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Preface

My family’s Delaware tribal history became official in 1626 with the “sale” of Manhattan Island. Many paintings exist of this moment. Tattooed “Indians” wearing deerskin robes, my forebears, meet with Dutch traders, who wear breeches and plumed hats. Peter Minuit presents guilders and trade goods as tribute to the Native leaders. In return the Dutch enjoy a trade alliance. From a European perspective this iconic moment transferred legal title of Manahatta, Island of Hills, and the Delawares left. Or did they? Delaware groups persisted through the resettlement of New York City by Dutch traders, the English, and then colonial Americans. Delawares continued to play major roles in the fur trade, the French and Indian Wars, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. When their political power finally diminished, most Delaware people went west along forced migration routes, while some populations stayed in the East. The major remaining clans are Wolf, Turkey, and Turtle. All of them adapt to many different conditions. All are survivors, like my family.

In the 1870s my grandfather’s Delaware parents relocated to the Kansas plains, far from Manhattan. Still, Grandfather lived with the consequences of transactions between Europeans and Delawares, as
do I. *Historic trauma* is the term that suggests long-lasting effects of grief through generations, and it frames my account. Restoring my family’s suppressed ethnic background adds a small part to the marginalized Delaware history.

I am among the uncounted numbers with “Indian heritage” who are doubly marginalized by misunderstandings of mainstream society and by federally enrolled tribal members who denigrate Natives without official recognition. Many United States Indigenous nations are fortunate to have a more continuous tradition, especially those whose members live in remote areas such as North Dakota and New Mexico. Delawares, in contrast, lived in Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania—centers of early European settlement. After several hundred years of resistance, from the 1500s to the mid-1700s, they were overwhelmed but not finally defeated.

Dozens of Delaware communities continue to exist from the Atlantic Ocean to Idaho and from Canada to the southern plains. Two federally recognized tribes are in Oklahoma and one in Wisconsin. State-recognized Delawares are in Delaware, New Jersey, and Ohio. Others meet regularly, including the Kansas Delaware Tribe of Indians near my home in Lawrence.

Twenty years ago, as an adult, I discovered my grandfather’s Delaware origins. Although Frank Bruner appeared to be Native, my parents never talked about this open secret, and his tribe was uncertain. When I was young, he and my grandmother kept apart from our family, even though they lived only a few miles away. As I grew to adulthood, I questioned this distancing. Now I recognize the workings of historic crosscurrents within my own family.

Grandfather’s life span, 1889–1963, is an era when lives of ordinary people, including Native individuals, were of less interest to those who recorded history. The nascent civil rights movement had not yet resulted in social and legal equities. Education of Indigenous Americans, overseen by the federal government, focused on assimilation and manual trades. As a workingman, my grandfather left behind no written records and only a few belongings. Among us descendants only brief stories survive. In this account I preserves as
much information about my grandfather as possible, from research and family stories. Grandfather Bruner lived a rich, even heroic life, despite prejudice, and I aspire to honor his legacy.

Family members who shared knowledge with me are my grandfather, Frank Lathrop Bruner Junior; mother, Dorothy (Bruner) Dotson; uncle, Robert Lathrop Bruner; father, William Francis Dotson; and sister, Mary (Dotson) Marchetti. Other family members who contribute are my sister, Jane (Dotson) Ciabattari, and brother, William David Dotson. Other sources are family members Theress (McCann) Bruner, Robin Bruner, Becky (Bruner) John, Barbara (Bruner) Johnson, and Gail (Bruner) Murrow. I appreciate the support of my husband, Thomas Pecore Weso, and his family, of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, especially Mary Walker Sanapaw.

Kimberly Blaeser has been a valued guide for this project and also Matthew Bokovoy. The anonymous readers provided invaluable suggestions for revision as well as project editor Joeth Zucco and copyeditor Elizabeth Gratch.

My writing draws on some oral traditions shared by descendants of the Fall Leaf, Journey Cake, and Segundin families. Janet Allen has been especially helpful and generous. Other sources are publicly shared historic Delaware tribal stories and historic sources. Some of the early commentators, such as Reverend Peter Jones, were Algonquin cultural brokers with blood ties—his mother was Mississauga Ojibwa. Reliable Native sources may have Anglicized names or not. I appreciate the inspiration of Clara Sue Kidwell, Ojibwa and Choctaw scholar, who first delineated for me how Native experiences are unique to United States history because of connection to the homeland, orally transmitted literary traditions, nation-to-nation status of tribal governments to the federal government, and identity of tribal communities. These issues are a critical baseline.

My appreciation to those who took time to read and comment on the manuscript, including Alice Azure, Kelly Barth, Mitchell Bush, Robert Day, Joseph Harrington, Susan Harris, DaMaris B. Hill,
and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg. Those who lent further support are Daniel Bentley, Cathryn (Miller) Colton, DeAnn DeRoin, Gretchen Eick, Heid Erdrich, Greg Field, Karen Highfill, Geary Hobson, Jennie James, Donald Knight, Stanley Lombardo, Judith Roitman, Linda Rodriguez, Siobhan Senier, Pamela Dawes Tambornino, and Diane Wille. Stephanie Fitzgerald and her scholarship are a continuing inspiration.

Gratitude to these individuals and many others who help me as I attempt to express personal, family, and tribal experience in the medium of language. All errors and misunderstandings in this account are my own.

Previous versions of some essays in this collection were published in the following:


“Delawares are like clouds,” says Brice Obermeyer. “They never get together.” He quotes an elder’s explanation of the Delaware diaspora, one of the longest of any United States tribal nation. Their first removals were in the 1600s and have never ended.

“Yes,” answers one of our group members. This is an annual meeting of the Kansas Delaware Tribe of Indians. She continues, “They may be separate, but they travel the same direction.” I laugh. The metaphor works perfectly to describe the stubborn individuality of my family members, especially my maternal grandfather, Frank Bruner. Some years ago I began a search for his Delaware past. I lived near my mother until her death at age eighty-seven, and besides her stories, she left a mound of invaluable documents and photographs.

This early summer morning the Kansas Delawares, related to the Lenape of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, meet at the Wyandotte County Museum, situated among rolling green hills—good farmland on former Delaware holdings. This spacious grasslands region is my lifelong home. Prairies have intense beauties: azure noon skies, fireplace ember sunsets, and an agate band of hazy western horizon where eternity is a real valence. Clouds, as they pass overhead,
A Twentieth-Century Native Man

come personal messengers with information about Rocky Mountain winds one day and Caribbean hurricanes the next. The speaker’s cloud metaphor is vivid.

I visited the Wyandotte museum, just west of Kansas City, once before, to research my Delaware grandfather’s life. He lived in the area during the early twentieth century, within a block of the original Delaware trading post. After the Ku Klux Klan invaded his hometown in central Kansas, his family moved into this haven. Kansas City’s community of mixed tribal descendants had welcomed my grandfather’s family a hundred years ago. Today, at this meeting, I want to express gratitude to their grandchildren.

My journey to this meeting began years ago, when a Wyandot student attended my class at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. Like the Delawares, the Wyandots settled in Kansas City during the nineteenth century, before their removal to Oklahoma. My student’s family remained in the city. This isolate group knows their Native roots and continues to practice their culture, almost invisible to their neighbors.

In my English composition class the Wyandot student worked hard and often wrote about tribal history. He described how Wyandots purchased land from the Delawares and stood with them throughout the turbulent skirmishes preceding the Civil War. His ancestor William Walker was provisional governor of Nebraska Territory and helped prevent the western spread of slavery in 1853. This student was among the first people to help me understand my family’s connection to larger historic events, including the Delaware migrations through Kansas. He opened my eyes to the cultural persistence of Native peoples into contemporary times. When I was a child, my parents had mentioned the “old country” as an abstract place like heaven, where the past was stored—Irish, English, and German grandparents alongside Native. In their view that history had ended. My Haskell student described a more vibrant history, one linking past to present. From his stories I learned how communities have living souls, as distinct as individuals. When they fracture, losses are real. When nurtured, they grow.
Discrimination against Native people has been so fierce that many people, like my family, suppressed their non-European ancestry as completely as possible. Some black Cherokees chose to identify with African Americans because it was easier. Dwane Lewis of Lawrence told me this and how his Cherokee freedmen family struggled to survive the Civil War and to establish themselves in a farm community that included Charles and Mary Langston, grandparents of Langston Hughes. They also shared Native ancestry.

Traditions do not disappear easily. Today, before the Kansas City meeting, a Kansas Delaware man purified everyone with sage smoke and prayers— in English but with the same intentions as expressed in the original language. After more than four hundred years of contact, smudging with sage smoke, or “smoking off,” endures as an aspect of spirituality. The Delaware practice includes smudging the bottoms of people’s feet as well as the rest of the body. Another tradition is hospitality. The spiritual leader included me, a stranger with no direct blood ties, without hesitation.

As the meeting begins, another guest, my husband, sits beside me. He is an enrolled member of a federally recognized group, the Menominee Nation of Wisconsin. Menominees, or Wild Rice People, are a related Algonquian-speaking nation. Next to him is the chief of this Kansas City group, Kameran Zeigler, who presides. All Kansas Delawares descend from families who did not make the final move from Kansas to Oklahoma in 1867. Each has solid documentation of ties to the Delaware Indian Tribe of Oklahoma. What they do not have is a million dollars to pay lawyers for a ten-year proceeding for legal recognition. My hosts at this meeting are as disenfranchised as my grandfather.

Now we sip coffee as Obermeyer, the visiting cultural director of the Oklahoma Delawares, continues with the day’s program. He researches both written records and spoken stories. As a community anthropologist, he understands how crisp paper with official seals can seem definitive yet create false authorities. Oral tradition can be unreliable factually, especially when the original Delaware displacements occurred centuries ago, or they can support archaeological
information. History is an imperfect construction, but it is essential to community identity.

First, the lecturer describes how the Algonquian language unites the Delaware bands with other groups such as the Powhatans of Virginia, Crees of Canada, and Ojibwa bands of northern states. Delawares were great traders and traveled on waterways and land trails. Today’s highways in their homeland often follow original Indigenous routes.

Obermeyer next presents what historians know about Delawares on the East Coast at the time of the Dutch. He explains how the earliest Delawares never had a central location because they dispersed among waterways in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. As he speaks, I think of my great-grandparents’ small house a few miles east of our meeting. A picture remains of my great-grandfather holding a bass from Jersey Creek. Rivers change names, sometimes only slightly, but always a river is nearby.

Next Obermeyer explains the liabilities of the independent but scattered organization of the Delawares. They never fit into European colonists’ patterns of governance. The Walking Purchase, a treaty
of 1737, excluded dozens of Delaware groups. The Delaware tribe came into existence only in the late eighteenth century in Ohio, under pressure from the United States Department of War. The United States forced creation of a governing body that resembled European models for negotiations. These treaties were primarily real estate transactions enacted by a few people. All the branches of Delawares cannot be reduced to a single group, under one leader, so these treaties disenfranchised Delaware communities.

The speaker’s slide changes to a migration map. Arrows flow from New Jersey westward through Ohio, where my grandfather’s
maternal relatives lived for a century, from the 1780s to the 1870s. Obermeyer says, “Everywhere Delawares lived during their removals, some stayed behind, like in Kansas City.” His articulation of this unwieldy history helps me feel more confident about my own research. The arrow continues into Indiana, then splits: one fork goes north, and the other turns south to Missouri, Kansas, and at last Oklahoma.

Obermeyer’s final map shows Kansas City watersheds with superimposed Delaware, Shawnee, and Wyandot reservations. “Do not be misled by these distinct boundaries,” he says. “These were refugee camps for many remnant groups: Peorias, Miamis, and Christian Chippewas—a band allied with Munsee Delawares. Some Delawares on the rolls were European-descended spouses. African Americans were community members as well.” We look around the room and see diversity. Kansas Delawares resemble my family, hues of the human rainbow.

Next he describes religious diversity, from adherents of the Delaware traditional religion to Methodists. On the early 1860s map families cluster in like-minded communities, with some exceptions. I wait, but that is the last map, and the Kansas story seems to have stopped midstream. Obermeyer explains that very little documentation remains for the Kansas Delaware community. “My next project,” he says, “is to trace exact locations of Delaware homesteads in this area from removal into the twentieth century and see if religion, history, or other connections exist.”

He moves to a discussion of the Civil War era. “Most factions, whether they practiced Indigenous traditions or Christian, united to oppose slavery,” says Obermeyer. He explains how Delaware men fought for the Union, as Indian Home Guard troops. The end of the Civil War, however, did not bring rewards. Instead, their neighbors envied their lands and seized them. Obermeyer does not need to detail how the beleaguered Delawares agreed to sell Kansas tracts and move to Oklahoma. This group understands that story all too well.

During the break several people ask about my family’s experience
in New Jersey and Ohio. When did my family come west? Who are my relatives?

“New Jersey family names include Bruner and Beaver, and Ohio names are Bear, Root, Weaver, Mowrer, and Wolf,” I say, “with some Munsee Delaware connections.” Several people nod. Wolf is a common Munsee name. Weaver is among the surnames of the Lenape group’s official rolls. I continue: “The Bears lived near the Cuyahoga War Trail in Ohio, now Highway 30, and later they changed the spelling to Bair because of German census takers. By then Wayne County was a mix of Chippewa, Mohican, and Delaware groups.” I realize, after Obermeyer’s talk, how this mingling of tribal communities, refugee camps really, was also common in Ohio. I resume my family history: “A Delaware encampment remained on the Bair land until the Civil War. A family cemetery with fieldstones for markers is still there.”

A listener says: “So, your people must have come west just after the Kansas lands were sold. Somehow they found Delawares in Kansas City. They must have stayed in touch.”

“Yes, no letters remain, so probably they learned by word of mouth,” I answer. “The family first lived in central Kansas, where they homesteaded, with some other Native families, and then Kansas City when that region became dangerous.”

We are interrupted as children enter the room. They have learned how to count in the Lenape dialect of Delaware and are ready to recite for us. As they say numbers, I remember we called my grandmother by an Algonquian term but with an English ending, Kok-ie. That was the last word that survived in our family, “little grandmother.”

Over coffee refills I ask Chief Zeigler, a mother of teenagers, if she knows anything about my Bruner grandparents. “They found refuge in Kansas City,” I say.

“Bruner? No,” she says slowly. “Bruner is not a name in the tribal archives.”

“Probably not,” I agree. “They were here after the government made the rolls.”
I ask another member who lives in Wichita if his family might remember the Bruners or Bairs but no luck. I am a generation older than most of the people in the room. Their great-grandparents may have known my grandfather as a neighbor, but that was long ago. A new discovery, however, is that Kansas City Delawares are, like me, unraveling history as they live it. Their program includes the capable scholar Obermeyer. I put the date of their next meeting on my calendar.

As a newcomer to this gathering, I hesitate to bring up more personal topics, such as the aftermath of trauma replaying through generations. I mourn the recent loss of a niece to addiction, and I suspect my family is not the only one experiencing tragedies.

As the meeting draws to a close, I appreciate how Kansas Delawares continue tribal organization, even without official recognition. Their history is certain, and absence from a government list does not alter it. Individually and as a group, they value their identity. Each, like separate clouds, floats the same direction, and I travel my own trail among them, on a parallel course. It has taken years for me to understand this destiny, culled from memories of my grandfather’s life, my mother’s, and those of other relatives. Years ago I began my quest in a Haskell classroom, and I continue to learn more each day.

* 

I knock on the door of a condominium in Laguna Niguel, California, and my oldest sister, Mary, answers. It is 1991. Underfoot are two dogs with furiously wagging tails, not very wolflike at all. They step aside and let me enter.

Mary is in her midfifties and a matriarch with three grown children. I make a fourth—she is my second mother. When I was born, Mary was thirteen and took charge of me. I adored her. Despite our early ties, though, she has become almost a stranger. She left home when I was ten, one of the great tragedies of my early life. We have, nonetheless, a deep attachment. We talk intimately on the telephone almost every week. Now business brings me to Southern California—I will be in residence at Occidental College, guest of
Yuki poet William Oandasan. I have not seen Mary in ten years, so this is a chance to reconnect.

My sister leads me through the living room and straight toward the kitchen. As I follow, I notice her dark hair has only a few streaks of gray. She wears it long and straight, with bangs. She is under five feet tall but large in presence. We do not embrace—that was not in our family repertoire of gestures—but we feel immediate rapport. She seats me at her table, pours two glasses of good red wine, and we talk. For two days straight we leave that table only to sleep.

We converse about parents, divorces (two each), children, siblings, and grandparents. Talk turns to Grandfather Bruner.

“Pop being an Indian made him quite inferior in the pecking
order.” Our family name for Grandfather is Pop. Mary is describing our mother’s uneasy footing with her wealthy father-in-law, who did not accept his daughter-in-law or her parents. To Mary the reason is obvious.

“He was Indian?” I ask.

“I always assumed he was.”

This resonates a long moment, like the stories of the Wyandot student. “No one told me, exactly,” I say. I am in my forties, and finally the family origins are clear. To hear her definitive assertion is the first time this comes into focus.

“Our mother tried to advance herself. Indians had trouble getting good jobs and were poor. Marriage into a wealthy family was a way out of poverty.”

I remember our mother’s obsessive drive to get an education and her pride in her job as a medical stenographer. She insisted that all of us children, especially the girls, train to make a living. Never did she tell me to look for a wealthy husband and learn how to cook. She was a tiger mother before the term was invented.

“What do we know about Pop’s Indian family?” I ask. “What tribe?”

“No one knows anything more. He looked Indian; he was Indian.” She makes a face. “He was so slow when he talked. I don’t think he was very smart.”

I am shocked but say nothing. All members of our family have good intelligence, including all my Bruner cousins. I cannot imagine Pop was not a bright man. I played gin rummy with him, and I knew he was a keen strategizer.

“He and Grandmother Cokie were very nice,” my sister adds, seeing the look on my face. “Slow. He was slow.”

Out of respect I do not challenge my older sister’s harsh evaluation.

Now I understand Mary’s dismissal of her Indian grandfather in several ways. Some stereotyped thinking was part of the family culture, especially on my father’s side. This would not be the first time I heard family members speak negatively about their bloodlines. I also wonder if Mary avoided her own painful past
by minimizing her ties. She had felt like a prisoner in our parents’ house—indeed, she was household labor and worked endlessly at cleaning, cooking, and child care. The Kansas of her childhood was a place of drudgery. The Southern California of the 1960s, when she arrived with a teaching degree, teemed with glitzy movie stars. She knew some of them. Ozzie and Harriet’s grandchildren played with her children on the beach. John Wayne shopped at her grocery store. When I was a teenager, I visited and had seen these figures, and I was impressed. Another reason she considered Grandfather “slow” might be the prairielands dialect. My sister corrected my slow-paced accent, my first awareness of my regional difference as a liability. Also, some Native conversational patterns have a slower speaking pace, with pauses for listeners to create visualizations. When speaking more slowly, storytellers can modulate tones for emphasis. Diné (Navajo) poet Luci Tapahonso describes this in her book *Blue Horses Rush In*. The different rhetorical style can seem tedious to impatient outsiders. Now, years later, as I reflect on Mary’s dismissal of our grandfather, these possibilities seem plausible.

During a pause in our conversation, Mary lets the dogs outside to break up the uneasy mood. They clatter to the patio door and lunge through it. When she returns to the table, she shifts to brighter conversation, deftly avoiding conflict. The look on my face is enough to signal disagreement.

“Grandmother Cokie was so much fun. She was full of energy.” Mary describes more about this Irish German grandmother who drove a car and made expeditions to see Wichita psychics in the 1930s. Her marriage was, at that time, affectionate. Mary describes Grandfather’s joking with Grandmother, something I never guessed. “They laughed together all the time,” she says. “He teased her, and she loved it. They were in their fifties then, not old.”

“Wasn’t he an alcoholic?” I ask. That is the family lore I know, and my second marriage had been rocky because of substance abuse. I have spent some time learning codependency programs for relatives of alcoholics.