

Revival of traditional ceremony called part of reserve's cultural 'awakening'

By Anne Jarvis
Expositor Staff

NEW CREDIT — The sun's rays shone on nine Indians standing in a clearing around a fire, their heads bowed and their hands clasped.

The Indians, Mississaugas of the New Credit, remained still and quiet, praying.

The traditional native ceremony, celebrated when the sun rises to thank the Creator for the day, was about three hours late starting on Tuesday.

The ceremony was held behind the band council and administration building.

Despite the inauspicious start, it was an important part of a cultural "awakening" on the New Credit Reserve, said Joanne Sault, the band's social services administrator.

Mrs. Sault credits the band's young people with rousing other members. Searching for the cause of lack of esteem and confidence, they discovered what was really missing — their identity.

"They wanted some sense of identity, of belonging," she said. "They realized how important it is to learn what it is to be Indian. It teaches a way of life."

Indians and non-Indians have realized that being native is "not just living on a reserve and not pay-

ing tax," said Betty Duxtater, a Mohawk from the Six Nations Reserve who co-ordinates a cultural program at New Credit.

Mrs. Sault watched her husband, band councillor Mark Sault, who was the firekeeper. He lit and tended the fire, which represents the sun, the source of life.

A man must perform that role because the sun is believed to be the male counterpart of the moon.

A boy playing with the fire was told to stop because the fire must be respected.

The leader was Wendell Froman, an Onondaga from the Six Nations. The designated leader was not there yet, so the people asked Mr. Froman to replace him. They offered him the traditional gift of tobacco. He accepted. It was arranged.

Symbol of life

Mr. Froman gathered the people in a circle, symbolizing the cycle of life. He stood on the east side of the fire, the position of the morning sun to the earth, and burned braided sweetgrass. The grass is the hair of Mother Earth and is almost always braided to denote the intertwining of body, mind and spirit.

Then the leader took the grass to each person, moving around the circle in the same direction as the

earth rotates. The people waved the smoke over their bodies, called "smudging," to purify themselves.

Each person then dropped the tobacco into the fire.

The smoke is called "visible thoughts" because as it floats through the air it carries the people's thoughts to the Creator.

The ceremony was silent and lasted only 10 minutes. Mr. Froman told the people they should pray only in Ojibway, their native language. But the participants didn't know Ojibway, so they were told to simply think good thoughts.

Indians who have maintained traditional ways celebrate the ceremony each morning. Another ritual at night asks the Creator for the next day.

It was only the third time the ceremony has been celebrated here. It is saved for special occasions — this time, a meeting to plan the first powwow on the reserve.

The Three Fires Homecoming Powwow is planned for Aug. 22 and 23, behind the band's council and administration building.

The phrase "three fires" refers to the alliance of the three tribes, Ojibway, Pottawatami and Ottawa. The word "homecoming" notes the revival of the culture of the Mississaugas, a band of Ojibway.

Sacred Feathers Theatre Company, a group of between 10 and 20 children from the reserve, will perform a play at the powwow. To be called either Dream Seekers or Visions, it will be about traditional native culture.

Native history

The group was started as part of Miss Duxtater's program. The children learn voice, acting, dancing and making masks, as well as native history and culture.

Native singing, drumming, dancing and stories are among regular activities at the recreation complex on Mondays from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

The program started with native language classes two years ago. But because it was based on volunteers, people met only once a month. It has been funded since February, enabling the band to hire Miss Duxtater and schedule more activities.

"People are warming up to it," Mr. Froman said. "It's going to take time."

"There will always be people who say it is devil worship. They have lost their sense of what being Indian means. Some have been taught that even speaking Indian is pagan. It's really pitiful. They don't understand this is theirs."

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Wayne Roper, Expositor Staff

Vince Sault enacts part of a traditional native sunrise ceremony on the New Credit Reserve on Tuesday. Indians do not allow photographs of the actual ceremony.