



In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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Episode 12: Elizabeth Barrett and Shahwahnegezhik / Henry Bird Steinhauer: A Gifted Ontario School Teacher and the Steinhauer Family

“Shahwahnegezhik,” later known in English as Rev. Henry B. Steinhauer, was born at the Narrows (today’s Orillia, Ontario) around 1820. As Shahwahnegezhik’s father had died, his mother raised him. His grandfather, whose memory he cherished, taught him about his religion. Once he recalled how his grandfather used to call the family together, “at certain seasons of the year, previous to his feasts which he had annually made to the four gods of the four winds.” He wanted “to impart unto them the knowledge he had.” As Isaac Mabindisa, a South African historian who completed his Ph.D. thesis on the Indigenous Methodist minister, has written: “Steinhauer is a very interesting historical subject because he was socialized to think and act like a Western Christian gentleman after he had spent his early youth in a traditional Ojibwa culture.” Throughout his adult life Henry Steinhauer served as a valued bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. His two sons Egerton and Robert Steinhauer, also ordained Methodist/United Church ministers, continued their father’s work into the early twentieth century. Elizabeth Barrett, a dedicated

Ontario school teacher, made an important contribution to their education in their teenage years.

After the end of the War of 1812 non-Indigenous settlement in what is now known as southern Ontario inched northward from York (in 1834 renamed Toronto) to Newmarket, and to Holland Landing, the northern terminus of Yonge Street. Both Indigenous and British Canadian Methodist church workers visited Lake Simcoe in the summer of 1826. By the fall of 1827, they had converted 100 Lake Simcoe Anishinaabeg. Within a year the total number of Ojibwe Methodists rose to 400 out of a total population of 515. The hymn singing, “so unlike the songs he had been in the habit of hearing,” attracted Shahwahnegezhik to the huge Methodist open-air meeting at Holland Landing south of Lake Simcoe. The Christian message of love and concern for others made a deep impression on his mother, who became known in English as Hannah Bird. The young Ojibwe was one of the 130 Lake Simcoe Ojibwe baptized at the huge camp meeting led by Peter Jones and William Case, the Methodist missionary superintendent, in mid-June 1828.

Rev. Case later recorded that Shahwahnegezhik, then about ten years old, with “the consent of his widowed mother,” accepted his invitation to attend the Methodist mission school on Grape Island near Belleville, on the northeastern shore of Lake Ontario. Elizabeth Barrett, a Methodist mission teacher who knew the Steinhauer family well in mid-1870s, wrote in verse a passage that captures the moment.

Said he, “My friend if you will lend
Your child to me for life’s short day,
I’ll treat as one that’s my own son,
And train him in the white man’s way.”

Shahwahnegezhik adapted to his new environment, the complete antithesis of his Ojibwe or Anishinaabe upbringing. A trumpet

sounded at 5 a.m. on a winter morning, and 4 a.m. in the summer. At 6:30 a.m. in the summer and 7:30 a.m. in the winter, the children proceeded through their tightly organized routine of meals at specific hours, religious and academic training, and daily physical labour. At 9 p.m. the horn sounded as a signal to prepare for rest. On the Sabbath, worship and religious exercises took up the whole day. Two Methodist teachers, one for the girls and one for the boys, taught the students. Years later Henry recalled that William Case “has been to me better than my own father for upwards of 12 years [and] cherished me under his roof as his own son.”

In spring 1829 a great adventure began. Rev. Case took Shahwahnegezhik and four other schoolboys, aged eight to 12, on a three-month fund-raising tour of towns and cities in the Eastern United States. Two teenaged schoolgirls from the Grape Island mission, ages 13 and 14, joined them. The students performed as a choral singing group in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) and in English. Shahwahnegezhik attracted particular attention in New York City on account of his fine, remarkably musical voice. With the other boys he spoke and sang in Philadelphia, their next stop. There he received a new family name. Following the missionaries’ established custom, a major benefactor could give an English name to the child whose studies they financially supported. A Philadelphian offered to pay for the education of 12-year-old Shahwahnegezhik. While in the city, John Neagle, a well-known American artist, painted the boy’s portrait. Shortly after the sitting Shahwahnegezhik took the name proposed by his American sponsor, Henry Steinhauer.

The young Ojibwe’s training in reading, writing, arithmetic, and grammar was supplemented by practical instruction in gardening, carpentry, and construction. Case took great pride in Henry who proved such an excellent student. After he completed mission school, they sent him to study for one year at Cazenovia Seminary,

a Methodist academy or high school in New York State, near Syracuse. Case had a dream that “the most promising Boys should be put to higher Schools.” The Indigenous Methodists needed “translators, teachers of Schools, Interpreters, and Ministry.” As an advanced student Henry received instruction in Latin and Greek as well as in the regular subjects.

Back in southern Ontario Henry obtained further schooling, including several terms at the Methodist college soon to be called Victoria College, now known as Victoria University in the University of Toronto. Egerton Ryerson, the young Methodist minister, later renowned as the founder of Ontario’s public school system, took a special interest in his college work (see Episode 7). Thirty years later Henry and his wife Jessie Mamanuwartum named in his honour one of their sons, Egerton Ryerson Steinhauer. After his college training, so rare for an Indigenous person at that time, Henry worked, as William Case had hoped, as a valued teacher, translator, and interpreter. Then, in his mid-30s, he became an ordained Methodist minister, selected for missionary outreach service in the North-West, in what today is Alberta.

Shortly after Henry Steinhauer’s ordination, and service in mission stations in what is now northern Manitoba, he and Jessie established a mission among the Woods and Plains Cree, 200 kilometres northeast of Edmonton. In 1857, he located his mission at White Fish Lake in the wooded parklands north of the Saskatchewan River. This was just beyond the reach of Blackfoot raiders, but close to the northern border of the prairie, and the still abundant buffalo herds. The soil was suitable for farming, and the lake contained an abundance of fish. Here Egerton Ryerson Steinhauer was born in 1859. His brother Robert followed in 1861.

Henry Steinhauer knew that Canadian settlement would soon follow in the North-West and transform the majority Indigenous population into a minority, just as had occurred in southern Ontario. He belonged to a generation of Anishinaabe or Ojibwe

Methodists from southern Ontario, inspired by Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) and Shawundais (John Sunday), who believed that as Christian farmers the First Nations could both survive and prosper amidst a growing non-Indigenous community. Several thousand kilometres away from his Ontario homeland, within just a decade and a half, his mission prospered. As Melvin Steinhauer wrote in *Shawahnekizek* (page 41), his 2015 biography of his great-grandfather, “he pointed out similarities between Cree religious beliefs and Christianity,” and did not want to destroy all their traditional religious beliefs. The Rev. George Munro Grant who visited the community in the early 1870s commented on Henry Steinhauer’s success. In his travelogue *Ocean to Ocean* (1873), the Canadian Presbyterian minister noted the White Fish Christians valued their school highly. “They are beginning to settle down to steady farming-work too, several families not going to the plains now, but raising wheat, barley and potatoes instead.”

The Indigenous Methodist minister had the full support of White Fish Lake’s Chief Pakan, known in English as James Seenum, a staunch defender of Indigenous rights. The devoted Christian, in the days of the Plains buffalo hunt, carried with his White Fish Lake hunting group, a large syllabic bible. The respected Cree chief endorsed his minister’s message of the importance of good schools, economic development, securing a title to their lands, and the importance of self-government. Henry B. Steinhauer was a valuable advisor to Chief Pakan at the time of the signing of Treaty Six in 1876, in what is now central Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Into this largely self-sufficient Cree settlement stepped an outsider, a talented teacher named Elizabeth Barrett who contributed greatly to its well-being. She reported how well the community had combined farming with their traditional diet. They produced potatoes, turnips, and barley, as well as their own butter. A few food items were imported: a little flour, sugar and spice, tea, and salt. The rest of their food was standard country fare: buffalo and

moose meat, venison and bear. Wild fowl and eggs, in the proper season, were plentiful. Another staple was whitefish. The very motivated British Canadian schoolteacher who came from Orono, a small farming community northeast of Toronto, added a great deal to the community. She came west in her early 30s, an arduous journey as the transcontinental railway only followed a decade later. A spirit of adventure and a deep Christian commitment brought her away from her early work in two southern Ontario reserve communities. Her younger sister, Charlotte or Lottie Barrett, a Methodist missionary teacher in Ontario, had set the family standard for bible study. Elizabeth once recalled that Lottie had read though the entire Old and New Testament, cover to cover, 15 times.

Henry knew the limitations of non-Indigenous church workers. As he wrote in the mid-1870s, “A foreigner, either as a Missionary or otherwise, will never take so well with the natives of this country, let him be ever so good and kind to them; there is always a distrust on the part of a native to the foreigner, from the fact that the native has been so long down-trodden by the white man.” Yet Henry greatly valued this first-rate non-Indigenous teacher, who taught at the White Fish mission from 1875 to 1877. In the settlement she lived with the Steinhauers and their large family of seven girls and five boys. At home Henry and Jessie encouraged a strong sense of spirituality by holding family devotions every morning and evening. The Ontario schoolteacher wrote in the *Missionary Notices of the Methodist Church* in April 1876: “Mr. Steinhauer’s is, indeed, an amiable and God-fearing family. I never saw more dutiful and respectful sons and daughters.”

An insightful comment about language appears in one of her letters from the mission. On 17 December 1875 she wrote: “The people love and cling to their mother tongue and are not likely to soon permit the English to take its place. Several who understand English will not speak a word of it, if they can possibly avoid

doing so; while on the other hand, they are perfectly delighted to hear me speaking Cree.” The children had real challenges with the pronunciation of English as there were, in her words, “elementary sounds and combinations of the same, found in the English language, but which are entirely absent from the Cree.” The conscientious young woman applied herself and in due course made excellent progress in her Cree studies. In her second year, she began to teach her students to read in Cree. On 27 April 1876 she wrote the Methodist Missionary Society in Toronto: “For a month past I have been teaching them to read Cree, and some are making rapid progress. Instead of a hindrance I find it a great help in their acquiring English. I am also gaining ground much faster myself since being able to read it. We read the Bible and Catechism in Cree and English every day.”

At the mission school Elizabeth had a large class. In addition to her ordinary workload, she took a special interest in Robert and his older brother Egerton, both gifted students who she prepared for college in Ontario. The Methodist teacher enjoyed the support of the community. In 1886 Chief Pakan recalled the Ontario woman’s two years at White Fish nearly a decade earlier: “We often talk about her in our camps and about the good she did for us. Our children loved her for all the acts of kindness she did for them, and our women looked upon her with affection.” What a tribute to Elizabeth.

In the summer of 1879, the Steinhauer brothers arrived in Cobourg, Ontario, a town of nearly 5,000 immediately to the east of Toronto. Egerton, then 21 years old, and brother Robert, 19, had ridden by horseback from White Fish Lake to the railhead near Winnipeg; then they travelled by train through the United States to Ontario. In Cobourg, they entered Cobourg Collegiate Institute, in preparation for Victoria University.

Shortly after Egerton’s and Robert’s departure, the White Fish Cree community established a satellite community at neighbouring

Good Fish Lake, just ten or so kilometres away. Older brother Egerton was now badly needed at home. On receiving his father's request to establish a school at Goodfish, duty called, and Egerton returned home. But Robert remained, and after completing his studies at the Collegiate entered Victoria University in 1883. In sports, the tall 6' Cree excelled as a football player and runner. He was also as a gifted singer, with a deep bass voice. He served as leader of the Glee Club in 1886/87. Very popular amongst his fellow students, his class elected him "Senior Stick," or class president, at the end of third year in 1886.

In August and September 1886 Robert accompanied Rev. John McDougall and the Cree chiefs Pakan and Samson, and the Stoney chief Jonas, all of whom were loyal to the Canadian government in the North-West Rebellion of 1885, on a tour of Ontario towns and cities, as well as Montreal. A reporter in Peterborough, Ontario, summarized Robert's remarks to his large audience in that city. The Cree university student defended the First Nations: "The Indians, he said, have a great respect for God, and do not take His name in vain, as he heard the whites do."

As his father had done before his death in 1884, Robert championed First Nations rights. In spring 1886 the Cree undergraduate wrote an article for *Acta Victoriana*, the college magazine. In his essay, "The Indian Question," he directly addressed the Western First Nations' disappointments. "Ever since the treaties were signed, there has been much discontent, and complaints made by him [the Indian]. He asks those who have taken the ownership of his country to give him his rights, at least the fulfilment of the promises made to him." They had wanted assistance, but in the place of competent government intermediaries they selected agents, "because they happen to be friends and right-hand supporters of the Government in power; men whose knowledge of what they were intended to teach was so limited that they were rejected in some places." Ottawa had placed

“low and unprincipled characters” in authority over them. (Thirty-five years later Robert would help and act as an interpreter in Alberta for the new pan-Indian political organization, the League of Indians of Canada, established by the Mohawk Fred Loft at the end of the First World War. See Episode 16.)

In 1887 Robert became the first Status Indian in what is now Alberta to obtain a university degree. Shortly after his return from Cobourg he married Charlotte Pruden, a woman of First Nations and English heritage, whose father had worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company at Lac La Biche. They had a family of six daughters and four boys. (I had the good fortune to meet his youngest daughter Ruby Erasmus, several times in the late 1990s.) Robert served at Saddle Lake, forty kilometres or so south of White Fish Lake, from 1887 to 1890. After the signing of Treaty Six in 1876 a group of people from White Fish Lake relocated to Saddle Lake in search of better farmland. Cree from other neighbouring communities also selected land at Saddle Lake. Robert returned as the Methodist missionary to White Fish Lake from 1890 to 1893, and then served at the Red Deer Industrial School in 1894. He was with the Stoney Nakoda at Morley from 1895 to 1903, back to his home community White Fish Lake from 1903 to 1911, and with the Cree at Hobbema (Battle River) from 1911 to 1919. He was posted at Saddle Lake, where he tried several times to retire — unsuccessfully, as his services were so badly needed — from 1919 to his death in 1941.

Ralph Steinhauer, who later became the first Indigenous Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta (1974-1979), recalled his two missionary uncles in a talk to the Historical Society of Alberta at Edmonton in 1955. Fortunately, Alberta historian Hugh Dempsey (see Episode 15) attended and made notes on the address. Half a century later he shared them with me. Ralph Steinhauer warmly recalled his great-uncle Egerton, who he had known in the early 1930s. The older of the Steinhauers’ middle sons, also ordained in

the Methodist/United Church, served on reserves across Western Canada until he moved to Saddle Lake to help Robert at his mission. Ralph remembered that Egerton, then in his early 70s, was once a great athlete. The respected Cree minister encouraged the young people to participate in sports. He told them: “Never let yourself think that you are not as good as the white man.” Egerton also challenged them and planted seeds of ambition: “If your people don’t perk up and follow the white man’s way in business, you’ll find yourselves left out in the cold! Can’t you become doctors, lawyers, or businessmen?”

Egerton also revealed something of his inner self to his great-nephew. He stressed to him the amazing similarity between Christian teachings and Native beliefs. The two peoples shared similar spiritual concepts. Speaking of the Sun Dance he told Ralph: “There was a bit of torture there, but it was no worse than training for the commandos. They also had the ceremonial dances. There was a good deal of paganism, whooping and hollering but you know, I’m still an Indian. Actually I can’t say too much against it. There were some great prayers said—heartfelt and sincere. The Sun Dance was a form of worship.” Egerton saw no contradiction in the fact that he identified himself as both Cree and Christian.

Early in 1937 Robert obtained a very high honour from his church. The veteran Cree minister received a letter from Richard Davidson, Principal of Emmanuel College, Victoria University’s theology college. The Senate of Victoria University, to mark the college’s 100th anniversary, wanted to complete their centenary celebrations by offering him the degree of Doctor of Divinity. “For as your father was one of the first students a hundred years ago you will be one of the first graduates of the new century of Victoria’s life.” On the evening of 27 April in Toronto, the 76-year-old First Nations missionary received his D.D. from his alma mater, now affiliated with the University of Toronto. In the early 1890s the Methodist

church had relocated their college from Cobourg to Toronto. Robert became the first First Nations person in Canada to obtain an honorary Doctor of Divinity. Both Robert and Egerton Ryerson Steinhauer saw education as the key to freedom for the First Nations.

Instrumental in both Robert's and Egerton's success was the vital contribution a non-Indigenous Ontario teacher had made in their teenage years. The hillside cemetery overlooking the historic McDougall Memorial Church on the Stoney Nakoda territory west of Calgary contains a large grey headstone whose inscription reads: "Sacred to the memory of Elizabeth A. Barrett, for many years Indian Mission Teacher. Died at Morley Alberta Feb. 8, 1888." Upon arriving at White Fish Lake in 1875 Elizabeth Barrett had promised Rev. Steinhauer and his Cree wife Jessie Mamanuwartum that she would train both Egerton and Robert, "so that they can enter any high school or college in Canada." The devoted Methodist mission teacher fulfilled her promise.

A Short Note on Sources

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