hopes that Louis has?

IN MEMORY OF
Leonard "Blackie" Lampman
Chief, Abenaki Nation of Vermont, 1980-1987
whose devotion to educational opportunities
for all children
will be always appreciated and remembered.

FINDING ONE'S WAY
The Story of an Abenaki Child

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