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Joseph Elie Joubert: Language Keeper

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

The Canadian First Nations Reserve of Odanak, near the mouth of the Saint Francis River where it joins the St. Lawrence, has long been a place of refuge for Abenaki people. Following its establishment by the Jesuits as a mission village (then called St. Francis) in 1700, over the next century it received subsequent waves of refugees from the traditional eastern Algonquin homelands in New England. The first were apparently Sokokis, followed by Penacooks, Pigwackets, Schaghticokes, Norridgewocks, Cowassucks, Missisquois, and numerous others, including Mohicans. All of them spoke related dialects of the same language (Day 1981).

There, in the province of Quebec, surrounded by French speakers, it was not at all uncommon for the indigenous inhabitants of St. Francis to be fully trilingual, speaking Abenaki, English, and French fluently.

Not only that, St Francis was the home of not one but three First Nations scholars whose work as linguists contributed to the preservation of their Native language. These men, Peter Paul Wzokolain (subject of one of my earlier columns), Henry Lorne Masta, and Joseph Laurent, received European-style educations in English at such universities as Harvard and Dartmouth. Each of them wrote books that have proven invaluable in the teaching and preservation of the language now called Western Abenaki.

It was into this multilingual community that Joseph Alfred Elie Joubert was “born an Abenaki Indian,” as he puts it, on May 3, 1944 (Joubert 2011). It was a crucial time for both the Reserve of Odanak and the Abenaki language. The policies of the Canadian government—like the United States—were aimed at the assimilation of their indigenous peoples, which meant extinguishing Native identity and, eventually, the termination of their tribal

holdings. Native children were sent to boarding schools—often far from their homelands—and forbidden to speak their Native language. (Also, since the government policy was that aboriginal blood was reckoned only through the father’s line, many Native women who married white men were stripped by law of their tribal memberships.)

At the time of Joubert’s birth, there were hundreds of fluent speakers of Abenaki in Quebec at Odanak and the other nearby Abenaki reserve of Wolinak. Many of those speakers were of the generation just before him. And though in the 1940s, Abenaki was still spoken as a first language in many Abenaki homes, nearly all of the boys and girls of his age quite literally had the language beaten out of them when they attended school.

Two events rescued him from the brutality of boarding school life. The first was that he was adopted by the couple who would become his parents on June 15, 1944, and who gave him his name. His new father spoke French and English while his adoptive mother, Cecile Wawanolett, was fluent in Abenaki, English, and French. The second was that—like a number of Abenaki families—his parents moved to Troy, New York. The community of Odanak Abenakis there, of people who found work in that mill town, has been in place since the early 20th century. (Although the actual number of residents of Odanak is around 500, at any given time, more than double that number are living off the reservation in Canada, the United States, and other countries.)

As a result, after attending first and second grade in the elementary school at Odanak, the rest of the young Joubert’s education was in the New York public school system of Troy. Although there was no Abenaki language instruction in the Troy schools, there was also no concerted

effort to expunge his Native language and identity, and Abenaki was spoken in his home.

As Joubert put it: “This resulted in my speaking English, French, and the Abenaki language. The remainder of my family lived on the reservation. I remember thinking that I was special because we could speak the three languages without accent. I always talked the language that I was addressed in. Thus, there was no reason to make fun of, or ridicule me” (Joubert 2019).

He did not have to look far for inspiration in terms of Native language retention. While he was in high school, his mother Cecile began offering classes in Abenaki. Recognized widely as the most important instructor of Western Abenaki, she was hired not only by the Band Council of Odanak to teach the language, but also by the Abenaki Nation in Swanton, Vermont.

Even before his mother’s passing at the age of 98, Joubert began taking on his own role as an important teacher of Abenaki. His fascination with the language was, at least in part, due to his “inquisitive personality which led me to the understanding of the true meanings of our words coupled with their inflections” (Joubert 2011). Teaching as a primary activity in his life had to wait though, until later in his life. After enlisting in the United States Navy in 1963, he served 20 years of active naval service, retiring in 1983, with the rank of Command Master Chief Petty Officer.

The number of Abenaki speakers was, by then, dwindling fast. He found himself the youngest fluent Abenaki speaker from Odanak, observing that by 1995, there were approximately 60 speakers left on and off the reservation, and by 2011, he could count on his fingers the number left. “It is for this reason,” he said, “that I have become an Abenaki Language Preservationist,” a role that he has been

playing for the last three decades, teaching in New York, Vermont, and other parts of New England, and serving as a frequent contributor of language lessons to newsletters published by Western Abenaki tribal groups (Joubert 2011).

His first book, *Nitami Podawazwiskweda: The First Council Fire*, was published in 2011 by Bowman Books. Published in bilingual format, it chronicles Abenaki life from the beginning of time to the creation of the first council designed to bring the people together in peace. Written in flowing prose, it is nearly as lyrical in English as it is in Abenaki, pointing out the deeper meanings of many words:

Achi aimek m8jassaik aided wasanm8ganihlak iya idamow pemega-w8ganal wassakol ala abasand8ganal n'wl8mawaldamen idamow abagigenol wassakol. Mziwi aid witobanki pebonki wassakol ala Aurora Borealis. Nanib8ssad idamow chakweniwi pemosadid ala p8gwas idamoiw mil8d p8gwigid wassana. Mziwi aided witobanik kizos. Wattawasoak idamow noppawsawwinnoak ta alakws idamow lagwigid meskaw8d. Achi nidali spemek aid Alakws8wdi, lossaw8ganek Spemkik. K'namih8bna agm8w8 m8jassik nib8iw w ta8lawi pamgisgak.

Also present in the beginning were the Dancing or Flat Lights. These were our names for the Northern Lights or the Aurora Borealis. The moon was known as the All Night Walker, and also known as the Giver of Pure Light, and the stars were called both the Scouts and the Direction Finders. Also,

there in the sky was the Milky Way, known as the Sky Road leading to the Above Land, that place we now call Heaven. We saw them all during the night in the beginning as we do today. (Joubert 2011, 2–3)

It is truly an example of what Thoreau wrote in his journals, speaking of Penobscot, which is virtually the same as Western Abenaki, “the Indian language reveals another and wholly new life to us” (Blake 1881, 69).

In 2019, with Jesse Bruchac as co-compiler, Joubert’s second book, the *Abenaki–English Dictionary* was brought out. The result of three decades of diligent work on the parts of Bruchac and Joubert, it contains over 20,000 words and is not only one of the largest dictionaries ever published of any Native American language, but also one of the few entirely put together by fluent Native speakers of their own language (Bruchac and Joubert 2019).

During my 2019 interview with him, Joubert asserted, “I am a firm believer that you are what you are. I am proud to say I am an Abenaki Indian. One thing I want to get across is that if you understand the Abenaki language in its entirety, it is such a beautiful thing. Everything is right here. Every word is so clear” (Joubert 2019).

Finally, this quote from Joseph Albert Elie Joubert on the website *westernabenaki.com* seems the right place to end this essay: “The secrets of our culture lie hidden within our language.”

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