

Border crossing celebration

OHSWEKEN — This Saturday will mark the 61st annual Free Border Crossing Celebration for Indians of North America. The word free refers to the freedom of natives to cross the international border between the U.S. and Canada. It is an example of a freedom which was taken for granted for thousands of years before the white men came and created Canada and the U.S.

They also arbitrarily created a border which suddenly divided families, clans and Indian nations from each other. As was usual with the white Europeans, who regarded themselves as conquerors, the rights of the natives were ignored. There were no consultations in regard to the disruption of the native way of life. The whites arrogantly believed that what was good for them was good for everybody. It is a belief to which some whites still stubbornly cling.

After more than two centuries, it is still the norm for natives to find that laws and regulations have been formulated and passed without their knowledge or consent. Laws in regard to crossing the international border are a case in point.

Article 3 of the Jay Treaty of 1794 restored the freedom to cross the border to North America's original people. It was reaffirmed 20 years later in Article 9 of the Treaty of Ghent. This double reminder of native rights was soon being ignored by the U.S. New immigration

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laws, such as a law which barred illiterates, was used to stop Indians from crossing the border.

While white people freely crossed the border, the original people of this continent were being treated as aliens in the land which they had freely roamed from time immemorial. The Six Nations Iroquois were very hard-hit by this discriminatory treatment. People of the Oneida Reserve, Six Nations Reserve, and Mohawks on the Tyendinaga, St. Regis and Kahnawake Reserves, all had relatives on New York reservations. To be turned away at the border, when going over to see an aging relative for the last time, was very hard to take. And not being allowed to attend a beloved grandmother's funeral, just a few miles over the line, was almost unbearable.

Because 61 years seems a very long time to the present generation, many Indians do not remember what a great victory the first Free Border Crossing was for all North American

natives. For an older generation, the border was the Indians' Berlin Wall. It is to be hoped that the young people will continue to keep this custom alive. If it lapses for even one year, it might not be revived.

It took years of legal efforts and letter writing to win back the right to freely cross the border. Much of this work was done by Chief Clinton Rickard of the Tuscarora Indian Reservation and the Indian Defence League of America, which he helped found. One of his helpers was Levi General, a Cayuga Sachem of the Six Nations Confederacy, whose hereditary title was Chief Deskaheh. Others were Frank and Teresa Meness, Algonquins from Maniwaki, David Hill, Sophie Martin and her son, Leslie Martin, from Six Nations and Huron Claus, a Baptist evangelist. All of these individuals helped in some way to bring about a civil rights victory for the Indian people.

The only similar border crossing that I know of is allowed to one native tribe which migrates north across the Mexican-U.S. border every winter. They have done this since prehistoric times before there was a Mexico or a United States.