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A true survivor

On June 15, Mohegan tribal leader Gladys Tantaquidgeon celebrated her 106th birthday. I interviewed her in 1994 when she was a youthful 94.



Tom Beardsley

Gladys explained then how she was born and raised in Montville, one of eight children, and how there were only 40 or so surviving descendants of the Mohegan tribe in eastern Connecticut at that time.

Her family name is the only Mohegan name still in use. Loosely translated, "Tantaquidgeon" means "wolf running along quickly." Gladys further explained how in the late 1600s the Mohegan tribe under Uncas wandered the northeastern Connecticut landscape, one that 200 years later would be dotted with mill villages and textile factories. She noted that in the 19th century many family members had worked as carpenters fixing the whaling ships in New London and that other Mohegans worked as deckhands and harpoonists.

Coincidentally, almost a century ago, in 1906, a *Willimantic Chronicle* reporter came across 80-year-old Thomas Ford and believed that he had come across one of the last surviving pure blood Mohegans in the state. Older Willimantic residents knew Tom Ford well because he had driven the stagecoach between Danielson and Willimantic during the 1850s and 1860s. However, the newspaper correspondent wanted to clear one point up immediately about Ford: "He has none of the laziness commonly attributed to his race, having had a more varied and wider experience than most of his white neighbors can boast."

Ford was born in Sterling in 1826. He and his family wandered around the area between

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Hampton and Sterling completing odd jobs. While in Hampton in 1846, Ford was hired by a farmer who was "an excellent man whilst sober, but when drunk was as bad a man as any of Ford's savage ancestors when under the influence of fire water." The farmer chased Ford around the farmhouse and tried to shoot him with a pistol. Ford escaped injury and fled for New London where he signed up for a tour of duty on a whaling schooner.

Ford's tour of duty on the whaler lasted for three years. He spent much time in the Sandwich Islands in the South Pacific, where "his color was no social bar to him." However, when the contract ended in 1850, Ford returned to his beloved eastern Connecticut and settled in Brooklyn. It was here that he became a driver for the Danielsonville to Willimantic stagecoach line and on the Danielsonville to Moosup stagecoach. He remained in this position until the Civil War.

In 1861 Ford entered the service of the 11th Connecticut Volunteers and for four years was the personal man servant of the regiment's assistant surgeon, Dr. Charles H. Rogers.

However, because of his color and race, Ford was not officially sworn into service and this later excluded him from gaining a Civil War pension.

After the war Ford drove the glass chariot that led the parades when Adam Forpaugh's famous circus came to town. He then returned to his native Windham County and for many years worked at the Central Village railroad depot in Plainfield manning a pumping engine that furnished water for locomotives. When this position became too strenuous, he returned to a trade he had practiced when doing odd jobs as a youth, that of caning old chairs.

This account of Ford's life reveals how the Mohegans and members of other Indian tribes were treated during the 19th cen-

tury, as their numbers dwindled.

Like Ford, many found employment in Connecticut's thriving whaling industry. It is doubtful if Gladys Tantaquidgeon's ancestors or Thomas Ford could have envisaged the future and considered their tribe's successful ventures such as the Mohegan Sun casino.

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