



The Learning Circles Project: *The Circle*



Family History Circle

by Janice Brant

Kanhiote – Tyendinaga Territory Public Library

Kanhiote Library opened in 1990 and established a philosophy “to provide a well-balanced collection of materials, to focus on maintaining a Native resource/reference collection with emphasis on Mohawk/Iroquois people, and to function as an information centre on aspects of cultural heritage.” “Kanhiote” means “rainbow” and was chosen to symbolize a bridge. This bridge would serve to link the knowledge in the material with the community, as well as other cultures and Kanien’kehaka culture, traditions and beliefs.

Kanhiote offers a wide range of books, magazines, videos, vertical file material, local history items, and genealogy research. A children’s corner offers a cozy area for children to read and explore a variety of brightly coloured books. There are six computer stations for the public with free access to the internet. Community members are welcome to set up an email account and come in to check their messages, do a resume, make invitations to a party, or create a newsletter to share with friends. Kanhiote is also a gathering place for families, children’s reading circles, the Mohawk language circle, and hobby groups. One such group that gathers at the library is the Family History Circle. The circle has been actively meeting at the library on the third Thursday of every month from 6 to 8 p.m. to learn more about their family history and about the history of Tyendinaga.

The Family History Circle was founded by community member Joy Brant and Kanhiote’s librarian, Karen Lewis. Joy had been visiting the library for several years researching her family history and genealogy. She had found some old photographs in the attic of her uncle’s homestead and was looking for people in the community that could help her identify the people in the photographs. Joy was also interested in learning about and

www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm

researching the 20 original families that settled the community and thought that others might share her interest.

Joy shared her idea for a Family History Circle with the librarian. The librarian liked the idea and offered to support the development of the group by posting an invitation in Kanhiote's monthly newsletter. Joy and the librarian, Karen Lewis call upon the researchers in the Lands department to help them brainstorm some topics to assist them in getting the group started. Lisa Maracle and Trish Rae from the Lands Department offered to visit the circle acting as resource persons from time to time to assist the circle members with their research and to offer their support and expertise.

Today the Family History Circle has 15 participants who gather to share their research findings, tell stories and share photographs. Recently the group visited the Napanee Historical Society to participate in a research presentation for a new book called *Dancing in the Sky* by Bill Hunt. This book will focus on the history of Camp Mohawk and Camp Rathbun. It was an exciting event for the circle as some of the elderly participants had childhood memories of family members employed at Camp Mohawk, while others lived in close proximity to the military training camp.

The Family History Circle welcomes both residents and non-residents of Tyendinaga to participate and share in their learning circle. It is a diverse group ranging in age from 28 to 75. Some have university degrees while others only attended school for a brief period early in their life. Each participant in the circle works at their own pace and shares their research as they wish within a flexible framework.

Topics and themes are loosely determined by the group at the end of each meeting, although there are more structured events such as the planning and coordination of visits outside of the library such as cemetery walks.

The circle explores a variety of topics from how to research family history and access records, to reading cemetery maps. They discuss veterans, family photographs, family

Bibles, larger than life characters, nicknames, special places, and school records. The circle has also explored band council minutes from the 1800s and census records. In researching and sharing family histories and the history of Tyendinaga, the Family History Circle hopes to build pride in community members about who they are and where they have come from. They want to help community members to develop greater sensitivity and understanding of one another by communicating the struggles of their ancestors. They would also like to demonstrate to the young people that they are all tied together, to promote belonging and acceptance. The circle has plans to develop displays for public viewing at community events about the various families and clans in the community. They also try to record some of their sharing on audio tape for reference at the library.

The librarian, with the help of lands researcher Trish Rae, has developed a pamphlet to assist the Family History Circle that outlines some best practices for starting your own family history. It can be accessed at Kanhiote Library and includes special considerations for researching First Nations family history. Some of the considerations include keeping in mind that documents reflect the times in which they were produced and there was a time when legitimate children of Status Indian women and a non-native man were considered to be “white”.

The circle is grateful for the support of the library in providing them with a place to meet, access to computers, reference materials, the photocopier and when needed the expertise of the librarian.

When asked what would make the circle stronger, participants simply said more people to share their family history and stories. One participant commented that it could be like a living museum and that our greatest strength is the people knowing who they are.