

Johnson's Verse Mediocre

HAMILTON (CP) — Indian poet Pauline Johnson, who had difficulty in having verse published while she lived, was subsequently "chosen for immortality by the literary boosters of the 1920s, a McMaster university assistant professor said today.

In an address to the International Conference on Iroquoian Studies at the university, Dr. Norman Shrive said interest in Miss Johnson was stimulated by the non-literary aspects of her career.

Shortly after her birth

in 1861, a sense of urgency was felt for a truly Canadian literature and in post - Confederation Canada it was more important that verse be written by a Canadian than that it be poetry, he added.

Miss Johnson was born on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, the daughter of a hereditary Mohawk chief and an English mother. She was determined to write but realized that she could earn no more than a few cents when she was fortunate enough to have work published.

She therefore embarked upon a career that essentially catered to popular taste of her time, he explained. Dressed in Indian costume she went from city to city, town to town, even barn to barn, reciting her verse and reading her interpretations of Indian legends.

In her costume, complete with scalps hanging from her waist she "could have carried at least part of the audience by merely standing on stage." The professor described the tours as being in the tradition of the music hall.

If an unprejudiced, dispassionate assessment of Pauline Johnson's verse was made, said the professor, "I think we shall see that she is to be neither unrestrainedly praised nor sneeringly scorned."