

No English used in Longhouse service

OHSWEKEN — A few weeks ago I attended a funeral at the Upper Cayuga Longhouse at Frog Pond on the reserve. The funeral was for an old friend, Laval Staats, a brother of our former chief councillor, Wellington Staats. I had known Laval since he was a boy in my first class at Six Nations School No. 3. He worked at the Little Buffalo store and even though he was now in his forties, he always called me sir. He was friendly and easy going.

Although I had driven past this Longhouse many times, I had never been inside before. However, I had attended funerals at the Lower Cayuga Longhouse, where some of my relatives are buried. I had also played fastball at the Seneca Longhouse and the Onondaga Longhouse in my younger days.

The funeral was for 11 a.m. Followers of the Longhouse religion believe that the burial must take place before noon. My wife and I were early. As we entered the Longhouse, a stout, casually-dressed man came over to us and asked us if we were relatives. The relatives were to sit along the south wall. When I said no, I was sent to sit on the east side, which was the men's side. My wife sat opposite, on

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the women's side. The middle of the room was empty.

The Longhouse had two rows of seats all around the four sides, like steps. The back row was high against the wall so those in front would not block anyone's view. Along the south wall hung several turtle-shell rattles. The rest of the walls were bare.

Laval was well-liked, with many friends both Indian and white. The Longhouse soon filled up. The hearse from Styres Funeral Home in Ohsweken arrived with many relatives following. The casket was wheeled in and put in the middle of the floor. Because the women's side was full, a couple of women had to sit on the men's side.

An elderly gentleman, well-dressed in a suit

and tie, had quietly taken his place toward the foot of the casket. At exactly 11 a.m. he stood up and began to address those assembled. He spoke for 20 minutes without one word of English. When he finished, we circled the casket counter-clockwise to observe our friend one last time. Some of the relatives wept out loud and few of us came out with dry eyes.

Then we followed the hearse to a little cemetery, a few hundred yards away. There were a few headstones and crosses but no large monuments. The grass was not cut. No noisy lawn mowers trouble the last resting places of those peacefully lying there.

The speaker again addressed us in an Indian language for a few minutes. Then he relented and told us in English that we were all invited back to Little Buffalo for a lunch. We then quietly dispersed back to our cars and left our friend to his eternal rest near the trees by a meadow.