

# No temples, no steeples, sacred all the same: The Six Nations, and the meaning of Onondaga Lake



Onondaga faithkeeper Oren Lyons and tadadaho Sid Hill (center) lead a moment of Thanksgiving Friday morning at Onondaga Lake, part of a nationwide celebration of sacred native places. (Sean Kirst | [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com))

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on June 20, 2015 at 8:46 AM, updated June 20, 2015 at 9:43 AM

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Clay and Kroy Arnold, twin brothers who play for [Onondaga Community College's national championship men's lacrosse team](#), drove Thursday night to see a Fall Out Boy concert at Darien Lake, near Buffalo, then hustled home and pulled themselves out of bed early Friday so they could hurry to Onondaga Lake.

Their mother is [Sandra Bigtree](#), of Mohawk lineage. Their dad is Phil Arnold, director of the new Skä•noñh, or [Great Law of Peace Center](#), by the lake.

The twins have grown up steeped in the heritage that made the lake part of Friday's [nationwide observance of places sacred to native peoples](#), an observance coordinated by the Morningstar Institute of Washington D.C.

"When you come here," Clay said, "there's [a power to the lake](#)."

"You feel the history, the presence," Kroy said.

As joggers and bicyclists used a nearby trail, a circle of people listened while [Sid Hill, tadadaho of the Six Nations](#), offered a Thanksgiving address just outside the Salt Museum, before Onondaga [faithkeeper Oren Lyons](#) spoke of his perspective on the lake - and the world around him - based on his 84 years.



Sid Hill, tadadaho of the Six Nations, at Onondaga

Lake: In a sense, a Jerusalem for native people. *Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com*

Afterward, Hill stood near the water and said he still is overwhelmed, sometimes, by the enormity of the position he holds. **The lake, for the Six Nations, is akin to their Jerusalem**: It is where they believe their Peacekeeper arrived, in a stone canoe, and urged five warring nations to bury their weapons beneath a tree of peace.

Part of the challenge was convincing a fierce Onondaga leader - Tadadaho - to embrace an end of war.

Generations later, his name remains attached to a singular role, assigned in the longhouse, an honor that demands assuming "the good mind."

Hill holds that position today, as **Leon Shenandoah did before him**. "It was decided here that peace would happen," Hill said, looking at the waters of the lake, tossing and uneasy on a cool June morning.

The meaning of the place, he said, is hard to put into words:

"We don't build temples. We don't build structures. We have what was given to us."

For almost two centuries, Hill said, the growth of Syracuse caused a "disconnection" between the Onondagas and the lake at the heart of their longhouse beliefs, a lake that symbolizes the primacy of water. Shoreline

industries dumped poisons into it. The city and other communities used it as an open sewer.

It has only been in the last 10 or 20 years that serious remediation has gotten underway, remediation [the Onondagas say is not yet close to enough](#).

They contend construction of a new lakefront amphitheater - steel frame visible Friday on the shoreline opposite Onondaga Park - [is premature](#). They specifically object to scientific arguments that putting a "cap" over toxic waste is adequate, a choice Onondaga leaders say only postpones inevitable leaks. The question to ask, Hill insists: What's best for our children, and their children?

"When you do it that way," he said, "the answers aren't so hard."

As for Lyons, he spoke to his listeners about water, and how scarce it is becoming in many parts of the nation, and how precious a gift we have in our lakes, rivers and green hills - even if we too often fail to see it. He talked for a while, words often lost amid the wind or lapping waters or birds crying in the air. Sometimes it was difficult to tell if the sound you heard was the soft voice of the Onondaga elder, or the shifting of the lake.

-- [Sean Kirst](#)