

Six Nations chief fought to keep U.S. border open; Annual celebration will be held Saturday in Niagara Falls

George Beaver

Wednesday, July 12,2006 - 01:00

Local News - Last week, I was reminded that the 2006 Border Crossing Celebration at Niagara Falls will be taking place this Saturday. The Celebration, as we used to call it when I was young, was well-known back in the 1940s. Its purpose was to keep the U.S.-Canada border open to aboriginal people.

Tuscarora Chief Clinton Rickard and friends from the Six Nations Reserve founded the Six Nations Defense League in the 1920s. When it was discovered that other native people were also being discriminated against when crossing the border, the name was changed to Indian Defense League of America.

With the help of the League, Rickard and his wife sent out 500 letters to U.S. judges, senators and congressmen. This was difficult for them because they had very little formal education.

Rickard also made speeches to the various veterans organizations to which he belonged. They were like a newer version of the old traditional warrior societies of the Six Nations Iroquois.

He also used the Freemasons Lodge, of which he was a member, to educate his white Masonic brothers about native culture and rights. The Masons, too, were like the ancient Iroquois secret societies.

Rickard even wore his traditional Tuscarora regalia in order to meet tourists from all parts of the United States in Niagara Falls. Those who were interested in helping were asked to speak or write to their congressmen. Rickard worked very hard to influence public opinion and expose the racial discrimination against Six Nations people at the U.S. border points.

In 1927, some of his hard work paid off. In the district court of Pennsylvania, Judge Dickinson ruled that the Jay Treaty of 1794 was still in effect. In March 1928, the Third Circuit, Court of Appeal upheld Dickinson's decision.

president signed law

In April 1928, U.S. President Calvin Coolidge signed a bill of Congress, supported by the League. The right of Canadian-born aboriginal people to freely cross the border had become law.

The League led by Rickard of the Beaver Clan held the first Free Border Crossing Celebration on July 14, 1928. Anishnabek speakers from Maniwaki, north of Ottawa, brought sled dogs to the parade across the bridge as a reminder that it is for all aboriginal people born north of the line.

The original league members are now gone but the organization is still here, but in a much weaker state. They are asking for volunteers this year to step forward at the border to help give out the paper Border Crossing signs for cars, at the Peace Bridge in Niagara Falls, ant.

It is now a burden for older members to direct traffic, umpire softball games, adjust microphones and do the many other minor tasks that need to be done at the celebration on the U.S. side.

If some of you teens and twenty-somethings want to make a contribution to a worthwhile cause, especially if you are going anyway, volunteer your help at the border or at the park.

Next year may be too late. The U.S. is tightening up the border in the near future. Now is the time for supporters of the Border Crossing Celebration to act.

Our town is a forum for news and views from smaller communities in our area. George Beaver is a Six Nations based freelance writer.

•