

## Healing a Community; Molly Ockett and Her Role in Developing the Regional Community

Kim Drew

Dr. Clarke: AP US History

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Dr. Clarke

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### Healing a Community; Molly Ockett and Her Role in Developing the Regional Community

Molly Ockett played a monumental role in establishing the community of Bethel and the surrounding area today due to her sense of community and her ability to integrate with settler's established by the so-called First Nation, that Colin Woodard describes in his book *American Nations*. The First Nation faced hostile white settlement and the method of integration or rebellion to this settlement defined their legacy. Molly Ockett used the element of integration, where she helped the settlers with medical procedures and bringing the groups together socially. These were the key to her ability to create relationships with the white settlers that were similar to the close relationships that the Native Americans used in their tribes. During the time of Molly Ockett's life, these relationships were in the midst of change, and began to create some tensions. These tensions Molly Ockett healed and this has allowed her to continue to be a great historical figure in the region. As for more recently, the change in this community, between white settlers and Native Americans, are changing again as well. In the time of Molly Ockett and again today, the sense of community in Bethel and the surrounding area were built on Native Americans and the family-like structure. Molly Ockett was the key component in the foundation of Bethel's community and the way that it would continue today, due to her social skills and medical practices, that allowed for integration.

The sense of the Native American community is derived from the sense of the tribe as a whole, ultimately creating intertribal relationships. These ideals being focused on working together for the better of the community and an immense focus on the ideas of family the connections between families. In the early eighteenth-century, the time of Molly Ockett, this began to change greatly, “Indian intertribal relationships disintegrated due to the burgeoning fur trade and the introduction of firearms. The demand for furs strained the native economy by using up time previously spent in search of large game for food and skins...importance of territorial boundaries, a concept foreign to the Abenaki before European notions of private land use and ownership were imposed on the region.”<sup>1</sup> Not only did white settlers interrupt the concepts of community, but they began to influence the trade as well as the use of land in Native communities. This was a large disturbance in the community and the way that it ran, due to the influence that it had on creating social classes.

The structuring of the Native communities played a role in the development of future communities and the ways in which they ran. The western tribes of America were entered and disturbed by foreigners much more quickly than that of Maine and the Northeastern America.<sup>2</sup> The distinct characters of each were often observed by the settlers, “A description of the semi-abandoned Pigwacket village made in 1703 by an English scouting party...” “When we came to the fort, we found about an acre of ground...and about one hundred wigwams therein; but had been deserted about six weeks, as we judged by the opening of their barns [storage pits] where

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie MacLean.. “Molly Ockett.” *History of American Women*. Womenhistoryblog. com. 9/17/2008. Web. Retrieved May 12, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Woodard.. *American Nations- A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Culture of North America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011. Print.

their corn was lodged.””<sup>3</sup> This quotation shows another problem that Native Americans were facing during the time that came along with the settlers--disease. While this was not necessarily a direct consequence of the settlers, it proved to be a community destroyer, often wiping out large portions of the Native community. The way that the Native Americans structured themselves was also important to the sense of community, as they found themselves living so that they could work together, generally not very far apart and such that they would be able to hunt, cook, and work together. This family-like structure was the foundation of the Native Americans, but proved to be something that would hinder them ultimately, due to disease.

Molly Ockett lived during a time of great change within the Native communities, due primarily to the new environment that the white settlers brought. This began to be known as a time of disintegration and would begin to show how the relationship between the Native Americans and the white settlers would form over time, based on the reaction to them. Molly Ockett differing from several other famous Native Americans in her tactics, as she focused on finding bridges and a movement towards integration. This differing even from her parents and the time that she grew up in, “Throughout her childhood, Molly Ockett and her family moved constantly to avoid the perils of the French and British colonial wars that were taking place around them. During 1759...Molly reportedly witnessed the death of her parents and many other Abenakis during the famous *Roger's Raid*.”<sup>4</sup> Even after enduring this, Molly Ockett was willing to continue helping others and did not move towards other means of trying to rid of the white settlers. This was a problem throughout the region, “By the middle of the 17th century, the traditional Indian way of life in this region was undergoing drastic change. An attitude of

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<sup>3</sup> Bethel Historical Society. (July 2004-May 2007). *Mollyockett and Her World*. Retrieved May 12,2016, from [http://bethelhistorical.org/legacy-site/Molly\\_Ockett\\_and\\_Her\\_World.html](http://bethelhistorical.org/legacy-site/Molly_Ockett_and_Her_World.html).

<sup>4</sup> Maggie Maclean. “Molly Ockett.”

friendly curiosity turned to distrust and hostility as the native population watched their numbers rapidly dwindle due to virulent epidemics introduced by Europeans.”<sup>5</sup> This demonstrating the changing community, as well as the effects of disease on the community and how it affected the people and their way of life, if they were able to survive it.

While Molly Ockett created the community and allowed for integration in several ways, her major bridge that she created was through medicine and providing for anyone who was in need. There were not many doctors who came with the settlers, so they had become used to seeing their friends and family members die when they became sick. Although, Molly Ockett changed this with her medical skills, “She collected her healing medicines and provided for herself as she had been taught by her ancestors.”<sup>6</sup> These medical skills were essential to the survival of the white settlers and ultimately allowed for a relationship to be made between the groups. With this level of a relationship, it would not tend to be a relationship based on ranking, but rather that of a mutual understanding and respect. The importance of her help and the reaction can clearly be seen through this comment, “She administered her remedies to the settlers whenever and wherever there was a need, never accepting more than one copper penny for her services. Molly was the only doctor available to most of these early settlers.”<sup>7</sup> There were large amounts of respect that were gathered at this point in time due to her methods, morals, and ability to help those in need.<sup>8</sup>

The other bridge that Molly Ockett was able to create was through working with integration of white settlers into the community, rather than trying to shut it down like those in

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<sup>5</sup> Maggie Maclean. “Molly Ockett”

<sup>6</sup>Canyon Wolf.. “Molly Ockett--Abenaki Healing Woman.” *Ne-Do-Ba*. Nedoba.org. August 2009. Web. Retrieved May 12, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Canyon Wolf. “Molly Ockett--Abenaki Healing Woman.”

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Newell.. *Molly Ockett*. Bethel, Maine: Bethel Historical Society, 1981. Print.

other regions. Sitting Bull being a very famous example of choosing a way that opposed the integration methods of Molly Ockett. She worked to create bonds and relationships that would constitute further as the relationships grew. These ideas of community brought forth and allowed for her to use this method, creating a very different dynamic than several other regions. One important form of integration to the white settlers was that of schooling, “We know that Molly had at least one daughter, Molly...who married a Penobscot (possibly Peol Sussup). She attended school at Bethel and spoke fluent English.”<sup>9</sup> This showed the devotion that Molly Ockett had to integration, as even her own daughter went to an English school, taking integration a step further. Another method of similar integration began in her childhood, “Another colonial war erupted in 1744, when Molly Ockett was four years old...This time MollyOckett’s father and five other Pigwacket warriors decided to side with the New Englanders...So it was that young Molly Ockett and her family went to live in the vicinity of the English settlers in Plymouth County.”<sup>10</sup> Molly Ockett began her connection to English and the white settlers early in her life-time and this explained her ability to integrate. If Molly Ockett had not experienced this, her integration may have differed greatly.

Molly Ockett served as an essential social component during her life-time as well, which led to her ability to communicate and create these relationships between the white settlers and Native Americans. Molly Ockett continues being known for her methods of integration. With the methods previously mentioned, but more importantly she communicated and found ways socially to be known by the whites. Not only was she known by the whites, but she also provided for herself and her tribe, which was what allowed the community to be made. Catherine Newell

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<sup>9</sup> Canyon Wolf. . “Molly Ockett--Abenaki Healing Woman.”

<sup>10</sup> Bunny McBride. *Women of the Dawn*. Lincoln: Bison Books, 2001. 47-48.

describes this side of Molly Ockett in her pamphlet, “With the renewal of white settlement...the remaining Indians withdrew...those remaining becoming absorbed in the white way of life...in the case of Molly Ockett, medical practitioner and advisor to the white newcomers.”<sup>11</sup> This account showing the importance and noted understanding of her ability to communicate and build these relationships. Another account of this is shown through the comments of Dr. N.T. True, “... “that she possessed more than ordinary ability among those of her sex and people is evident. She gained the respect and even the love of whites at a time when the mere notion of an Indian was wont to kindle upin breasts of white men anything but pleasing emotions”.”<sup>12</sup> These social skills were an integral part of her ability to develop and communicate.<sup>13</sup> Communication within a community is essential and she was able to do this well and efficiently, creating relationships.

### *Molly Ockett Today*

As Molly Ockett was able to create change and adapt to her changing community, the Bethel community has been experiencing a similar change in the recent years to their Mollyockett Day celebration. This change can be seen through certain traditions that take place during the ceremonies, “For fifty-five years there was a tradition of a young girl being chosen to portray “Miss Mollyockett,” ride in the parade and preside over the day’s events. In 2013, the tradition evolved into a new one: the “MollyOckett Essay Winners.” A high school boy and girl, who write the best essay...as MollyOckett’s life...Mollyockett’s generosity, self-reliance, and accomplishments are qualities as worthy of community honor...they provide a fine inspiration for

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Newell. *Molly Ockett*. 1981. Bethel Historical Society. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Newell. *Molly Ockett*. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Newell. *Molly Ockett*.

Mollyockett Days.”<sup>14</sup> These changes were monumental to the tradition and show a change in the relationships. This method of celebration supports the qualities that have been found to be important, while also allowing the community to see the Native American culture in a different light; not just a local girl dressed as Mollyockett riding in a red sports car. Catherine Newell believes that some may be opposed to this and want the traditions back, but she believes that there are enough people to keep this new tradition.<sup>15</sup> This adjustment to Mollyockett Day has been something thought about for a while, but shows the developing community of Bethel that is today. It is important to see the abilities of the community to change for this relationship, demonstrating similar qualities to that of Molly Ockett herself and going back to the community that Molly Ockett herself initiated in Bethel. A community in which there are relationships between all, a community that supports each other, and one in which assimilation can occur because the community is not afraid of change.

This year’s Mollyockett Days are focused around community, which seems to celebrate Molly Ockett in one of the best ways possible. As the person who created the Bethel community, it is essential to celebrate her in this form, as well as the community and its continual ability to change and explore new angles. Arla Patch describes this year’s theme through her artwork that expresses it, “The first thought that came to me about community is how food and health are at the core of a community. The image of two women hoeing the earth came next. I drew them symmetrically, as a mirror image, to reflect the connection between the original stewards of the land we live on and the current residents. I wanted to pay homage to

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<sup>14</sup> Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce. “Who was Mollyockett?” *MollyOckett Days*. Mollyockettdays.com. 2016. Web. Retrieved May 12, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Newell. *Molly Ockett*.



those who tilled the land for thousands of years before we arrived. I also wanted to portray the ways in which we are connected: birch bark canoe and kayak, the drums, Wabanaki beadwork and quilts, and that food is at the core of our survival,”<sup>16</sup> This demonstrating the qualities of a community, with the importance found in the bringing together of people and the continual support that is necessary. It is important to understand, as well, that a community is not just the current, but also the past and the future. The Native Americans exemplified this sense of community as they supported those currently in the community, appreciated those in the past greatly, and strove to make the best for those who would come. This was how they maintained their community and a lot of local communities have the same principles today. It is clear, as well, that these communities are structured the same due to the Native Americans and those like Molly Ockett herself.

Molly Ockett was a key in the development of Bethel and the surrounding areas. Without her significant methods of integration, she wouldn't have been able to do this. Her methods differed from many others who were a part of the First Nation, like Sitting Bull, who rebelled without end. This eventually leading to Sitting Bull's ultimate death, while some methods of rebellion worked, it was not always very consistent. Colin Woodard describes the situation of the First Nation and that of integration clearly, “Finally, I'd like to underscore the fact that becoming a member of a nation usually has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with culture. One doesn't *inherit* a national identity the way one gets hair, skin, or eye color; one *acquires* it in childhood or, with great effort, through voluntary assimilation later in life.”<sup>17</sup> Molly Ockett was able to use this concept to create the Bethel Community. She played a key role

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<sup>16</sup> Arla Patch. “Celebrating Community”. Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce.

<http://www.mollyockettdays.com/who-was-mollyockett.html>

<sup>17</sup> Colin Woodard. *American Nations*. 18.

during her time and now as we continue to assess the relationship and how well it is working.

What would Bethel and its community have been like if Molly Ockett hadn't been there? What would it have been like if the Native Americans rebelled? The center of the Bethel Community resides around Molly Ockett and the measures that she took to create strong relationships between the Native Americans and white settlers.

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