

a 'stunning' discovery

OHSWEKEN — The "last flicker" of a great people's 10,000-year-old culture has been found in Bob and Leona Moses' basement.

And the stunning find was just a "flake," an amateur anthropologist says.

David Oestreicher, a 28-year-old history student from Eastchester, N. Y., had read about a mask believed to be all that is left of the Delaware Indians' religion in Canada.

He stumbled upon it while visiting this week in the big yellow brick house, almost hidden by trees, on Sixth Line.

"It was stunning," he said Friday. "It was a marvelous unexpected discovery."

The mask, a face carved in wood and painted red, represents the Creator. The eyes, made of tin, flash from under the deep lines etched in the forehead. The mouth, stretching from one side of his face to the other, is open, revealing wood teeth. It's not a smile or a frown.

It's a look of power and it's framed by long black hair, probably from a horse's tail.

It was worn by a chief and medicine man. It gave him power to heal people, it was believed. When it wasn't used, it hung on a post in the centre of the Big House, the name of the building where the Delawares worshipped, until 1850, when they were converted to Anglicans.

There are two stories about what happened to the mask after that.

One is that the chief and medicine man gave it to the wife of Rev. Adam Elliott, the missionary who converted the Delaware, in 1860. She gave it to Rev. I. M. Racey in 1876 and he gave it to the church.

The other story is that Mr. Elliott and Chief George Johnson, father of Pauline Johnson, took the mask as a souvenir to commemorate the conversion.

Mr. Moses' father, Elliott, a Delaware, started looking for the mask 100 years later and found it in the Anglican Women's Auxiliary office in London. The church returned it to the family.

The mask is the only one that still belongs to the Delaware and the only one pictured in the two mair books on the people. The rest of the remaining masks come from Oklahoma, where most of the Delawares moved starting in the late 18th century.

Last relic

"This represents the last relic of a great people who flourished," Mr. Oestreicher said. "It's a very ancient part of their culture."

"The only way I can explain what (the Delaware) feel is that, to a believing Indian, it's as if they came across the Ark of the Covenant or the Shroud."

A 77-year-old Delaware woman from Oklahoma, one of the last people who knew the culture, found one of her people's masks in a museum.

Mr. Oestreicher, who talked to her before she died in 1984, will never forget her reaction.

"So many Delaware had danced around it, touched it, including her, she said. She felt as if she had met an old friend. But she couldn't even touch it. It was behind glass. She cried."

The religious ceremonies were last performed there in 1924, when the woman was 16.

Mr. and Mrs. Moses also have a board from a plain wood bench for the firesweeper in the ceremonies. His job was to sweep the evil away from the fire.

The Big House, the last one in this area, is gone, too.

The wood building, which looked like an Iroquois longhouse, was on the east bank of Boston Creek, between the creek and the Canadian National Railway tracks, in what is known as Smoohtown.

People in the community say it was sold to a farmer named Thomas Campbell, who tore it down, took it to Caledonia, and put it up again. It was used as a blacksmith's shop first and then as a barn.

Mr. Campbell tried to sell it to a museum for \$200, but the museum refused it.

The stories are divided into two different endings. One is that the building collapsed in 1938 and the wood was used as fuel. The other is that the building was knocked down to accommodate a new road.

A man named Nick Peters who died in the 1940s or 1950s was the last person in the community who knew the culture, Mr. Oestreicher said. Now there is no one, just "a

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word here, a song there to show there was a culture."

The Delaware, who used to live in the eastern United States from New York to Delaware, have been traced back as long as 10,000 years, Mr. Oestreicher said.

They called themselves "Lenape," which means "ordinary people." Europeans called them Delaware because they lived by the river named after Sir Thomas West, Lord De la Warr.

The people lived in small settlements named after the land. Manhattan, where one group lived, means "island."

The Delaware were at the height of their existence in the 16th and 17th centuries. There were up to 20,000 of them.

But white settlers took their land

and their animals and white diseases took their lives. So they moved.

The 20th century is the "twilight" of the Delaware, Mr. Oestreicher said. He called the mask in the Moses house "the last flicker," of their culture.

Mr. Moses, 61, and his 59-year-old wife are Anglican. They speak only English. But Mr. Oestreicher has inspired them to learn more about their culture, Mrs. Moses said. When they die, they want their children to keep the mask so it stays with the people.