

The one-eyed woman: a living legend.

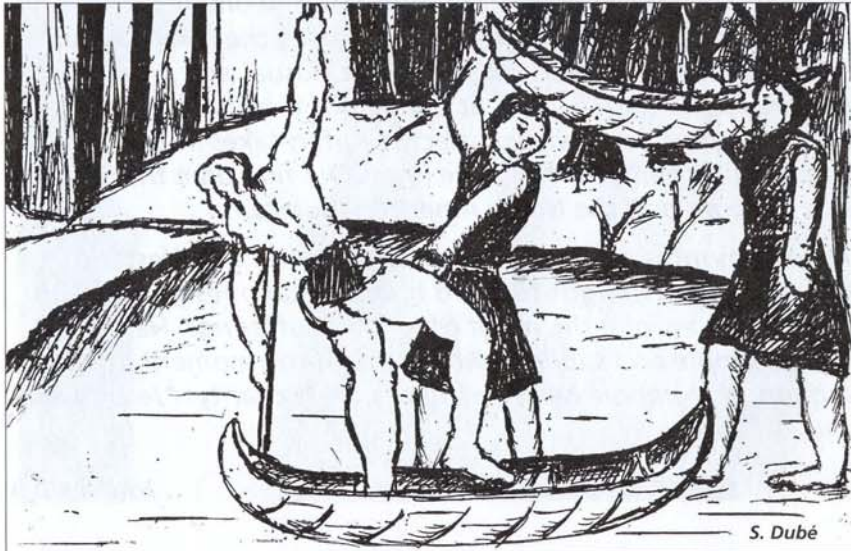
Here's a very colorful character at the borders between legend and reality: "the one-eyed woman". She lived in Laprairie, P.Q. when the mission existed, in the second half of the 17th C. This one-eyed woman was an Iroquois of the Mohawk nation or Kanienkeha. Her nickname had been given her by the French of Laprairie, because of an accident in her youth, in which she lost an eye. She was very conversant with healing plants. Because of that, the French were inclined to see her as a witch while the Indians looked upon her as a wise woman.

The one-eyed woman came to Kentake(Laprairie) around 1671, along with many others

of her own people. She had decided to leave her village of Gandaouage (Fonda), on the banks of the Mohawk River in New York State, because she wanted to embrace the Catholic faith.

Many of her own people probably didn't like her action, for they took away her title of Olander (a high rank), which denotes a person listened to because of her acute mind, her prudence and wise conduct.

Moreover, alcohol and continuous wars disrupted the native way of life. It was to live in peace that she came to the Saint Francis Xavier des Prés (Laprairie) Mission where she lived all by herself in a small cabin by Saint Jacques River.



S. Dubé

The Indians arriving in La Prairie

Indian medicine

Among the Odonossone (the Iroquois Confederation) the women's occupation was to cultivate plants and so they knew their power better than the men. For this reason Indians and at times Whites came to consult "the one-eyed woman" to alleviate their illnesses. In return, they would give her some corn, tobacco, a bowl, an arrow or whatever.

The one-eyed woman's pharmacy must have included medicinal plants according to what we know of Amerindian pharmacopy; she could possibly use a decoction of elder's bark, of achillea against fever, rhubarb blood root and cyclamen were effective against constipation.

A common practice among the Amerindians was to make the sick person sweat in order to expel toxins. For that elderberry or burdock was used. A small tent was fitted in which they placed red-hot rocks on which water was poured. For physical weakness there was nothing better than ginseng roots. Moreover, the Amerindians always knew how to cure scurvy by using cranberry, purslane, thuya bark and many other plants full of vitamine C.

Gift of clairvoyance

The French would say that the "one-eyed woman" was a witch. It was probably due to her gifts of clairvoyance. It is said that in 1961 she took refuge in the Fort of Laprairie, before the British and Amerindian attacks.

Besides being a part of the legend of Laprairie, the one-eyed woman remained a long time in the collective memory, giving its name to a section of Laprairie. In fact, since the 18th C. one can find the Coast of the One-Eyed Lady (La Borgniese as the French borgnesse was spelt them). It denoted the present Citière and Magdalen quarters. It most probably was the site of the Amerindian village at the time when the mission existed. It is not by chance that the site is named "The one-eyed woman". It was in memory of a woman who left her mark on her contemporaries, the French as well as the Amerindians.

Charles Beaudry

