

Bread and cheese tradition introduced by queen in 1860s

OHSWEKEN — Bread and Cheese Day is fast approaching. For those who don't know, Bread and Cheese Day is an old tradition on the Six Nations Indian Reserve. It started well over a century ago, during the long reign of Queen Victoria. For many years it fell on May 24, which was Queen Victoria's birthday. Queen Victoria was regarded with great affection in the 1800s by the Six Nations Council of Confederacy Chiefs.

On a recent visit to the Woodland Indian Centre on Mohawk Street, Tom Hill, curator of the centre's museum, told me a very intriguing story. One of Tom's ancestors, Oronhyadekha, was the official interpreter for the Chiefs on the occasion of a visit by the Prince of Wales. The prince was Queen Victoria's eldest son. On discovering that the young Oronhyadekha was interested in a higher education, the Prince and Dr. Ackland, who was accompanying him, encouraged him to go to Oxford University in England. Oronhyadekha, whose English name was Peter Martin, took them up on the offer and went to Oxford. He stayed with Dr. Ackland and also became a medical doctor. Tom's family used to refer to him as Dr. O.

When it came time to return to Canada, Queen Victoria asked him what he would like to take back with him as a souvenir. He jokingly said that he would like her throne. To his great surprise, she said that there just happened to be a spare throne sitting in Westminster Abbey and she would send it along shortly. She either had a great sense of humor, or none at all.

In due course, the throne, complete with a heavy Stone of Scone underneath it, arrived at Dr. Oronhyadekha's home. Tom has an old picture of it sitting in Dr. O's livingroom. The Stone of Scone, from Scotland, was necessary to make a royal coronation official. The throne is now in the possession of the Royal Ontario Museum.

In 1860, during the early part of Queen Victoria's reign, the

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George
Beaver



large sum of money being held by the British government for the Six Nations was transferred back to North America. Perhaps this is why she was so popular with the Six Nations. It was also sometime in the 1860s that the queen sent funds to buy bread and cheese. That was to ensure that none of the Six Nations, her faithful allies, would be hungry on May 24, her birthday. Perhaps Oronhyadekha had something to do with it.

Queen Victoria had not come from a wealthy family and she was very careful with her money, even after becoming Queen of England. Her gift to the Six Nations was probably intended to be a one-shot affair. However, it proved to be so popular that successive councils have continued the practice to the present time with hardly any breaks.

As far as can be determined, the money for the first bread and cheese was a real gift from the queen. It did not replace bullets, blankets or flour, which some treaties called for. These others were actual payment for services rendered in wars on behalf of the British. They were not gifts or presents, although some history books wrongly call them that.

Dr. Peter Martin (Oronhyadekha) founded the Independent Order of Foresters which has also continued to the present time. He modelled the organization on the Ancient Order of Foresters, which he saw operating in Europe.

Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the district. George Beaver is a Six Nations Reserve resident and was a teacher and principal on the Six Nations and New Credit reserves for 33 years.