

Border celebration a colorful event

OHSWEKEN — Recently I attended the 61st annual Free Indian Border Crossing at Niagara Falls. My wife wanted to join her softball team so we did not wait for the parade at the border. We went on across to Hyde Park on the American side. As we approached the U.S. side, we saw an Indian man handing out windshield stickers with "Border Crossing Celebration" on them in large letters. With this in our window, we were waved on through customs.

We got to Hyde Park around noon. A couple of the men's teams had already started to play fastpitch. There were some empty ball diamonds but the women's teams were standing around. I suppose they were slow to start because they were going to play slowpitch.

I headed for a picnic area where the afternoon program was to take place. I walked around looking at some beautiful Indian crafts that were for sale. It was cool under the tall trees. A public address system and a platform had been set up in a sunny spot.

After the marchers in the parade arrived, the afternoon program began. The master-of-ceremonies had been a member of the Indian Defence League of America for many years. The first thing he did was move the microphone from the platform in the hot sun to a shady place nearby. After welcoming everyone, he introduced the marching bands. One was from the nearby Tuscarora Reservation in New York State and the other was from the Oneida Reserve near London, Ont. They played several musical numbers for us.

He then called on the Ximali (She-maw-lee) Aztec Indian Dancers from Mexico City. They had bright native costumes with graceful poses

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over their shoulders. Their headdresses featured long pheasant feathers instead of the hawk, owl or eagle feathers usually seen around here. Around their legs were strings of shells which clattered in time with the music when they danced. They danced barefoot on the grass as their forefathers had done before the Spanish arrived. Many people do not realize that there are still lots of Indian people in Mexico. Some still speak their own native languages. After 400 years of Spanish domination, their Indian culture still has not been wiped out.

An attractive young member of the Aztec dance troupe, who could speak English fairly well, explained a bit about the dances. Her speech was interspersed with a few Spanish words. The other dancers were not fluent in English.

After thanking us for letting them share a bit of their culture, they asked the audience to join in a Friendship Dance. Many did and soon there was a large circle of would-be dancers, trying to keep up to the big wooden drum. After much stumbling and laughing, the dance was over and the Aztec Indians prepared to leave.

They had to hurry back to The Turtle, as the Indian Centre in downtown Niagara Falls is called. They were to perform in the big, turtle-shaped building that evening.

Our master-of-ceremonies, Harry Hill, next introduced Barbara Graymont, editor of the biography of Chief Clinton Rickard, called Fighting Tuscarora. Chief Rickard was the founder of the Indian Defence League of America. Ms. Graymont teaches history at Nyack College, near New York City. She told about the formation of the League of Peace.

When that was over there was a baby contest. Mr. Hill asked for each baby's nation and clan. One mother claimed that her baby was of the Killdeer clan but Mr. Hill explained that there was no such clan. They decided that she must be a snipe (woodcock) which is also a long-legged bird.

Each contestant was dressed in Indian regalia and there were cash prizes for children of different ages. Later there was to be Miss IDLA beauty contest but it was getting late and I had to leave. I arrived back at the playing fields in time to see my wife's team play the final game with Oneida Reserve. We won.

We wound up the day with a short shopping trip and a stop for supper at a restaurant. And our sticker was still good at the border when we came across.