

Rebuilding History: Tale of an Indian

The Impact of Restoring the Skowhegan Indian

By Cory King

Recently, there has been a lot of positive development around the restoration of the Skowhegan Indian statue. An active committee has finally been established and funding is being acquired through grants, family foundations, donations, support of local businesses, taxpayer requests and other sources as well. As Executive Director of the Skowhegan Area Chamber, I have been involved with the Skowhegan Indian Restoration Project



for the past seven years. In my second week on the job in 2007, I met contractor Steve Dionne and I saw his passion for this project, and I knew it was something I wanted to get accomplished too. I am so thrilled by the recent developments in the restoration of the project, as we stand now closer than ever to making this restoration happen.

An interesting change in conversation is beginning to happen though. For years I have been answering the 'who-what-when-where-how' questions on the Indian. Who is rebuilding it? (Steve Dionne) When will it happen? (As soon as we secure funding) How will they do it? (Carefully; also on staging) Where will it be? (The same location- see below for details). However, the shift in conversation now has to do with 'why'. Many people are aware of the Indian, but why is it important that we restore this piece? Many townspeople have asked that question in the last few months, so I wanted to give all of you some reasons why we at the SACC find it so important.

The Indian is record holder, and people like seeing records. Much like a top-ten list, people like seeing the best or to say they have seen the biggest 'this' or the largest 'that'. Well the Skowhegan Indian is the largest statue of a wooden Indian sculpture in the world. Many people say it's the biggest wooden

Indian, but it is not. The Indian is actually a metal frame from which wood hangs forming the image of an Indian, rather than a piece of wood that the Indian was carved from. This is one of the reasons it is difficult to move because if tilted back to be loaded on a truck, or even from the vibration of moving it, more pieces of the Indian would fall off and be damaged. If more pieces were damaged or fell off there would not be enough of the statue left to rehab it, and this piece of history would be lost. As far as the height goes though when you take all of the Indian statues in the world (which includes carved statues as well as fiberglass Indians and other material Indians) the 69-foot Skowhegan Indian (not including its 20 foot concrete base) is the largest in the world- and that's pretty cool. So, very simply we do, in fact, have the largest Indian in the world.

The Indian is an important piece of art, and fans of the artwork created by Bernard Langlais will come and see it. Langlais was a brilliant wood worker who lived in Cushing, Maine and who was commissioned to build the Indian in 1966. It took three years to complete and he placed it where it is today in June of 1969. His placing of the piece in the location that it currently resides at, is another major piece to why the Indian is located where it is. Of his many pieces this is one of the few that still remains where he put it, which is very important to art investors, foundations and art historians. Langlais was a student of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and is one of their famous alumni- the Indian remains one of his most famous pieces, if not the most famous. There are students who study his work and his pieces and others in the arts community that cherish his work as well. In fact Colby College in Waterville just received over 3,000 Langlais pieces from his estate and there is going to be a massive exhibit in the summer of 2014. That just happens to be the same time frame that we will be rebuilding his Indian monument once we secure funding. How many people do you think will take the drive up Route 201 or Route 104 to come see the Indian, the artist's most famous piece? This restoration will drive tourism and acclaim.

The Indian is historic, and it speaks as much about our past as it does about our present. The statue was originally commissioned for as part of Maine's 150th celebration of

statehood. The statue was dedicated to the Maine Indians who resided in this region and who were "the first people to use these lands in peaceful ways". That speaks to the first recorded history of this region when Passamquoddy Indians and other tribes lived in this area. Skowhegan got its name because it means "A Place to Watch". This definition has been debated for years, but many believe 'a place to watch' was selected because in the very literal sense that is what Skowhegan was. Along the Kennebec River in Skowhegan the river bends in such a way that it makes an optimal lookout point for things coming up and down river. With that the islands in Skowhegan became unique watching areas for travelers on the river. The Indians would settle near the rivers for the fresh water and fishing near the falls, and later farmers would use this land to grow fresh vegetables and fruit. Years later the lumber industry used the river to send logs downstream to the mills and this entire community was built because of the Indians first utilizing this land, and the Kennebec.

Today we find ourselves with a thriving co-op of farmers using the land in this area to build one of the biggest organic networks in the state. We have the grist mill which is milling grain, just a literal stone's throw away from the Indian. The Farmer's market sets up their twice a week in the summer to sell their fresh goods, and the organic culture continues on in our region. Add to that the Run of River project and the increased awareness of how the Kennebec will help a new generation of citizens and businesses, and we can rightly say that Indian and its history represents us as much of who we are today as it did decades ago.

The Indian is a unique, one-of-a-kind monument, and that is a very underrated quality. In a world that, at times, can look extremely similar, the Indian sticks out. There are companies that strive to have each location of their store, across the country, look identical. They decorate them the same, give the employees the same dress code or uniform and use the same advertising. That makes their brand efficient, and recognizable- but is it memorable? We all have a story about the first time we saw the Indian. Some people saw it when it rolled into town. Some people remember their parents pulling off the road in Skowhegan to take their picture in front of it.

Generations of families have passed down the Indian idea to their children and grandchildren, telling them to stop and see it on the way to or through Skowhegan. Locals used to bring their visiting guests down to see it. That is special.

There are many highway exits that lead to towns and places that don't have anything unique. There are towns that have a few stores and shops, and some gas stations and baseball fields- but nothing truly special. Some towns are only important as bedroom communities to other larger places- so their entire identity is based on their physical proximity to something else that is truly great or unique, with no identity of their own.

Well, Skowhegan doesn't have that problem. We've got unique covered. We have a community that has come together to build on its successes and is taking on new challenges every day. We have a growing business sector and more visitors coming every year for our fair, our Kneading Conference, our RiverFest or just to buy their favorite New Balance shoes direct. We have a diverse, organic network of farmers that continues to grow and expand. We have access to the arts and outdoor recreation that other places would love to have. We are truly 'A Place to Watch'. As a matter of fact, we are so proud with how it's going, that we put a symbol of the pride we have for this community smack dab in the middle of town. It speaks to the history, culture and perseverance of our region. As matter of fact we are going to be restoring it next summer. It's this magnificent statue of a wooden Indian that is almost 90 feet high built by Bernard Langlais, a significant local Maine artist. You should really stop by some time next summer and check it out- and bring your kids. We would love to show you around town.