



The native scholar who wasn't

Sarah Viren

In 1928, a forty-one-year-old woman named Adeline Ovitt, née Rivers, drowned in the Schroon River, in upstate New York. The circumstances of her death are largely unknown, but she left behind a husband and five children, including a ten-year-old son named LeRoy, who later had six children of his own, including a daughter named Anita. Anita eventually settled down with Robert Hoover, a pipe fitter for General Electric, in the town of Knox, about forty minutes west of Albany. In 1978, Anita and Robert had their first child together, a daughter named Elizabeth. Two more daughters would follow.

Elizabeth Hoover, who is now forty-five years old, describes her childhood as “broke”—her father worked odd construction jobs and was periodically unemployed—but idyllic. “I spent most of my time running around outside,” she told me recently. “My dad said I could head anywhere as long as I took a dog, a walking stick, and a knife.” Much of her youth was spent harvesting vegetables, butchering meat, and chopping wood for the winter.

As Hoover and her sisters grew older, they began to find a sense of purpose and identity in a story that Anita told them about their family. Their great-grandmother, she said, had been a Mohawk Indian, and she had drowned herself in order to escape her drunk and abusive French Canadian husband. The girls were also told that they were Mi'kmaq on their father's side. Anita began taking the girls to powwows across western New York and New England, where Native Americans would play music, share crafts, and dance. These gatherings are held throughout the country. They are intertribal and offer opportunities for Native Americans who have become disconnected from their people to be welcomed back in.

Tammy Bucchino met Hoover at a powwow in the early nineties. Bucchino's mother, a German woman, took Tammy to the powwows for the same reasons that Anita Hoover took Elizabeth: she wanted her child to feel a connection to her heritage. Bucchino's father was full-blood Mi'kmaq, but she wouldn't get to know him until later in life. “We clicked because she said she's Mi'kmaq, like me,” Bucchino said of Hoover. “And she said she had Mohawk background, and my stepbrother has a Mohawk background as well.”