

## Transitioning Traditions: Rectifying an Ontario Camp's Indian Council Ring

By Taylor Wilkes

*Shh, no talking. No giggling. Just stay quiet and keep walking forwards in the long line of pairs crossing the bridge and heading up the hill towards the ring. It feels weird to be on your best behaviour after being a wild-child all month at camp; when you're young, formality makes it seem like a very long walk. The path narrows near the entrance and the line becomes single file as you pass by painted horses with barefoot riders under a fern archway held up by fire-dancers patiently anticipating the start of their performance.*

*Set back in the forest, this gathering space is encircled by vertical logs with horizontal ones surrounding the central fire. The space is strangely commanding—it instantly grabs your attention and triggers your curiosity. You've never been in a place quite like this before.*

*Chatter arises as 400 campers settle into their seats, but an immediate hush signals the Chief's presence at the entrance and the beginning of this month's Council Ring. Everyone rises.*

*The Council surges with enthusiastic sounds as campers participate in the challenges, games and performances, showing off newfound bravery and skills. Your adrenaline rises and falls throughout the event, influenced by the energy in the crowd until, at last, the Chief's hands rise and the crowd quiets down. The evening culminates in a theatrical telling of *Hiawatha's Departure*—an age-old story told for decades for the moral it reveals. You sit with your friends, quietly enraptured by the performance.*

Council Ring has always been a very special event, remembered fondly by generations of campers. Taylor Statten Camps (TSC) are not the only camps to cherish such an activity. Across Canada there are dozens of camps that have supported "Indian" assemblies in the past, but a select few still do. Most organizations abandoned them during the 1960s or changed focus to themes that do not risk racist interpretation (Wall, 2005). This trend outlines the struggle camps have faced to appropriately represent the culture

of the First Nations at events—a struggle or, better yet, a challenge we at TSC have just begun to accept. As a long-term camper and senior staff member last summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in reviving the program and observe the progress and obstacles that evolved. The founder of TSC, Taylor Statten I, was a highly respected man who valued the role outdoor education plays in child development. Nicknamed "Chief" by Ernest Thomas Seton in 1922, he wove his deep respect for First Nations philosophies into the foundation of his camp program with Native-led workshops, excursions and artwork. He saw capacity within Indigenous culture to captivate campers' attentions and promote confidence and good character. The ultimate representation of this idea is the Indian Lore Program currently known as Council Ring (Eastaugh).

Over 90 years, the small, weekly, age-targeted gatherings amalgamated into a more formal, monthly ceremony. As First Nations participation at camp decreased, heightened expectations were placed upon the director to conduct the "Indian" event. In the late 1970s there was a brief attempt to reform the program by eliminating some of the "Indian" costumes. It was a response to a First Nations staff member who criticized Council Ring, stating it made her sick "having to watch you people make fun of my people." After receiving pressure from other campers and many alumni to uphold a long-standing TSC tradition, the event quickly returned to its original form. Regardless of how harmless the founding intentions were, this cultural polarization and the depiction of Indigenous culture as the "other" is one of the reasons why the traditional Council Ring is simply unacceptable.

Recently there have been very positive signs of change. In the past three years, new directors have respected the resurgence of Indigenous culture Canada is currently experiencing and have recognized the need

for improvement. They have reintroduced First Nations influence at camp, inviting different people to lead storytelling and campcraft workshops. A director, Jay Kennedy, has taken initiative to become better educated for his role as Chief during Council Ring. And most importantly, fully supported by Jackie Pye and Andrew Reesor, the directing team has admitted their need for help and asked Jim Adams, a First Nations educator from Toronto, to help make the ritual more culturally appropriate. In two years, the camp has made a lot of progress.

During the first meeting, Jay described the difference between the old and new councils, highlighting the questionable or offensive elements that had been removed. Jim's response was one of surprising recognition and support for the advances that had been made in such a short time frame. His positive feedback was encouraging.

Jim's influence has also improved the director's ability and willingness to acknowledge difficult questions. *Why is it bad to use a pipe as a prop? How can it be offensive that we honour the culture? Why shouldn't we wear headdresses?* Jim very clearly explained that items such as headdresses, pipes and drums have traditionally been deeply sacred components of Indigenous ceremonies, so their use as props by people unaware of their purpose is very disrespectful. Understanding this and being able to explain it to the TSC community should enable the directors to overcome the pressures that instigated the 1970s reform and stand by their position.

The most prominent and exciting success so far was this year's ceremony for retiring the headdresses. Made by Taylor Statten II and worn only by senior staff and directors, the headdresses are of historical significance. Eliminating their use has been repeatedly rejected until this year when Jim helped develop an appropriate method for retirement.

It was exciting to observe the process Jim went through to identify the correct ceremony. He primarily listened—listened in ways most people are not aware of.

After visiting the ring, he reiterated the overwhelming positive energy he felt and support he heard from spirits excited about the changes being made. He listened to what Jay and I had to say and processed our intentions, listening for advice. Three weeks later he returned to explain the ceremony that had been revealed to him and prepared the staff to conduct it.

On the day of the ceremony, Jim explained to the campers what would happen that night at Council Ring and why it was important. Tobacco bundles lined the perimeter of the ring, and smudging was available for those who wished it. The feeling of acceptance within the ring transformed into curiosity when Jim began the ceremony in song. He acknowledged the role the headdresses had played in our camp's history and the fact that despite being created with good intention, we were recognizing their use was no longer appropriate. To honour this, the senior staff wore the headdresses for the last time, walking around the fire to the sound of Jim's drum.

The ceremony was honoured by the spirits too. Almost immediately as Jim began speaking, it started to rain. Water, the most fundamental, sacred element in life, is known for its power to cleanse and rejuvenate. While we encircled the fire, it poured down from the sky, cleansing the headdresses, Council Ring and all its participants.

Interesting questions evolved during the process that challenged the very premise of the project.

*What is appropriate and how do we incorporate it?* By watching Jackie and Jay struggle to balance appropriateness with excitement, I realized how hard it is to control the pendulum that swings between education and entertainment. A certain level of entertainment is needed to captivate a youthful audience, while educational explanations make the event more appropriate. In lengthening the program and expanding on topics, many people reported decreased attention and intrigue.

*How can we keep the activity exciting and fun, yet still culturally appropriate?* The event could grow to emphasize outdoor skills or voyageur history over its First Nations theme, but the camp is still undecided as to what direction it will take.

*How do we collaborate?* It was very interesting to observe Jim and Jay's conversations as they tried to communicate from different world views. Jay asked questions hoping for advice and direction from Jim. In response, Jim shared experiences, traditions and stories that combined into a holistic idea for Jay to interpret however he saw fit. Brief silence always followed these cross-cultural responses, as Jim wondered whether his explanation was sufficient, and Jay wondered where to find his answers within it. Collaboration for Jay meant learning to bend his linear, westernized framework of thinking to include the Indigenous cyclical nature and holistic thought.

Regardless of their differing perspectives, there was a constant and obvious respect between these men. I think they are wise. If Canada is in the process of decolonizing and "decolonization" means working towards a more integrated, respectful relationship, then learning how to collaborate and maintain a relationship makes them progressive and resilient.

*What if we don't want it to change?* These efforts did not escape criticism or opposition. The social pressure from alumni and returning staff is just as strong as it was in the 1970s, perhaps even stronger with an added forty years of appeasement. Their power manifested this year with the decision to exclude four headdresses from retirement so they could be worn in Council Rings during September alumni camp.

This is to be expected. Change is never well received. I have been told staff presented mutinous acts and obscene gestures the year smoking was banned. They wanted to preserve their favorite hangouts—including the "butt-hut"—that had created so many of their memories. However, just as discontinuing smoking privileges

keeps the camp up to date with evolving health standards, discontinuing culturally inappropriate props keeps the camp up to date with evolving cultural standards.

The directors understand something is lost when traditions change and that this tradition has been perpetuated by generations of returning campers with high expectations. That is why the headdress retirement was recognized with such a well-prepared ceremony. The camp also realizes older generations have perspectives based on older beliefs. However, the directors are not trying to eradicate Council Ring's respect for "Indian Lore"; they are ensuring it is respected in a manner appropriate for today.

As with any paradigm shift, there will always be the last individuals to accept the reasons behind change. However, with time and clear communication, the myths and fallacies of our old-time traditions are transforming into an improved, New Age program.

### **Does any of this really make a difference for decolonization?**

The big question is, can we keep the event appropriate and inoffensive to Indigenous culture while maintaining such a powerful forum for outdoor education? One could argue that it is almost more powerful than other forums because of its placement within the camp setting.

Anyone that has ever been to camp can understand that camp is a magical place, and special events at magical places leave big impressions on children. I, for one, was a child so intrigued by Council Ring's expression of Indigenous culture that it sparked my curiosity to study Indigenous Environmental Studies at Trent University as an adult. Outside my experiences at camp, I had no other opportunity to get a similar exposure to Indigenous spirituality. Therefore, I am grateful for the opportunity to have witnessed the old tradition, however inappropriate it may have been.

As a staff member with this point of view, I value the role Council Ring plays in educating our campers about another culture, and hope the camp continues working hard to reform the ceremony so that it can maintain its cultural component. There must be a way to balance Taylor Statten's original objectives for displaying his awe and respect for First Nations culture with a modern context of their role as *part* of Canadian society.

Being aware of Indigenous culture is key to understanding what it means to be Canadian and why we need to work towards a more integrated, respectful relationship. If Council Rings at camps across the country can express this message in an appropriate, memorable and exciting fashion, then the answer is yes. It does make a difference. Cumulatively, they could become a useful

tool for decolonizing Canada's next generation.

### References

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