

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LACROSSE STICK

The following are extracts from “Tewaarathon” by the North American Indian Travelling College and “A History of the Western Australian Lacrosse Assn” by Ian Toy

Many centuries before the white man set foot on the North American continent, the native people were given the gift of lacrosse from the Creator.

The original people of North America had names for the game of “Lacrosse”. Among the Algonquins (Southern Quebec and eastern Ontario) it was “Baggataway”, to the Iroquois or Six Nations (Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca & Tuscarora) it was “Tewaarathon”.

To the early French settlers the stick reminded them of the Bishop’s crozier or croisse in French, so they named it “La Crosse”.

Because each nation had different resources available to them, the kind of stick that was used and, consequently, the kind of game that was played, varied, with each fashioning their own version of the Creator’s game.

Before the white man, lacrosse stick making was widespread among the Mohawks who settled at Akwesasne (Akwesasne is a region which includes part of what is now New York upstate and Ontario, as well as Cornwall Island and other islands in the St Lawrence River) in the St. Lawrence River Valley. Lacrosse sticks were produced in several other Indian settlements, such as Caughnawaga, but because of the abundance of hickory, the best suited wood to make lacrosse sticks, stick making became centred at Akwesasne. Prior to the white man the manufacture of lacrosse sticks was characterized as a cooperative family endeavour. There was and still is an entire year’s time involved in making a lacrosse stick and the various stages of stick making had a definite seasonal relationship.

In the winter, the men and older boys were responsible for going to the forests and selecting the best suited hickory trees so that they could be cut into logs and hauled across the snow back to Akwesasne, taking full advantage of frozen rivers. The logs were then split into shafts, then had to be cured for a year. After the shafts had been cured, the men steamed, bent and tied them to set for three months, to ensure that the bend remained. When the bent shafts were ready, the men carved them to a more workable size, and the women and girls hand-sanded the shafts and applied a lacquer or varnish to the finished wooden frame. The “womenfolk” (Don’t you love that term girls!) then hand drilled the holes necessary to hold the strips or leather which comprised the laced pocketing. The lacing of the leather pocket and side gut wall was done principally by the women but the men obtained the necessary hides, tanned and prepared them, to produce the materials to make the pocket.

The cooperative familial nature of stick making and its link to Akwesasne itself enabled the need for “Quality control” to become built into the production system since pride in family, and later tribal, workmanship provided enough incentive for the Mohawk craftsmen to produce only the finest sticks.

The French who lived around Montreal first took notice of lacrosse in 1834 and during the latter half of the 19th century, lacrosse interest spread rapidly among the non-Indian populace which created a demand for the production of more lacrosse sticks.

One of the famous stick making families of the 19th century was the White brothers who lived on Cornwall Island.

During the first decade of the 20th century Frank Lally gained fame as an outstanding non-Indian goaltender and it was through his participation in lacrosse that he came in contact with the Mohawk players who possessed the finest lacrosse sticks to be found anywhere. Frank's brother, Joseph, who was a well respected referee, seized upon the idea of hiring some of the Indian stick makers to produce sticks in an assembly line manner because he believed a greater quantity of sticks could be produced in this way than by each individual working independently. The Mohawk stick makers who worked for Lally on Cornwall Island began to wonder why they couldn't handle both the production and marketing of lacrosse sticks themselves.

Among the workers at the Lally factory in the 1920's were the Roundpoint brothers who wondered why they couldn't market and sell their own sticks, so they left and started working from home. While working for Lally they had developed a very efficient manner for producing large quantities of sticks and had picked up stick making knowledge going back many generations. But despite trying to market their own products they encountered difficulties and realized they needed an educated English speaking person whom they could trust to get them the true value for their sticks while providing the necessary marketing and promotional assistance needed to make their dream come true.

In 1928 a young man of Scottish descent by the name of Colin Chisholm began his teaching career at the Cornwall Island School. Due to the lack of adequate transportation and roads, Chisholm boarded with a Mohawk family on Cornwall Island. The family's children went to school at Cornwall and learnt English and given Chisholm had no prior knowledge of the Mohawk language he boarded with the Leaf family, and he fitted in well and was well received by the local Mohawk community.

Stick making was difficult between 1910-1930's due to economic downturns, WW1, and then the Great Depression, as well as customs duty and transport to the U.S. markets.

During the Great Depression, Chisholm's earliest friends, the Roundpoint brothers, shared their dream of starting a lacrosse factory on the island and to compete with the Lally Company, which at this time had the market sewn up. Chisholm was a reluctant starter but as he was going to a teaching convention in Toronto he contacted several sporting goods stores and to his amazement, he received orders for 60 sticks, just because they were produced on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. From the outset the brothers provided the raw materials and skills and did all of the stick making, while Chisholm became the promoter, accountant and manager, which he continued until his retirement.

By 1931 the business was thriving and filling the growing order list, employing more local craftsmen and moving into a larger factory. Supply logistics was an issue as the bridges to and from the island were solely for trains, and raw materials could reach the factory only during the winter months when horses could haul the logs across the frozen St. Lawrence River. A year later, Alex's persuasive ways allowed them to rent a New York Central push-car and flat bed, which could be used while the regular train went to Ottawa and back.

Given the success of the Mohawk business the Lally business declined and Frank Lally approached Chisholm in the 50's to buy his business, but on the condition that he did not include the remaining Roundpoint brother, Frank. Chisholm was not prepared to do that but

about one year later Lally agreed to sell the business to Chisholm and Frank Roundpoint, but at twice the price he was offered a year earlier where he would be the sole purchaser.

Chisholm was highly respected by the Mohawks and vice-versa, and he retired in 1967 after 39 years of teaching the Mohawk children only. His wife also taught at the reservation.

Sadly the factory was burnt to the ground in June 1968, Frank Roundpoint died a month later, but the workers wanted the business to continue and picked up their tools and what they could and started manufacturing sticks from their homes. A new cement block factory was built within 4 months of the fire.

As a result of the fire there was an extreme shortage of lacrosse sticks in the market. To fill this void, a plastic stick was introduced to the field game and was successful. Up until this time Chisholm Lacrosse Company virtually had a monopoly in the box and field lacrosse versions of the game. The fire, the death of Frank Roundpoint, the introduction of the plastic stick and the expansion of other hickory stick manufacturers when the factory burnt down contributed to the start of the demise of the company.

In 1972 the Mohawk Lacrosse Stick Manufacturing Co. purchased the net assets of the Chisholm Lacrosse Manufacturing Co. Sadly the Mohawk Company went into bankruptcy in 1974, due in the main to the inability to regain the field lacrosse market in the U.S. and abroad.

The Dept of Indian Affairs started a new company, Mohawk St. Regis Lacrosse Ltd, in October 1975, with Canadian Cycle and Motor appointed the distributor of their high quality wooden sticks.

The rest is history, sadly the hickory market is virtually non-existent and the plastic stick has taken all before it. Anyone who had a hickory stick, or still has one in their garage, would appreciate what a wonderful thing of beauty they were, the feeling of a perfectly balanced stick, with its lacquered fence and oiled frame. The sadness and gloom when that wonderful friend breaks! I have three in my garage and they will go to god when I do! Comparing hickory to plastic is like comparing something unique to a mass produced item. They can't be compared but sadly the hickory stick no longer competes, like an old warrior its time has come, but it lives forever in our memories.

While lacrosse only started in Australia in 1876 from the late 1800s and for most of the first half of the 20th century, hand crafted sticks made by native Americans was the only if not predominant source of supply, the major brands were Lally, Chisholm, Mohawk and Flannery.

During the 1930s, the Australian government imposed a 57% tax on imported sticks, notwithstanding that Australia could not produce hickory sticks, certainly not to a suitable quality or quantity, and custom duties applied to lacrosse sticks up to the 1970s. Following WW2 there were also foreign exchange restrictions, so even if you had the funds it was very difficult to import some items.

Following the imposition of the 57% customs duty, Harold Evans, a Queenslander approached the Queensland Forestry Commission, asking them to find a suitable timber. After 18 months of experimenting Evans discovered that the Native Americans only used second year growth hickory and only two sticks were yielded from one tree, and to prevent breaking they had to split the timber along the grain rather than sawing it – "Very expensive

deforestation". Evans along with the Queensland Forestry Commission came up with a "Leopard wood" but volumes were very limited.

In 1951 wooden sticks were imported from Pakistan and England (Probably Hattersley) but they failed to withstand the test of regular play. The CSIRO also produced a laminated stick but it also failed to achieve the standards required. The shortage also prompted S.A. cricket bat manufacturer, P.J. Brady, to emerge as a lacrosse stick manufacturer in 1952, but again they did not stack up in terms of quality.

The main source of sticks in the 1950s remained the Chisholm and Lally stick hand crafted in Cornwall, Ontario. During 1959-60 Laurie Turnbull from W.A. made a generous business decision to import a large supply of new Canadian wooden sticks produced by the Chisholm Lacrosse Manufacturing Co., which purchased the famous Lally family business. Laurie Turnbull would have been prompted by the 1959 USA team visit to Australia, which played its initial games in Perth, and the team left a lot of its equipment with the locals, including the latest wooden sticks.

Harold Evans, the Queenslander, dream had not died and travelled as part of the 1967 lacrosse tour of U.S. and Canada to learn more about stick manufacture, including meeting with Colin Chisholm. During this trip Harold was billeted in San Francisco with Doane Lydecker, who had perfected all the drawings for making a tubular plastic lacrosse stick. Unfortunately the tooling and production costs were beyond Harold's resources, particular for a small lacrosse nation like Australia.

During the 1950s the Brine Corp. invested time and money into lacrosse equipment, experimenting with materials from laminated wood to fibreglass, plastic and aluminium. Finally they discovered a plastic made by DuPont call "Surlyn", which had all of the necessary properties for the intense game of lacrosse. Brine Corp then created a technique for moulding that became the standard shape for the modern plastic stick. Brine was acquired by New Balance in 2006.

In the 1960's a few lacrosse people working at a plastics company, WT Burnett, in Baltimore started STX Manufacturing Co. began experimenting with lighter synthetic materials to create a lighter and more resilient stick.

During the 60's and 70's Mal Taylor in Williamstown was the go to man in Melbourne's west where most players went to buy a stick or have one fibre glass repaired. There was also a Palmer's sports store in 1202 High Street, Malvern, which was the official sports depot for the V.A.L.A. Palmer's was owned by Frank Maggs whose son played for Caulfield. In S.A. it was probably Jim Goodale on behalf of SALA and Laurie and Ross Turnbull in W.A. There no doubt were others.

In 1970 the NCAA Championship game was still dominated by wooden sticks but during that year U.S. Patent No 3 507 495 for the plastic head was granted. Remarkably in the following year the championship game was played with all players using synthetic sticks.

In 1972 the Australian touring team returned with the first version of the plastic headed stick. Hickory continued in Australia but diminished significantly from 1973 and by 1980 very few players were using the hickory stick. Don Rudderham claims to be the last to use a hickory stick in W.A. in the 1980s, I would suggest Michael Hilsberg was possibly one of the last players to use one in the 1980's in Victoria. I am sure someone can tell us who the last one was in S.A.

The introduction in 1972 of the plastic head lacrosse stick with an aluminium handle was a revolution for the game, with hickory sticks replaced in a short space of time.

Before the advent of the plastic stick lacrosse in Australia generally had experienced an inconsistent supply of hickory sticks, particularly after the two world wars, which had an adverse impact on the growth of the game. The hickory stick was time consuming to produce, quality hickory was hard to find, and sticks were made specifically for left and right handers. While broken sticks could be repaired they generally never had the balance they originally had, and had to be maintained with linseed oil on the wood to keep it flexible, lacquer or shellack on the fence and neatsfoot oil or fat on the strings to keep them moist and flexible.

The plastic stick had repeatable quality, virtually maintenance free, interchangeable parts, it could be used as left or right hand, was readily available from local distributors, the wet or mud did not impact on their performance and they were incredibly light compared to hickory, they were "Tupperware". As Roy Sloggett pointed out it was a lot harder to throw on your opposite hand with a hickory stick due to the fact that they were made for left or right hand, not both. He also felt it was easier to check or dislodge a ball out of an opponent's stick merely because it weighed a lot more than plastic.

Hickory sticks continued to be widely used in box lacrosse, notwithstanding that plastic had taken over the field game, but even box lacrosse now uses plastic, so the traditional stick is now a thing of the past.

Eddie Toomey was the original importer and distributor in Australia of Brine sticks from the mid 70s. Eddie had a long association with the Brine family and held the agency for Brine for many years. The original importer of STX was Les Goding and his agent in S.A. was Roger Attenborough and in W.A. it was Laurie and Ross Turnbull, who also had the Brine agency in the early 70's. Les had a strong link to the STX Company through previous tours with 2 guys, Dick Tucker and Bill Crawford, both of whom were involved with STX from the early 70's. The inventors of various lacrosse sticks or elements thereof, which it would appear, were patented and assigned to William T. Burnett & Co. and/or STX over many years, were Fielding Lewis Jr, Richard Tucker, William Crawford, Jackie Davis and others.

During the early 1970's, Eddie Toomey sourced a locally produced plastic stick branded "Lancer" specifically for the junior and schools market, which were sold for around \$30 and were sold in the 3 lacrosse states.

The plastic frame was moulded by local suppliers and the Toomey family strung the sticks. Not long after the sticks were introduced the design was challenged, legal action threatened, and thus the sticks were no longer sold. One major difficulty that arose was that Eddie and Les Goding, the distributors of Brine and STX in Australia, both were heavily involved in starting and developing the Mitcham Lacrosse Club, but because of issues emanating from their respective distributorships, Eddie Toomey moved to Surrey Park, where he remained for the rest of his career, as did his sons.

When Brian Griffin took on the national distribution of STX in the 70's, he put in place sponsored players, including Ross Turnbull, who promoted STX at club level to sell sticks and other lacrosse products.

This left Brine with no WA distributor so Alan Keen (Murray's father) approached Eddie Toomey and took on the WA distribution for Brine around 1980, which he held in WA until

the early 1990's and distributed equipment through local sports stores plus sold to WA lacrosse players and clubs. Attached is a photo of the Brine sign outside the Keen's Dianella factory (the sign still hangs at the factory today).

Brian Griffin continued through the 80's with STX and was largely responsible for the development of the Sofcrosse programmes that went into a lot of schools through that period.

After the World Series in Perth in 1990 Ashross Agencies took over as the Australian Distributor from Brian Griffin and continued until the distribution rights were sold in 2007 to Mark Mangan and Trish Adams. Mark Hickey was the agent in W.A. during that period.

Things have probably changed over the last decade and there are now more manufacturers of plastic sticks, the market continues to evolve.

Thanks to Roger Attenborough, Eddie Toomey, Ian Toy and Murray Keen for their input on the evolution of STX and Brine in Australia. Thanks also to Dick Morgan for lending me "Tewaarathon", which has some fascinating insights from the Native American people. Thanks also to Roy Sloggett for invaluable information on the hickory stick and its distribution by Palmers Sports Store, which was an official sponsor of the 1959 championships and test against the U.S.A.