Several times in the past five years we have had the opportunity to rummage through Wawanosh’s box, a collection of papers located in the J.J. Talman Regional History room at the University of Western Ontario. The first reading of the papers was to explore the place of trees in southwestern Ontario Algonquian communities. Wawanosh’s box presented all sorts of interesting clues to the question, providing elaborate contracts for tree cutting, two versions of the Indian Act where trees played a surprising part, and hints of interactions with trees that were quite outside the chop-and-sell scenario typically offered as the reason that trees might be important from the British or Canadian administrator's perspective. A second examination of Wawanosh’s box came in an attempt to find documents pertaining to Wawanosh’s contemporary, James Evans (Valentine 1999). Another very interesting box dedicated to Evan’s papers held in the regional collection room formed the core of that investigation. In that case, Wawanosh’s box came through again, revealing several key letters written by James Evans dealing with southwestern Ontario land claims.

Over the past several years, we have followed public debates surrounding the Stoney Point and Caldwell land claims in southwestern Ontario. In both cases, local community groups were formed to counter the First Nations’ claims. The positions of the non-Native communities are similar, espousing “equality under the law” and private property rights while attacking any form of “special status” based on treaty rights. A major component of the campaign has been to attack the historical justification for the claims and to construct an alternative history of settlement in the region. In the Caldwell Band case, the debate over historical nuance extended to the genealogy of early settlers, suggesting that the ancestors to whom the land was given were of European rather than First Nation descent. When a respected historian, D. Leighton of Huron University

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College in London, entered the fray with an attempt to clarify the events in contention, he drew the ire of local advocates of the predominantly non-Native community network.

These debates made us self-conscious about our own constructions of the past. The use of history for instrumental purposes, like the use of historical data to research land claims or a specific event, involved the imposition of significant filters on the historical data considered or available. As a result, we decided to look at Wawanosh’s box to see what the historical data would tell us if we were to address what was there and attempt to honor its integrity rather than imposing an a priori structure on it. The papers held in the J.J. Talman collection were an easily accessible and rich resource. Given our previous exposure to the collections related to Sarnia, we decided to select the Wawanosh papers, focusing particularly on the first box in the set, which we have called “Wawanosh’s” box. The work proved more challenging than we expected; it forced us to explore a very different path than we would have taken if we had paused to track down answers to specific questions that emerged along the way. The results were often surprising and always enriching.

**THE WAWANOSH FAMILY PAPERS (1807-1964)**

Wawanosh’s box is one of four boxes donated to the J.J. Talman Regional Room in 1969 following the instructions of Agnes (Wawanosh) Sands Merns who died, childless, in 1966. The history of the ownership of the material is a history of a branch of the Wawanosh family of the St. Clair River. The list below gives the basic lineage of the generations of Wawanosh from Kachkinnindji to Agnes Sands Mern, based on information found in the boxes:

**Kachkinnindji**

(Joshua) Waywaynosh/Wawanosh 1781-1860s

David B. [1822-1867, eldest child of Joshua] = Elizabeth [d.1905]

siblings: Joseph, Thomas, William [enfranchised as Wells], Florence


siblings: Francis [1853-1877], Agnes, Minnie, David D. [b.1859]


no siblings, no children

The boxes, numbered 4381-4384 inclusive, provide a history of Joshua Wawanosh (born c1781 somewhere in the Lake Superior region,
possibly in Michigan, whose chieftainship extended from the early 1800s through the late 1840s when he passed on that mantle to the eldest of his sons. Materials in the boxes trace that history through Joshua’s sons David, Joseph, Thomas and William, and through David to his daughter Julia Wawanosh Sands (1854-1931) and from Julia to her only daughter Agnes (1897-1966), who married John Phillips Mern in Brooklyn in the 1920s.

The histories one can find in the boxes are varied and fascinating ranging from histories of land claims and business propositions to love affairs and proper etiquette for visitors. As noted earlier, this paper focuses primarily on the first box, numbered 4381, which we call “Wawanosh’s box”. Box two (4382) is mostly Agnes’s correspondence and business papers – she and her husband Jack Mern built and ran the “Wawanosh Post”, a gas station and convenience store in the Sarnia region for one year in 1937-1938 and many of the materials in this box follow that business.

Agnes was, blessedly, a packrat. Not only did she keep old Sarnia band business materials, she kept almost any piece of paper, from the most damning letters about her and her family to notices of concerts, church bulletins, and the like. It is in the second box (4382) that we trace Agnes’s steps to enfranchisement in the early teens, and later her collusion with her cousin, a son of William Wawanosh, to sell a 29 acre plot that was originally part of the reserve. William had earlier enfranchised and changed his name to Wells. Box three (4383) contains mostly materials that have to do with Agnes’s husband, John “Jack” Mern. The fourth box (4384) is a treasure trove of photographs, and tintypes of, particularly David Wawanosh, the eldest son of Joshua, who was apparently a photographer in addition to his other activities. In this final box, we find three tintypes of David, his wife and one other Wawanosh, notable for their abnormally large size, each measuring approximately 8”x6”.

Wawanosh’s box (4381) provides snippets of life dating from 1807 to 1964. In Series I-1-1, we find most of the oldest materials: there are at least six letters in Series I written in Ojibwe, Roman script, dating from around the 1840s written by various leaders around Lake Huron. There are a couple from the chief of Au Sable and a joint letter from the chiefs of “Au Sable and Kettle point”. There are letters in Ojibwe from George Copway, Peter Jones, and Peter Jacobs, all known for their outstanding English educations and their ability to negotiate in both the Ojibwe and English worlds.
Figure 1: Cartoon by Agnes Sands, circa 1924
In this first series, we learn that Joshua Wawanosh was monolingual in Ojibwe. His eldest son, David, was known for his eloquence in English, apparently translating for his father. We learn that David, while considered fluent in English, still had an Ojibwe accent: his daughter, Julia (traced through Series II and III) however, was considered to be absolutely bilingual, with no trace of accent in either language. Julia’s daughter, Agnes (b. 1897) also in Series III, is accused of being embarrassed to hear and speak Ojibwe, according to a relation in the Grey-Bruce area whom Agnes visited. But, circa 1924, we find the gem shown in Figure 1: a cartoon with Ojibwe and Hebrew created by Agnes in collusion with friends in an upstate New York resort (Series III-1-12) during the period when she was living in Brooklyn. The history here is the story of language shift over four generations, and in this case the shift was not presented as forced, but rather as a marker of political power and big-C cultural status.

Another bit of history found in the box is a note that Wawanosh the elder had moved to the St. Clair region in 1825 after having gotten himself into some trouble in his home area, somewhere farther north, probably in Michigan, based on letters from “family” who were working on land claims in the mid 1800s around the Saginaw area. We also find evidence that Wawanosh was given the largest silver medal in the area for his meritorious service in the War of 1812. Whether this medal was given for bravery or just for really annoying the Americans by fighting against them is hard to determine. In the same box as the letters from the 1840s written in Chippewa/Ojibwe, there are recipes for green tomato relish and remedies for a variety of ailments, such as the “cure” for rheumatism (Figure 2).

There is a very compelling series of letters in Series I: Band History sent from Penetanguishene, by Wawanosh’s cousin, Tagewinini, dating from August 1839 to July 1866 that illustrate the richness of the lives that are recorded in this box. Note that the final letter in the series is found in Series II: Family Papers.
Letter 1: Cold Water August 30th 1839

Dear Brother,

It's a long time since you have sold our lands. I am much in want. I have expected money from you this long time past, + I hope you will send me a part this fall by the mail which there is no difficulty in doing. I shall be satisfied with 100 dollars this fall. Next summer probably I shall go and see you and settle the Ballance [sic]. I should have went to Monatoolin if I had been aware of your being there. I went last year expecting to see you and you did not come + I thought you would not come this year therefore I did not go. It was a long time before I heard you had sold the land the govrnor [sic] was the first to tell me.

From your
most affectionate Brother
Joseph Tawgawini

Letter 2: Saugeeng June 22nd 1843

Chief Wawanash

Dear Brother,

We have just this day received some more news of your troubles, by Atauga,we,ne,ne and in consideration we are very sorry indeed.
Yes we feel for you. We have this day held a council in this place, for the purpose of consulting among all of us, well after examining all your situation, where you now stand, we have made a unanimous will that you had better make away with all you claim there and come and live here with us.

We all hope now that the Great Spirit will help us along, and all that are here present beg and pray that you will not refuse our call, for you to come and live here with us. We do not speak for you alone, but we mean the whole of your band come and help us here, that we may by your assistance conduct affairs which will be best both for us + our children. Dear friend and brother, you will see by the following numbers of names what and who are the ones that speak to you by this paper.

Jacob Mitigoab
Jean Baptist Autanga, we, ne, ne
Oge, mau, waw, be, see, his mark
Manegoewis
Wagam
Nanwaugua
Kadaugegoua
Ma, shau, kewawidaug
Waupagase
(?P) opinash
Manconsanga
c(+njegaubwe
Cowetiosh
c(+ manaquot
Shingonse
Man, day, ge, shig,
Oyemaubeness
(?D)a, ning, goab
David Ritchie
Thomas Ritchie
Madoashemind
Meshauwash
Jacob Autaugawenene

Waubadik of Owen Sound has expressed the same wish that we have written on the other page.

Now my Dear brother as I have come here for this purpose I hope to hear from you soon, and tell me candidly if you will come to live in this place, for I shall do the same thing as it is my great wish or desire to see you here among friends and our direct place of refuge as it where [sic],

From your ever affectionate brother for life,
Jean Baptist Autagawenene

Letter 3: Penetanguishene 2nd July 1843

Dear Brother,

I write you this few lines to let you know that I am just arrived from Sauging. I did not go thier [sic] without been axt by the Chiefs of that place. When I got their they all assembled and had a counsel in their talk they mentioned your name on account of your troubles. They mentioned
that it would be better for you to come and live here with us. That you would be more comfortable and Happy amongst [sic] your friends. In the same time they made me the same offer, my answer was if you came then, that I would go too. I had your letter with me to show them when they seen your troubles they were very sorrow to here [sic] that you was so it used that is the reason they want to see you very much. You will oblige my wife to tell (petowanaquoit) the Clouds over one another) to send her by the vessel one dearskin [sic] for the winter. John Assance, mentioned to me that he would be very glad if you would come and live with us all that is to say at Sauging. He says that we could have the pleasure to visit one another often and in the same he mentions to you that all the headmen of this place talks of going to Manitoulin Island and we expect to have the pleasure to see you their. Equa.wish my sister sends you and your wife her best love. She would have sent him some sugar but the sugar as [sic] failed here entirely.

I remain your brother
Your well wisher for life

J. B\textsuperscript{t} Tagayonini

NB
I would be very happy for Wapose to send his daughter, but it is not an easy thing to send a young girl without som [sic] person to protect her.

Letter 4: Penetanguishene 27\textsuperscript{th} April 1844

Dear Brother

I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated Kingdom 18\textsuperscript{th} April you wish me to send you a statement of your chief­tain ship. I sit down at this moment to give you a very correct account – Namance ['Sturgeon' was penned above the name] which gave your Father Kaskiningi ['Cut Finger' again above the name] his Chiftain ship [sic] and gave him a river called nago cibi ['Sandy River' written above] your father took possession of that river – another Chief (Annimikense) come forward and told your Father I cant attend to both side of River St Clair I give you this side, English side. He I put this wampum belt in your nick. This land will be yours and your children from one generation to another – now no person can dispute your rights of that part of the Contry [sic], this Chieftain ship of yours at present comes from your Great Grand father I don’t see that a few stragglers that as sold their lands to the Americans is coming forward to claim your property — if they don’t believe this let them go at the [torn off] of our nation and enquire of the Otawa [sic] Great Chiefs them is the per­sons to settled every thing concerning our Chieftain ship, and then they will find out the truth –

John Assance. Willie Yellowhead. Waywaynosh. them is the three per­son for this part of upper Canada no other.

I have the honor to be yours for life

Tagayonini

my respects to your family –

John Assance joins me in wishing you to succeed
Letter 5: Penetanguishene 20th April 1845

Chief Waywaynosh
River St Clair
Dear Brother,

This few lines is to let you know that I am just in the start to go at work for my Grandfather lands. I am determined to get them to know how the Company got possession of the lands I depend on what you told me that you never sold that part. I have sent to yellow head and snake for their signature. I will have to send you the same petitions for your signature. I hope you will have no objections. I will not send to you before I get your answer, we have nothing here of any thing worth mentioning. We here all well and maid [sic] plenty of sugar.

I remain Dear Brother
yours for life
J. B[t]. Tagayonini

Letter 6: Penetanguishene 23 August 1845

Chief Waywaynosh
River St Clair
Dear Brother,

This few lines is to let you know the news of this place. I wish to mention to you that I have had talk with Anderson and in the same time I mentioned to him about you being a Chief at least he enquired of me how you came to be Chief. As I was not at a loss I told him everything and in the same time I mentioned some other Indians that could tell him the same that were living in the States. I told him that thay [sic] was one the name of Salt that was living with you that could tell him the same – Anderson answer of [sic] I had told him how things was. I am very glad to know all this. I am going to make it my duty to have all the right Chiefs as they out [ought] to be I understand that there is a good many of these Indians that pretence be Chiefs. I will have all them excluded and [word missing] right Chiefs more forever, to not give fir... [word/ words missing] drunkard them that will not be Christian and them that will not obley [sic] their Chiefs. I have to inform you that I have a few days ago forwarded my petition to His Excellency the Governor General. I enclose your certificate and the map you made out for my share of land. The reason I have sent your paper is to give an information to the Governor, how these lands is our property from our Grand Father – I suppose you will be questioned about this business about my lands. [missing word] you will not say thing against what is right [as we h]ave done for you. Wm Wabatik will take your example and do the same. I have nothing more to say.

I wish you well and all your family. We are all well here.
Thank God. I hope god all mighty will keep you in good health
J. B. Tagayonini
his [picture of a deer] mark
Letter 7: Penetanguishene 10th February 1946

My Dear Brother

In respect to the lands I have a claim for at Goderiche I sent in a petition to the Governor General accompanied by your certificate as to my claim being well founded, to which I received no answer but having lately seen our Superintendent T. G. Anderson Esq I spoke to him concerning the same, and as the matter I suppose had been referred to him, he tells me that the greatest difficulty that lies in the way is that the Government entered your name for the whole of the said lands and that you regularly receive the annuity stipulated for the same, that [?never] the matter cannot be attend, but Mr. Anderson advises [sic] as the more equitable plan that you should allow me during my natural life a sum of two hundred dollars yearly and that you continue to receive the annuity for the whole as usual as the Government does not feel disposed to make any alterations in the arrangements they have entered into with you. I therefore will willingly agree to give up all further claim to the said lands on your agreeing to pay to me yearly the sum above mentioned with my best wishes for yourself + your family. I remain my Dear Brother

Affectionately yours

[deer with antlers] Tawgawinnie

Mark

Letter 8: Wikwemikong, Manitoulin Island March 7th / 50

Mr. Chief Joshua Wawanosh
Port Sarnia C. W.

Wamens formerly head chief of the whole tract of land comprising Owen Sound, Sauging, Goderic, the Sale and Port Sarnia, had nine brothers. To one of his nephews, Kabisanichkang, he gave the tract of land from Owen Sound to Sauging inclusive. Wabitick, the present Chief, is the son of Kabisanickkang. Wamens also gave to Kach-kinnin-dji another of his nephews from the Sable to Sarnia inclusive. Wa wanosh the present chief of that tract of land is the son of Kach-kinnindji. He Wamens reserved to himself from within 20 miles of Sauging to 10 of the Sable(?). He had no children but a step daughter named Mosson-equah whom he adopted for his own. She married a nephew of Wamens [written above, kitakinjisso] and had two sons - Sa ga a nagwech kang and - Ta-ge-winini. The elder of whom Sagaanageckkang she gave to her step father to serve and take care of the old chief, who at his death made him his heir and chief of all the land he had reserved to himself. One month after the death of Wamens, his adopted son Sagaanagweckkang died also, and consequently Jean Baptiste Tagewiniini lawful brother of Sagaanageckkang became successor to the land in question. But he have neglected to take immediate possession [sic] of the same, his cousin Wawanosh monopolized and sold it to Government. He, Wawanosh, denies having sold it an notwithstanding Tagewiniini's repeated applications to him for a share, at least, of the pay, the only satisfaction he can obtain is the usual reply - “apply to the government for your rights, I never sold your land.”
Sir Geo. Coleburn when Governor told Tagewinini that the land in question had been purchased of Wawanosh and offered to transfer the pay from him to Tagewinini, but the latter refused to deprive his cousin of the other whole of the pay, trusting to his generosity and honesty, to be allowed at least an equal share of the same. Sir Geo Coleburn expressed his approval of Tagewinini’s decision in favour of Wawanosh saying that he had no doubt but that he would act honestly in the matter, but such has not been the case and now Tagewinini’s only resource is to state the facts as they are, and demand that justice may be done him. He will be well to state that five years since Tagewinini received to the amount of $180. In small remittances at different periods from Wawanosh by way of present as the latter expressed it, and not as pay for the land.

His
Jean Baptist + Tagewinini
mark [the mark is an equilateral cross]

Letter 9: Penetanguishene 24 July 1866

My Dear Uncle,

My father requests me to write you to say that he has for sometime been expecting an answer to his last letter and is very anxious to hear from you. He has been very bad for this Sometime past with the ague. John Aipanis’ young men are now playing the Same game that your has or trying with you wishing to put him out of his Chieftainship when men get so vile as to debate th...stens by using all kind of underhand work – it is a disturbing thing to the community they belong, in your case you are sober + have your wits about your, not so with poor John he unfortunately allows himself to be led astray by drink which will give his enemies as I may so call them an advantage over him. But I hope they will not succeed in their Satanic work. Excuse this short scrawl as I am rather in a hurry to write more at ?la... please write as soon as possible given us all the news as we are very anxious to hear from you. My love to all friends in which my father + mother sincerely joins. I remain My dear uncle

Your Effectionate [sic]
Nephew
Joseph Tagawinini

[Addressed to:]
Mr Wawanosh
Chief
Port Sarnia

CONCLUSION

What makes a good history? We found many potential histories in the collection. Wawanosh’s box is rich in materials that come from all aspects of life. There is a genealogy of the tribal linkages spanning southwestern Ontario. There is a record of oral and textual language shift. There is material that documents love affairs, morality, mobility and social prac-
tices including recipes, medicines and even standards of cleanliness. The letters presented above have been the most frequently requested items in the box. They have been read for their insights into land claims and histories of band governance. However, that is only one aspect of the story that they tell. Issues of family relations are as central to the letters as are the issues of land ownership.

Our efforts not to impose a theme of relevance on the materials let us see potential (hi)stories we had never imagined. Music played a huge part in the Wawanosh family, as did writing, drawing and photography. The wills, handwritten and often redone through the years, show expectations of transferring goods across gender lines and generations. As interesting as the wills are the several letters sent by non-family members following funerals to claim items either worn by the deceased or found in his or her home. Diaries were surprisingly candid. The collection allows for wide-ranging entry into people’s lives through four generations.

The only frightening thing found in Wawanosh’s box were the pencilled comments in the finding guide that read, “weed”. Like dandelions, these weeds may be the spiciest part of the mix, but such weeds are likely to be pulled if the gardener has preconceived ideas of what a salad should be.

REFERENCES