

Quarter-Acre of Heartache

Claude Clayton Smith, Emeritus English Professor, Ohio Northern University

Claudeclaytonsmith.wordpress.com

Shanti Arts Publishing

www.shantiarts.com

9781962082716, \$19.95 USD

Amazon

<https://www.amazon.com/Quarter-Acre-Heartache-Claude-Clayton-Smith/dp/1962082717>

Can conflicts extending back 300+ years be resolved? Who really adjudicates Native American affairs and protects their rights? In Quarter-Acre of Heartache Wisconsin author Claude C. Smith, Emeritus English Professor, Ohio Northern University, illuminates the fight by the Golden Hill Paugussett tribe to save their reservation in Trumbull, Connecticut, and finds answers to these questions.

In 1976 while the United States celebrated 200 years as a democracy, the Golden Hills tribe experienced an older, uglier American story. A white neighbor filed a lawsuit claiming ownership of their land and demanding Chief Big Eagle vacate it. The once-extensive reservation, created in 1659 and understood to be among the earliest, had been chiseled down to a quarter-acre. Now even it was threatened.

Chief Big Eagle (Aurelius Piper, Sr.) heard about the suit while researching the Delaware language at Wisconsin's Munsee Reservation and counter-sued. Such veterans of the 1973 Wounded Knee stand-off as AIM activist Russell Means and renowned civil rights attorney William Kunstler joined Munsee colleagues and other tribal representatives to turn the Golden Hills' protest into a national benchmark.

Hailing from Stratford near Trumbull, Smith met the chief when the protest made the news. Their interactions led to the 1985 publication of Quarter-Acre of Heartache (Pocahontas Press).

This summer in 2025, on the eve of the nation's 250th Anniversary, Shanti Arts Publishing has published a new edition. It has the edited original with updated Preface and Afterward, including information about subsequent international experiences the two men shared, along with additional photos and more recent documents and news accounts. This edition shows the chief's impact during his 92 years, including the 1994 publication of a Russian language Quarter-Acre.

Smith's decision to write in first-person in the chief's voice gives authenticity to the intertwined themes of survival and loss, laced with hope. After describing the abundant wildlife in thick forests sustaining their structured communities before Europeans arrived, the chief asserts, "My ancestors walked in beauty" (27). His yearning for that lifestyle defined him. He lived alone in the Maine woods for three years as a teen and later returned to Trumbull to help his elderly uncle, Chief Black Hawk, on the reservation. Later as Full Chief facing the lawsuit, he assessed their position: "Not very much room for an Indian nation" (34).

Yet with outside supporters, his people stood their ground, even facing violent attacks. Citing the chief's frustration over legal stalemates, the author details the staggering layers of legal oversight that often leave Native peoples in limbo. Smith's emphasis shows the leader's transformation into a knowledgeable activist and savvy chief learning the legal twists to enhance his tribe's future, to attain more land, a tribal center, and respect within Trumbull.

In his 2025 update, Smith discusses his and Chief Big Eagle's 1990-91 travels to Russia during the Soviet Union's dissolution. The Indianists who invited them admired Native Americans' refusal to conform and assimilate. The pair also joined a large Russian pow-wow, a recreation of a Native American event. Smith fully describes the surreal experience in *Red Man in Red Square* (Pocahontas Press, 1994) but offers fascinating background [here](#).

Chief Big Eagle's enduring dedication parallels the United Nations' commitment in their "Decades of Indigenous Peoples" to ensure the dignity, respect, and lasting heritage for indigenous populations claiming space and rights in a modern world. Claude Clayton Smith's *Quarter-Acre of Heartache* (2025) provides inspiring history and valuable information for communities with similar goals.

**Eva B. McManus
Reviewer**
