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Surrender No. 40

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KEN WILSON

Surrender No. 40

That first morning is cool and bright. I check out of the motel on the highway and walk the eight kilometres into Dundalk, a town near the source of the Grand River in southwestern Ontario. I stop at a restaurant, order bacon, eggs, and coffee, and then push on to my next stop: a B&B some twenty-five kilometres south. My hosts there are curious about why I'm walking, and I tell them. They're going out for dinner, but they leave me some sandwiches. I'm grateful for that, because I'm hungry and not carrying a lot of food in my pack.

Not many people would like walking by themselves all day, but I'm enjoying the warm sun, the sweet smell of milkweed in bloom, and the songs of eastern birds, so different from the ones back home in Saskatchewan. Everything is so green, despite this spring's drought. This journey isn't some kind of hair-shirted penance. I'm having fun. That's a good thing, since I'm going to be walking all day, every day, for the next two weeks.

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In 1784, Sir Frederick Haldimand, the Governor of Quebec, issued the Haldimand Proclamation. That document reserved six miles on either side of the Grand River, from its source in the hills near what's now Dundalk to the place where it empties into Lake Erie, for the people of the Six Nations. They call themselves the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse. Or the Onkwehonwe, the Original People. The Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora: those are the English names of the Six Nations. The Haldimand Proclamation states that, in recognition of their loyalty to the Crown, the people of the Six Nations could choose to settle in a corridor six miles deep on either side of the Grand River. Haldimand had bought that land from the Mississaugas for that purpose. Those 950,000 acres in the Grand River valley make up the Haldimand Tract.

Haldimand made this Treaty with the Six Nations because they fought alongside the British during the American Revolution. In revenge, the Americans launched a scorched-earth campaign against them: burning crops and villages, killing women and children. When the war was over, many Haudenosaunee were living as refugees along the Niagara River. The Six Nations remained powerful allies against the Americans, though, and because Haldimand wanted to keep them that way, he negotiated the agreement expressed by the Haldimand Proclamation with Joseph Brant, a Mohawk Pine Tree Chief. Many Haudenosaunee found themselves building new lives in the Haldimand Tract.

Between 1784 and today, however, the Haldimand Tract got a lot smaller. The current Six Nations reserve, southeast of Brantford, the city where I grew up, is only forty-six thousand acres—just five per cent of the land described by the Haldimand Proclamation. What happened to the rest? I never thought about that — never considered how my parents ended up with the title to our suburban lot and red-brick bungalow. When I discovered the truth, I felt angry and ashamed.

That's the reason I'm walking through the Haldimand Tract, from the source of the Grand River near Dundalk to the point where it empties into Lake Erie, a journey of some 335 kilometres: because, as a descendant of the settlers who chose to live there, I'm part of the Haldimand Tract's story of land theft and displacement.

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For the first couple of days, I walk on gravel roads and the shoulders of highways. That kind of walking can be dangerous and difficult: traffic on busy roads is frightening, the coarse gravel is hard on my feet and the lateral slope of a highway shoulder strains my ankles and legs. That's why I'm looking forward to the third day, when I reach the Grand Valley Trail, a series of marked footpaths, mostly on private land. I'll still have to walk beside highways occasionally, but I figure the footpaths will be quieter, more pleasant. But since they aren't always well marked, the path often seems to vanish. And then I'm lost.

On the morning of that third day, though, I'm not expecting the path to disappear. When it does, I stop, confused. I look at my map, decide it must follow a narrow lane lined with cottages, and set off in that direction. That's when, waddling around a corner, heading right towards me, I see disaster: a skunk.

We look at each other.

"Okay, buddy," I say. "Okay." I start backing away, slowly.

I envision trying to clean myself and my clothes with tomato juice in that night's B&B, wondering how I'll get the stench out of my boots and my pack. But the skunk is just as afraid of me as I am of him. He turns around and scuttles back the way he came. I move forward, cautiously: maybe it's an ambush. But he's gone. The lane turns out to be a dead end and I retrace my steps, watching for the skunk. But he doesn't reappear. After a long search, I find the right path. I take a deep breath and keep walking.

Because I keep getting lost on the Grand Valley Trail, I eventually decide to plot my route along roads. Because that's not the way I wanted to make this walk, once in a while I try the trail again. When I do, I almost always lose my way.

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Settlers began claiming pieces of the Tract almost before the ink was dry on the Haldimand Proclamation. In 1793, John Graves Simcoe, the first lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, took

back the northern third of the Tract. The original survey had been botched, he said, and the Crown hadn't purchased that land from the Mississaugas after all. Simcoe went ahead and bought the land, but he didn't add it to the Tract; instead, he kept it for the Crown. That decision is the basis of one of the Six Nations elected council's land claims.

Then there's the middle third, where the cities of Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge are. Brant convinced the Confederacy Chiefs to use that part of the Tract to create a permanent income for the Six Nations, so he sold that land in the 1790s. The Six Nations elected council, though, says that Brant was only supposed to arrange to lease that land — that the Confederacy Chiefs wanted the Six Nations to retain ownership. But Simcoe was saying that the Six Nations couldn't sell the land at all because it wasn't really theirs and it seems that Brant thought the best way to prove him wrong was to go ahead and sell some. Since Brant exceeded his power of attorney, the middle third is the subject of another land claim.

The Six Nations set up a trust fund with the money from those sales. The government appointed trustees to manage that money and, as well as stealing from the fund to line their own pockets, they let the government borrow from it to pay off debts, build roads, canals, and bridges, and keep McGill University from going bankrupt. Not one of those loans was ever repaid. Today, figuring six per cent compound interest per year over more than 150 years, Canada owes the Six Nations about seven billion dollars.

People from the Six Nations settled mostly in the southern third of the Tract, from Brantford to Lake Erie, in villages along the river — different nations in separate villages. A lot of that land was stolen by squatters — settlers who just showed up and took it. Some was flooded without compensation by the Welland Canal Company. Some was leased to settlers who turned around and sold it to other settlers. The rest was taken by the government in a series of surrenders, some big and some small. The biggest was the General Surrender of 1841, which stripped the Six Nations of all their land outside the current reserve. The government found people at Six Nations to sign the papers, but they can't have represented the majority, because the Six Nations have been protesting the General Surrender since it happened. It's the basis of another land claim.

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Learning about the Haldimand Tract taught me what was missing from the story I'd been told about the place where I was born — about Canada itself, really. Canadians like to think that our country is a good place filled with good people; the history of our behaviour towards Indigenous Peoples contradicts that self-image.

I asked myself: what are you going to do now that you know the truth about the Tract? The only answer I could come up with was this: I can walk. I've walked in Spain, in England, I thought. I can do it again — this time in the Haldimand Tract. I started planning. I would keep a blog about the walk called *Muscle and Bone*, after something the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote: "The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones" (184). I wanted to know in my body — in the muscles of my legs and the bones of my feet — exactly how much land was stolen from the

Six Nations. Acquiring that knowledge was the purpose of the walk. It felt like the least I could do.

I wanted the walk to connect to the Six Nations community, so I decided to use it to raise money for the Woodland Cultural Centre's Save the Evidence campaign. The Woodland Cultural Centre is an arts organization located in what used to be the Mohawk Institute, the residential school in Brantford. The first in Canada, it opened in the 1830s. When that school closed in 1970, the property was turned over to the Six Nations, and it became the Woodland Cultural Centre. Most of the Centre is located in the classroom building, which was constructed in the 1950s. The dormitory building, built in 1903, stands next door.

Survivors call the Mohawk Institute "the Mush Hole," after the porridge that was served to the children there. The food was so bad, and the children so hungry, that they'd sneak out of the dormitories at night and go to the landfill — it's just down the road — and eat garbage. Or they'd steal bait from the rat traps in nearby factories. Like other residential schools, it was a terrible place.

I toured the Mohawk Institute building during my walk. What I saw there shook me deeply. It was still open when I was in elementary school on the other side of Brantford and that fact continues to upset me: while I was learning to read and count, other children not that far away were being starved and abused. I know shame is a useless emotion, but I feel ashamed of the difference between our experiences nonetheless.

Some time ago, the Woodland Cultural Centre said to the people at Six Nations, let's renovate the dormitory building — it needed a lot of work — and create a museum about residential schools there. At first, I'm told, some people didn't like that idea. They said, why not just tear it down, try to forget such an awful place ever existed? But others said it was important to save the evidence of what happened at the Mohawk Institute and places like it, and in the end, that's what they decided to do. The Woodland Cultural Centre started raising money in support of this project. Recently, it announced that its Save the Evidence campaign exceeded its fundraising goal. I was happy to hear that news.

Before I got too excited about this idea, I needed to talk to people at Six Nations and at the Woodland Cultural Centre. So, in December 2015, I flew back to Ontario from Saskatchewan. I got in touch with someone in Brantford who would trade deerskin for tobacco with me. People at Six Nations have been growing tobacco for thousands of years and I'd been told that it's bad form at Six Nations to give gifts of commercial tobacco. I talked to people at the Woodland Cultural Centre. They were generous and encouraging. And I met with a Faithkeeper at Six Nations. She's Seneca, a grandmother. She asked me not to use her name when I tell this story. We had coffee at a diner on the edge of the reserve. We talked for a long time. I told her about the walk I was planning and asked if there was any reason I should forget the idea. "No," she said, "you're passionate about it, so you should do it. But there are things you need to do, while you're walking and before you start." She said, "You need to look for joy while you're walking, offer tobacco to the Creator every morning and every night, and pray for gratitude. And whenever you cross the river, you need to toss a pinch of tobacco into the water, to show your

gratitude to it.” I was surprised to be invited to participate in Haudenosaunee spirituality in this way and I vowed that I’d do what she said.

I also talked to Tom Hill, a writer, curator, and the former executive director of the Woodland Cultural Centre. We met in the office on the reserve that he shared with his sister-in-law, a land-claims lawyer. He made tea and I told him what I wanted to do. He didn’t see a problem with it; nobody at Six Nations would complain about me walking. I told Tom that I’d been told to offer tobacco to the Creator but didn’t know how. He explained: I have to burn it. The smoke will carry the words of my prayers into Sky World, where the Creator will be able to hear them. Can I use commercial tobacco? I asked. (I wanted to keep the tobacco I’d traded for to give to people.) “Oh yes,” he said, “some of the old fellows, they just crumble a cigarette into a dustpan and set the whole works on the wood stove and burn it there.”

So, while I’m walking, I offer tobacco to the Creator and pray for gratitude. I look for joy. And I offer tobacco to the water whenever I cross it, taking a pinch out of the deerskin pouch I carry and dropping it over the side of the bridge, hoping the wind won’t blow it back into the passing traffic.

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It takes ten days to walk through the northern two-thirds of the Tract, from the hilly country near the river’s source to the flats south of Brantford. When I get to Six Nations, it’s National Aboriginal Day — Solidarity Day, as the people there call it. My walk from Brantford to Ohsweken, the village on the reserve, is my longest walk ever — 38 kilometres. I walk beside the river, through a forest, along country roads. Eventually, I end up on the shoulder of Highway 54. It’s busy. Cars and trucks are speeding past just a few feet to my right. The narrow shoulder is covered in fine sandy gravel that’s hard to walk on. It’s hot. Sweat stings my eyes. I run out of water but get some more at a gas station on the reserve. I buy a braid of sweetgrass there, too. It’s pinned to a bulletin board next to the cashier.

I’m tired and sore when I get to Chiefswood Park, where the Solidarity Day celebrations are happening. It’s still some five or six kilometres to Ohsweken. I sit and rest and watch a band tear through a set of blues classics. My camera dies, but that doesn’t matter: I’m too tired and self-conscious to ask for permission to take anybody’s photograph. Besides, I’m wearing a t-shirt I’d bought the day before at the Woodland Cultural Centre that features a picture of the Mohawk Institute on the front, along with the words “I Helped Save the Evidence.” I look around at the old people sitting near me, survivors of that awful place, more than likely, and I’m sorry that what I’m wearing might remind them of it.

The band finishes its set and I hobble down the road into Ohsweken. I’m staying at the Bear’s Inn, a boutique hotel on the far side of the village. They don’t serve supper, but I’m too exhausted to care. I fall asleep in my sweaty clothes and sleep that way all night.

I spend the day at Six Nations. I’d tried to set up meetings with people on the reserve, but they all fall through. I call Jan Longboat, an Elder my friend Edward Doolittle, a mathematician from

Six Nations who teaches at First Nations University of Canada, said I should get to know, partly because we're both gardeners. "Her garden's amazing," he told me. "It's like nothing else on the reserve." Jan's on her way to a funeral, but she says that we could get together in Brantford when my walk is over. "I'll call some people and we can have a potluck lunch," she says. Okay, I think. That'd be nice.

*

When I went to Six Nations to talk to people before the walk, I noticed a lot of dogs running loose. I almost hit one when it ran out in front of the car I'd rented. Dogs are bad news if you're out walking in the country: they seem to hate pedestrians. I carry a little baggie of Milk Bones in my pocket to bribe my way past them; it works, most of the time. Still, I always worry about getting bitten. The day I walk from Ohsweken to Caledonia, though, the dogs I see are tied up. I start to relax. Maybe, I tell myself, I'm going to get to my next stop in one piece.

I'm looking down at my phone, not paying any attention to what's around me, when I get to a house with four dogs out front. Three of those dogs are tied up. One isn't—a pit bull. He's big and angry and he's coming right at me. I'm terrified. I cross the road, quickly but not too quickly: I don't want him to think I'm running, that I'm prey, even though we both know I am. I make soothing noises: "Okay, buddy, okay." He growls, comes closer. Scenarios flash through my mind. How am I going to find out if he's had his shots? I can't knock on the door to ask — I'll just get bitten again. Do they still treat rabies with painful injections to the stomach? Is there a doctor back in Ohsweken? How would I get there? And, if this dog bites me, how will I finish this walk?

I fumble for the Milk Bones in my pocket and throw one at him. He stops and eats it, growling while he chews. I've never seen a dog do that before. Cautiously, I put distance between us. He keeps growling, his hackles raised, but doesn't follow. By the time I get to the edge of the reserve, I've finally stopped shaking.

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In 1835, the Six Nations agreed to lease land to the Crown for a road from Hamilton to Port Dover, a fishing village on Lake Erie. It was called the Plank Road, because its surface was made of wood; that's how roads were built then. The Six Nations also agreed to lease land for a half mile on either side of that road for settlers. Today, the Plank Road is called Highway Six. It's the main street in Caledonia.

Because the Six Nations only agreed to lease that land, they retained ownership. But the government turned around and sold that leased land to settlers. The last of those land sales happened in the 1950s. A lot of Caledonia sits on that land. So does the Douglas Creek Estates development. People at Six Nations call that piece of land Kanonhstaton, "the Protected Place." Farming is one thing — the Haudenosaunee were always farmers, growing the Three Sisters, corn and beans and squash — but building houses on that land would be something else, a permanent occupation. The Douglas Creek Estates development was the last straw for many

people at Six Nations and, in the winter of 2006, they occupied the land to prevent it from being built.

When I get to Caledonia, I ask the woman who runs the B&B where the occupation is happening. “Oh, it’s just down Argyle Street,” she tells me, “on the edge of town, next to the Canadian Tire.” I walk out to see it. There’s a fence and a sign that says *No Trespassing* and gates bearing the Two-Row Wampum and the flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Behind that, there are broken streetlights and a show home, where the occupiers stay. I can’t see any difference between this piece of land and the Canadian Tire next door, or the housing development behind that, or the lot across the road with the *For Sale* sign on it. That’s no surprise: it’s all part of the same Plank Road land claim.

Here’s another story about land. The house where I grew up sits in what the Six Nations elected council calls Surrender No. 40. In 1835, the Six Nations surrendered that land to the Crown. In return, they were supposed to get two things. First, the government was supposed to remove the squatters from the rest of the Six Nations’ land. Second, it was supposed to sell that land and turn the money over to the Six Nations, for their trust account.

But the government didn’t hold up its end of the bargain. It didn’t do anything about the squatters and it gave the land away instead of selling it. So, was that agreement valid? The Six Nations elected council doesn’t think so. The 48,000 acres of Surrender No. 40 are the subject of yet another land claim.

There are 29 unresolved land claims related to the Haldimand Tract. And the Haldimand Tract isn’t the only place in Canada where there are disputes between First Nations and the federal government over land. Too often Canada broke the Treaties it made with Indigenous peoples. Reserve land was often taken or sold without permission. In some places there are no Treaties, or the Treaties that exist don’t cede land to settlers. And the federal government has never understood that Treaties are about sharing the land, not extinguishing Indigenous title to it.

The land claims process is slow. First Nations say it violates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada finally adopted in May 2016, because the government demands that Indigenous Peoples extinguish their title to their land before anything can be settled. First Nations say that’s not the way to do things, that it makes the land claims process just another land grab. Phil Monture, a Mohawk man who ran the Six Nations elected council’s land-claims office for more than 25 years, says that Canada needs to enter into long-term Treaty relationships with First Nations instead of demanding that they extinguish their rights to their lands and resources. Monture isn’t alone. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action number 45 calls upon the federal government to establish or renew Treaty relationships — including the Treaty represented by the Haldimand Proclamation — on the basis of mutual recognition and respect. And the Supreme Court has said that reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests can happen by negotiating agreements that recognize, rather than extinguish, Indigenous title. But these are not the paths we settlers, through our federal government, have decided to take.

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My next stop is Cayuga. My hosts at the B&B there complain that construction of the new bridge over the Grand River was delayed for a year because people from Six Nations occupied the land where the bridge was supposed to go. "I don't understand why they would do that," they say. "It doesn't make any sense." I try to explain what I've learned about the Haldimand Tract. Maybe, I say, if the government would negotiate resolutions to the outstanding land claims, these occupations wouldn't happen. My hosts aren't convinced, even though the name of this town is a clue to its history: old maps show that, before the General Surrender, it was the Cayuga village.

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Two days later, I walk the last thirteen kilometres of my journey, from Dunnville to Port Maitland, where the Grand River empties into Lake Erie. I wet my feet in the river; it has a heavy smell, a mixture of shit and dead fish. Down the road at a cottage development facing onto Lake Erie, I wade into the surf. The water's cold and a lot cleaner than the river. Then I sit on the breakwater and watch the waves crashing against the beach.

One of the cottagers comes over to say hello. I tell him about my walk and he complains about Americans. "Those fuckers tried to open a Walmart in Dunnville," he says. "My buddy was upset about that — it'd bankrupt all the independent businesses in town." But this guy, the cottager, he knew what to do. "I told him to call the Indians," he says. "And they came down and put up their flag and sent those Yankee cocksuckers back where they came from." I tell him this land did originally belong to the Six Nations. "Oh, yeah, they think they own everything," he says. "Skydome, the CN Tower, the whole works." He's talking about the Mississaugas of the New Credit's land claim related to the Toronto Purchase, which was resolved back in 2010. "What're you gonna do?" he says. "You can't just give it all back."

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My sister Pam, my niece, and my grand-nephew drive down from Brantford to pick me up. We hurry back to the city to meet the people Jan Longboat has brought together. I'd told Pam it was a potluck and she's made a fruit salad—a good thing, because I don't have any food to contribute. We're getting together at Kanata Village, a bankrupt museum on the site of what used to be the Mohawk Village, back before Brantford existed, long before the General Surrender of 1841. After the bankruptcy, the city tried to seize the property for back taxes and a group called the Mohawk Workers occupied it. The museum building is open and people are inside. One fellow gives me a thick envelope of information about the Haldimand Tract. He's one of the leaders of the Mohawk Workers and he tells me that the land we're on still belongs to the Six Nations. "We never sold it," he says. "It's still ours." He's a little suspicious of me. He says, "I'm not going to shake your hand until I find out what this is all about."

We gather around a table to eat. One man stands up and delivers a long blessing in Kanien'kéha, the Mohawk language. The Thanksgiving Address, it's called. When he finishes, he

says, “And that’s the short version!” Everybody laughs. Then he explains in English what he just said. The Thanksgiving Address is a statement of love, respect, and gratitude for everything, he says, from the grasses beneath our feet to the skies above us. For me, it’s a glimpse of Longhouse spirituality, its ethics of relationality. It’s beautiful.

After we eat, we go around the table, introducing ourselves. One woman gives her name in Kanien’kéha and then her name in English — or, as she says, her prisoner-of-war name. Another’s a survivor of the Mohawk Institute. She won’t talk about what happened there. Not today. Instead, she tells us how hard it is to tell those stories. Eventually it’s my turn. I talk about my journey: my discovery of the history of the Tract, my decision to walk as a way to understand the magnitude of the crimes committed against the Haudenosaunee. One woman says, “Thank you for caring about this history, for making this walk.” It’s only a gesture, I say, nothing more. The fellow from the Mohawk Workers shakes my hand.

Then they give me gifts: a beaded zipper toggle bearing the flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, sweetgrass, books about the Mohawk Institute. We talk about people from Six Nations walking together through the Haldimand Tract. “We’re too old,” one woman says. “But our young people could make that walk.” I say I’d like to come along. “Well, you know the way,” somebody says.

I still feel so honoured that my walk ended this way. I never expected anything like it. When I get back to Saskatchewan, I send Jan Longboat some ornamental tobacco seeds. The plants are supposed to be stunning — tall and aromatic — but I’ve never been able to grow them, because summers here in Regina are too short. I hope they found a place in Jan’s garden.

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Two words are used to describe settlers in Kanien’kéha. One, o’seron:ni, means “the axe-makers.” It means that all settlers do is chop down trees. It’s considered to be an insult. The other word, tyorhenhsa:ka, is different. It’s from the Kanien’kéha word for morning; it means “the people who came from the east.” The dawn people. Isn’t that lovely? I thought about those words a lot while I was walking in the Haldimand Tract. Maybe we settlers are o’seron:ni now, but maybe we could aspire to become tyorhenhsa:ka. Maybe, if we tried hard, we could find a way to live up to that name.

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KEN WILSON is a settler who lives on Treaty 4 territory in oskana kâ-asastêki (Regina, Saskatchewan), where he teaches English courses at the University of Regina. He has published academic essays in scholarly books and journals, and his creative nonfiction essay “Populus” was shortlisted for *The Malahat Review’s* 2021 Constance Rooke Creative Nonfiction Prize; it appeared in *Queen’s Quarterly* in 2023. He has also published poetry in *The Goose*. He holds an MFA from the University of Regina and is an alumnus of the Sage Hill Writing Experience. His current writing project is a book-length manuscript on walking, which won the 2022 City of Regina Writing Award. He completed his PhD in 2022.