

2008

Long Journey Home: Oral Histories of Contemporary Delaware Indians (review)

Marshall Joseph Becker

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, mbecker@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/anthrosoc_facpub



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Becker, M. J. (2008). Long Journey Home: Oral Histories of Contemporary Delaware Indians (review). *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 32(3), 192-195. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/anthrosoc_facpub/45

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of the Sciences & Mathematics at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology & Sociology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wressler@wcupa.edu.

2008 Vol 32 (3): 192-195

Long Journey Home: Oral Histories of Contemporary Delaware Indians.
Edited by James W. Brown and Rita T. Kohn. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 448 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Long Journey presents oral histories derived primarily from individuals descended from the peoples called Delaware Indians. Earlier versions of some of the narratives provided here appeared in Rita Kohn's *Always a People: Oral Histories of Contemporary Woodland Indians* (1997; see Becker review 1999, *Journal of American Folklore*, 112). Kohn now has joined with a colleague in the journalism program at Indiana University to produce a lavish volume focusing on statements made by descendants of some of the many Native peoples who once lived in the northeastern woodlands. A brief introduction is followed by four sections, each of which contains a series of "interviews" from a specific recent period. The order of presentation of these "histories" within each part is alphabetical. Part 1 includes ten accounts derived from the Indian Pioneer Collection, originally recorded as part of a 1936 Works Progress Administration project. Part 2 includes only three accounts, derived from tapes made in 1968 by Katherine Red Corn. Part 3 includes two interviews conducted in 1995 by Kay Wood as part of a doctoral research project. Part 4, filling three-fourths of this volume, is composed of thirty-one histories collected by the editors between 1998 and 2004 (103). Interspaced throughout this volume are some ninety-five recent color photographs and plates by James Brown. These vibrant illustrations provide an impressive visual record of a re-created "culture," but

their random placement, like the occasional footnotes, gives a picture-book quality to this thick volume.

The Brown and Kohn interviews focus on people with varying degrees of Native ancestry, including Don Collier, the "Delaware gift shop manager," and James Rementer, the "Language project director" (155, 275). Rementer has spent decades in an effort to preserve a language whose last Native speakers were alive when he began. Rementer's contribution, and many of the others, describes how he came to be identified as a "Delaware." Note is made of "the James Rementer archive of oral histories" but not how it relates to the versions included here or how to access these records for comparative material (71).

It is not clear how these accounts were selected. The oral histories that are included in part 4 reflect a small subset of living people who are of Delaware descent. In Kohn's *Always a People* eleven Delaware, or "hyphenated Delaware," are among the forty individuals represented. Accounts by several of these eleven also appear in this volume, with some interesting differences in versions recorded only five or six years apart (see, for example, Michael Pace and Curtis Zunigha). Leonard Thompson's important earlier account includes information on peyote rituals that are absent from the narration that appears here. In this volume Jacob (Jake) Sears appears in photographs on the dust jacket and pages 39 and 40 but without a history. Details of his kinship (his parents are DeAnn Ketchum and Andy Sears, his mother's sister is Kala Ketchum Thomas) can be gleaned from the histories, but a genealogical chart would be helpful. "We just feel a kinship" is how Don Collier begins his narrative (155). Collier's cultural connection may be as remote from the Native speakers as that of Jake, who has an identity formed by powwows and other re-created activities.

The "journey" of the title could refer to the migration of three tribes from the Delaware River valley region. Those peoples all spoke what I call Delawarean languages, a subset of the Algonquian language family. After 1750 these peoples were all commonly referred to as "Delaware." The five-page introduction by Deborah Nichols-Lederman and James A. Rementer offers "historical information about the Lenape" (xxiii). This is a peculiar tale assembled from records relating to several peoples. Rementer affirms that these three tribes spoke separate "dialects," or "languages" as he also calls them (278). These three separate tribal entities were recognized as representing distinct cultures long after members of each of these tribes sold their lands and left their aboriginal homelands. Not all left. Like the story of the creation of "the Delaware Nation," the fiction of "forced migrations" of Native peoples from Pennsylvania and New Jersey prior to 1750 is a modern myth, as may be the "forced removal" from the White River area of present Indiana (xiv, xxiv). The focus here is on modern individuals, most of them living in the Bartlesville, Oklahoma region, who had ties to one or another of the Native groups once resident in Indiana.

Who were these people? The three tribes included the Lenape, the Munsee, and the people whom the English called "Jerseys," recently identified by a Native name (Lenopi). Although all Lenape might be considered to be Delaware, not all Delaware are considered to be Lenape. The Delaware

2008 Vol 32 (3) 192-195

of the Anadarko, Oklahoma area may be the descendants of Lenape bands, but no studies of their language or culture history has provided kin ties with peoples living in the Bartlesville area. The Bartlesville-area Delaware may be the direct descendants of Lappawinsoe, Tishcohan, and Teedyuscung, all of whom were members of the Toms River, New Jersey band of Lenopi. I have traced Lenopi genealogies from the seventeenth century to the 1750s (Becker, "The Moravian Mission in the Forks of the Delaware," *Unitas Fratrum*, 1987, 83-172), but thereafter the linkages remain unclear. The Lenopi may be those Delaware who often were linked with the Shawnee after that date. Don Secondine's note that his family is both Delaware and Shawnee may provide an important clue to their kin lines.

As Secondine correctly notes, when his "grandfather, Henry Secondine, was chairman of the tribe" the leaders were not called chiefs (295). When I visited the Bartlesville area in the 1970s I was a guest of Belva and Henry Secondine and witness to the process by which tribal leadership was being wrested from Henry's capable hands. The interlopers not only took power, but also they began to fashion a culture history that best suited their political goals. The recent efforts by some of these people to rebrand the Delaware as Lenape are reflected in this volume. The term *Lenape* has only recently been used commonly in Oklahoma, where earlier narratives uniformly use the term *Delaware*. Julia Hall (1852-1942) referred to "my people," an appropriate translation for the self-referent term *Lenopi* as well as for *Lenape* (19). Until recently I did not understand the urgency expressed by both Nora Thompson Dean and Belva McBurney Secondine, descended from Plains peoples, for recovering all the information possible about these people. These "histories," with all of their perceptual distortions and other peculiarities, do include bits of information that can be decoded in the context of ongoing culture change.

These histories might be useful to academics if transcribed in their original form, directly from recordings, or if the locations of the original versions were clearly identified. Indiana University has the world's foremost program in folklore and publishes the premier journal in the field, yet these editors appear to lack basic knowledge regarding how that complex field operates. The result is far from a scholarly work. The prolific amateur historian Clinton A. Weslager acknowledged that his works were journalistic accounts of the Delaware people. Weslager did, however, have basic scholarly concerns that place his works far closer to modern scholarship than anything found in this volume. This effort suggests that those involved in this project were unconcerned with scholarly forms (see Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, ed., *History of Oral History*, 2007 and *Thinking about Oral History*, 2007). The intended readership of this volume is not the scholarly community concerned with peoples of Native descent whose ancestors originated in the Mid-Atlantic region. The received wisdom that fills this work reflects the final phases of acculturation of some of the best-documented Native tribes in North America. These peoples, however, were far from the passive victims of a European invasion, as some historians and the editors of this work would have us believe. Native peoples were skilled and often brilliant politicians, merchants, and entrepreneurs who negotiated the frontier between foraging societies and a preindustrial

European expansion. Those "Natives" who wound up in Oklahoma had elected to participate in traditional ways. They retained their language and at least some elements of culture well into the twentieth century. However, they are not the only descendants of those who lived in the woods, called *wilde* by the Dutch, who became emblematic of "Native" life. As early as the 1630s some of these Natives chose a different path. Those who settled down to farm were lost from view and no longer identified as Indians. The process of becoming today's Americans may have taken different routes over the centuries, but the results are much the same. This volume contains glimmerings of once vital cultures whose last speakers only recently were absorbed into that vaguely ethnic *mélange* that typifies the United States of America.

Marshall Joseph Becker
University of Pennsylvania