
*Fuse* was a Canadian arts and culture magazine published by Artons Cultural Affairs Society and Publishing Inc. from 1979-2013.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License.
A Nation Rebuilds Through Broadcasting

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED transcript of an interview with Jake Swamp, traditional chief of the Wolf Clan (Mohawk Nation), David Back, production manager for CKON (a radio station operating on the Akwesasne Reserve which straddles Ontario and New York State), and Daniel Benedict, CKON program manager. I would like to express my thanks to Jennifer Sells for her assistance in carrying out this interview.

DON ALEXANDER: We were reading in Akwesasne Notes that the radio station had been licensed by the Mohawk Chiefs and Clan Mothers instead of the government of Canada. Would you talk about how that came about and its significance?

JAKE SWAMP: Over the last couple hundred years we've been hampered from exercising our government as we know it. We have our own constitution which governs our people. But yet we have the imposed government systems of the United States and Canada. We're trying to replenish our government within our communities by exercising our ability to sanction these acts: we sanction our radio station; we sanction an education system. Our view is that, later on, our people will become strong again. And then they can operate with pride in themselves. It would no longer be just words of what we were before, we'd be saying this is what we are again as a people, and this is really the reason [for

DON: During the licensing ceremony, it was mentioned that the fact of having one's own radio station, something people hadn't conceived of a number of years ago, was a very important step for Mohawk sovereignty.

JAKE: The radio station, through the airing of our views, is educating our people to what they're supposed to be. We tell them about the creation story, about who we are as a people, because in the process of the last two hundred years, the people have lost their identity and picked up another's identity. So we have to reverse this process and it's going to take, maybe, years. But through this radio station, it's going to make the reality [happen] sooner.

DON: Technology has often been used as a means to inculcate white values, whether it's through television, radio, or through printed media. Obviously, by running this radio station, you think some of this technology can be turned away from this function and made to do something else.

JAKE: We're looking at appropriate technology. We have to recognize the technology as we know it today, and we have to apply it wherever it's going to benefit our people. But, at the same time, we also have to recognize that it must not come into conflict with what we believe in, with our natural surroundings. It's very important factor, because if we walk away from what we believe in, if we walk away from these principles, we would be destroying our own purpose. So, we're staying on course, recognizing most of the technology that's available to us. We will take advantage of those things as long as it doesn't hurt the environment, because we have a great concern for the environment.

DON: What further plans do you have for the use of technology?

JAKE: We've been meeting with different Indian peoples across the country, and we've been noticing that everyone wants to come together. And this is our goal also - to link up the Indian communities in North America, maybe using computers, along with radio communication by satellite. This is our projection into the future, so that if an issue is arising out west somewhere, we will instantly know what's going on and can report it in our area.

DON: How was the idea of the radio station conceived and what kind of work went into actually making it possible?

JAKE: We were surrounded by New York State police here in our community for about a year and a half. We had bunkers up and warriors patrolling the perimeter. And this is where our culture that's thousands of years old, and it's in jeopardy. Here's our culture that's thousands of years old, and it's in jeopardy. We had to look at all these things, and weigh them out. How are we going to survive in this kind of situation? So we put together a phone tree linking up our community, and eventually other communities, so that
when they were planning to attack our people, we would get on the phone and call one person, and that person would call another person. In a matter of minutes, our people from the community would come to our assistance, and they would surround the police that were surrounding us. We made the phone tree grow to other cities, and other communities in Europe. When something would come down on our people, all we'd have to do was make a phone call and it would go all over the world, and people would start sending telegrams and watching the situation closely.

Coming from this experience, and because of the communication available to us now, I don't think what happened back then is ever going to happen again. The police would not be so willing to come over here and say: "When we come in, we're going to destroy all your women and children, so that later on we won't have to bother with this problem."

DON: How did the police come to surround the reserve?

JAKE: Back in 1979, one of our chiefs within the traditional council heard these chainsaws operating one day and went down to investigate. He found a group of young men cutting trees, making way for a fence. He wasn't informed of any fence coming through his property, and so he confiscated the chainsaws. He wanted to get to the bottom of it: why are they cutting these trees down? Our culture tells us to hold the trees in high esteem; we don't want to destroy every tree that's coming up out of the ground. So this is the reason the conflict started.

The tribal council had this Youth Conservation Corps - a summer program where they create jobs for young people - and their plan was to build a fence around the reservation. It would have been simple just to inform the people, but they didn't, and this is why the problem arose. When our people went there and investigated, they tried to convince [the Youth Corps] to have a meeting with the tribal council where they could work things out. But what happened is that the tribal council instead went and called the police from outside and, at the same time, they had their own police - the Bureau of Indian Affairs police - and they worked hand in hand with the State Police.

So, they went to this man's house - they were after the tools that he had confiscated - and they arrested him. And there was an old woman there that they hurt in the process. They put a stick in her stomach and she spent the night in the hospital. She was about seventy-six years old at the time. After that a series of events happened: we say we are a nation, then why are we going to go to court? If we're a nation, then we don't belong in another country's court. We're going to stay here and stand our ground. [He laughs.] And somebody put up a gate. This is our own country, and we maintained that it's Mohawk law that's going to stand. And New York State says: "No, you're going to follow my law. You're going to become our citizens." So that's the problem that ensued for a year and a half. [Eventually] it was costing them too much to maintain that police force twenty-four hours a day. They had to pay a lot of overtime. They lost millions of dollars, so I guess that's the reason they decided to disperse.

For about a year and a half we were inside the encampment and we had our families in there. [This experience] taught us how [people] operate on the outside, it taught us how they are. This is how our education system was born, which is going toward immersion this fall right up to the eighth grade. The radio station, too, because we want to communicate with the rest of the world, because if our culture dies, along with it dies our concepts, our principles of how we look at the world. We think the world today, as we know it, is in grave trouble. And I think we would have an impact on other nations...
if we could speak to them about these matters.

DON: So what specific work had to be done to bring about this radio station? You say you conceived the idea in 1980 of gradually expanding the communication system.

JAKE: What we had to do first was look into our community, and see what kind of gifts people had to give toward the rebuilding of our nation. And we noticed that if we took a certain area that we wanted to develop, we only had to look around in our community to find somebody that knew something that would be of benefit. In the area of fundraising, we had people who worked on that stuff and they knew what to do. They knew how to approach people, how to write proposals. And then we had people who were electricians who could become our engineers. And we got musicians like Dave here - he's the one that puts together our programs in advertising, and Danny has a knowledge of different music, how to level it out. We borrowed the equipment, and were getting help from all over. And after we realized we had the station, [the government] didn't give any order, we just went on the air.

The Communication Society had a plan for how things were supposed to go, but once it got up to the day before we went on the air, there was no real preparation for how to do it, how to sound good right from the beginning. So we said: Let's go on, and we'll learn from there!

DON: Do you have an active skills-sharing program for folding in new people and teaching them skills?

JAKE: There's three young girls working here now who are training. [He motions to the studio from which the sounds of heavy metal are emanating.] We're always encouraging young people to come in and try out for D.J., especially on the weekends.

DON: Tell us a bit more about your programming?

DANIEL: [In terms of news] what we mainly have is Jake's show. It starts at 10 o'clock. He does general news - it's in Mohawk - for fifteen minutes, then he does Mohawk language for fifteen minutes. He comes on again at noon with his talk show. If there are any news breaks, we try to put it on right away - like with the confiscation of road equipment at the Seneca Nation - that was put on the talk show as much as possible.

JAKE: What I like about doing the Native program is that I'm reaching old people who don't know how to speak English. They're amazed about what's going on in the world, when you talk about the world news. When I'm talking about South Africa and the apartheid policies, when I'm talking about South America and what's going on down there with the Indians, they can really identify themselves with that.

They can't read newspapers, and they can't understand what's being said on the radio or television. But I'm coming into their homes and telling them what's going on in the world, and they really like that. So every day I'm talking about South Africa 'cause every day it's in the news.

DON: You bring international news to the reserve. Do you also take the message of Native people over to Europe?

JAKE: Yeah, I made about three trips out there. I made a presentation at the U.N. in Geneva in '82. We were trying to form a working group for indigenous peoples where they could present their problems. The U.N. voted on it and it's now in existence. In fact, we have people over there right now attending those conferences. And we're working with the South American Indians who have problems that they want us to present. They want us to take the lead within the U.N. because our nation's structure was used as a model to form the United Nations. The United States patterned their constitution from ours, so we can testify with how politics works in the world.

DON: It seems that there's increasing cooperation worldwide between indigenous peoples. For example, there's the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Also, there's the delegations that have been going down from the Iroquois people to sit in on the talks between Brooklyn Rivera (leader of the Misurasata, an Indian organization on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast) and the Nicaraguan government. It seems that there's a lot of communication and exchange of information.

JAKE: Yeah, I had Brooklyn Rivera here about three weeks ago and we had an hour long conversation and that made the people in this community really aware of what's happening in Nicaragua. It's really important, you know - especially the role world politics plays in our lives, and you can almost pinpoint where the trouble is coming from. Especially with the big corporations of the world. They have a big control over the lives of the people of the world. And every time we speak out about these things, we get the feeling that these people get mad at us. It's kind of dangerous to speak the truth in a presentation. When you're in the U.N., you can't directly point fingers at certain nations. You have to generalize.

"...I'm reaching old people who don't know how to speak English. They're amazed at what's going on in the world."
So we speak for the grass, the water, the air. They can't speak for themselves in those forums, so that's what we do. Sure, we come in there and talk about our problems, about how we've been wronged and we've lost a lot of land, and we're almost extinct. But it's not just us. We always bring up the issues about the natural environment. They don't have a place to come here and present their problems, so we come here to speak for them also. Because they're part of us.

DON: Do you see any new movements or philosophies developing in the last ten to fifteen years which are more in line with the Native worldview?

JAKE: Oh yeah, we've seen a lot of changes. [People in general] take our principles and the way we look at life and they're utilizing them in their lifestyles wherever possible. Anywhere you go, you can hear the remark: "Well, we must make this decision today and it's going to affect the seven generations; make sure that those grandchildren are not hurt." That comes from our constitution, that's one of our laws. When we make a decision, we have to look seven generations ahead. The decision we make today is going to affect our grandchildren.