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Wooden sticks at a sacred lake: This weekend, a lacrosse homecoming of great meaning

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Wooden lacrosse sticks, with a traditional ball, made by Onondaga craftsman Al Jacques. (*John Berry | The Post-Standard*)

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on September 27, 2013 at 3:40 PM, updated September 27, 2013 at 10:09 PM

Randy Hall found his lacrosse stick in a Syracuse thrift store. There were three of them, all wooden, thrown onto a shelf. Hall picked one up. He could tell by the craftsmanship that it probably dated from the 1940s. He rolled it in around his hands, then checked on the price.

Three dollars.

Hall bought all three. One is now his favorite stick.

"When I saw them," he said, "I thought: 'I have to rescue them.'"

Hall was the catalyst for this weekend's **Haudenosaunee Wooden Stick Lacrosse Expo** at Onondaga Lake Park. He is a Mohawk who lives at the Onondaga Nation, and he plays in Masters competition "Old Sticks" games among the Six Nations. After a game last year at the Cattaraugus territory, some of the Senecas handed him the ball.

"They asked me if I could pass along the ball to the central fire," Hall said, speaking of the Onondagas, who serve as traditional "firekeepers" for the Six Nations; in essence, their territory is the capital. Hall brought the ball to Phil Arnold, director of the **new Ska-nonh, or Great Law of Peace Center** at Onondaga Lake Park.

Together, they decided to return the game this weekend to its sacred roots:

Using wooden sticks, **teams from the Six Nations will be playing at the lake.**

That shoreline, for their people, is equivalent to a native Jerusalem. It is where they believe their Peacekeeper called together warring nations. It is where they believe he convinced longtime enemies to bury their weapons beneath a tree of peace. It is the birthplace for the ideals at the center of their culture.

During that same epic gathering, Arnold said, the people of the longhouse honored their Creator with a game of lacrosse.

As they played, they carried wooden sticks.

"It's important," Hall said, "that we keep bringing that game to our young people."

So what is **happening on Saturday and Sunday** takes on powerful overtones. There is hope for the recovery of the lake. Bald eagles - great birds believed to be messengers to the Creator - **have returned to the shoreline**, especially in the winter.

The games "will be a way of giving thanks to the lake, and trying to give it strength with all our contributions," Hall said.

There will be legendary stickmakers in attendance, such as Alf Jacques of Onondaga. Many native leaders will take part, as will such wooden stick authorities as **Onondaga faithkeeper Oren Lyons and his old friend, Roy Simmons Jr.**, groundbreaking coach at Syracuse University - who can recall when his father's SU teams used wooden sticks, made by native craftsmen.

As for Hall, he'll be using the stick from the thrift store. Whether the stick comes straight from a tree or is discovered on a shelf, his people believe you don't find the right stick.

It finds you.

"When I saw it," Hall said, "I told it, 'I'll bring you home, and bring you back to life.'"

- **Sean Kirst**

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Randy Hall, in a 2005 "Old Sticks" lacrosse game: Bringing wooden sticks back to a sacred lake.

John Berry | The Post-Standard