

A change in federal law last year has ended a 117-year prohibition against alcohol on Canadian Indian reserves.

1986

Change in alcohol law creates new challenges for Six Nations

Political, cultural changes may follow end of the ban

OHSWEKEN — Prohibition has ended on the Six Nations Reserve.

On Dec. 28, a federal law passed last June came into effect, allowing natives to consume alcohol on reserves and giving their businesses and community organizations the right to apply for liquor licences and special occasion permits.

There is some disagreement among community leaders over the immediate impact on reserve life of the change in the law.

However, there is agreement on the political ramifications of the law. Many Six Nations leaders believe that the change is also tied to continuing discussions about native autonomy. They argue it represents another attempt by the federal government to impose its version of self-government on natives without consultation.



Chief Coun. Montour
Political ramifications

The federal government had prohibited alcohol on reserves since 1868.



Wilton Bomberry
Teach responsibility

— "Don't drink the fire-water because the water will quench the fire."

That is what native elders have been telling their young people since they were introduced to alcohol centuries ago. Despite the warning, natives remain victims of alcoholism. And the fire, symbol of the spirit, has suffered.

Cultures different

But natives are still vulnerable to alcoholism because of cultural differences, and this makes the native alcoholic one of the most misunderstood and loneliest victims of the disease.

One difference is that natives are taught to share whereas white people are taught to be competitive, Mr. Bomberry said. A native in a white environment suffers "culture shock."

"For a native who leaves the reserve, it's easier to socialize in a hotel room where there is alcohol rather than deal with the loneliness."

Mr. Bomberry, who has been sober for 13 years after a seven-year drinking bout, speaks from experience.

Ten years ago, he earned \$25,000 a year as a diesel mechanic for the United States Air Force. Because he was single, he spent

most of his money on material possessions and alcohol.

"I felt guilty," he confessed, "but I didn't know why. In white society I was considered successful, but in native society I didn't have a family to share it with."

According to Iroquoian ethics, Indians should not demonstrate anger, Mr. Bomberry said.

This ethic stems from the code of noninterference. Every natural thing in the universe possesses a spirit because it originated from the Creator. Disrupting another spirit upsets the Creator's plan.

In the extended family of the traditional Longhouse, every person had a role to perform and anger was deemed disturbing. War was considered the means for venting anger, one of the reasons the Iroquois were such fierce warriors.

"In today's society, there isn't an appropriate outlet. When a native person drinks, his normal restraining mechanism is lessened and the anger that has built up is expelled."

The bottom line is a society's ability to adjust. "Non-native society has had 2,000 years to set up norms for drinking, whereas native society has only been allowed to drink legally for 30 years."

Just as the reasons for drinking in native society differ from those in white society, so does the treatment. That is why it is important for a native to counsel a native, Mr. Bomberry said.

More than 98 per cent of the 480 clients who use the centre annually are native, which is the reason the seven staff members are native. "The understanding is already there. There is a basic unity. You don't have to say anything because the other person already knows."

Counsellors avoid a structured setting, Mr. Bomberry said, adding that native culture is democratic. "When they (native clients) are put into a counselling situation where one person is domineering, it is viewed as a power trip."

A native client who agrees to an appointment may not be ready to start at that time. But if he appears the next day, Mr. Bomberry offers his help.

"It throws time management right out the window, but that's when the best counselling sessions are. That's when the native is ready to talk and get rid of the excess luggage he has been carrying around."

The counsellor may employ humor to "break down the barrier of uncomfortableness".

Because of the code of noninterference, natives are not accustomed to seeking help from other

people, Mr. Bomberry said. It is difficult for them to make that first move.

"If you're native, you don't hang out your dirty laundry. Many natives feel that talking to another person about their feelings means they are being weak and burdening the other person's spirit."

Aware of protocol

The same code means that natives are conscious of protocol. A native needs time to adjust to the situation before he can respond to the counsellor's questions. Mr. Bomberry said.

It is also important to remember that in native society eye contact is considered disrespectful. Often the client does not look at the counsellor, but that does not mean he is not listening. Such cultural differences are frequently perceived by white people as unwillingness to co-operate when it is really ignorance, Mr. Bomberry said.

Positive feedback is important for native clients, Mr. Bomberry said. Traditionally, each member of a native family is expected to perform a role and there is little praise for completing tasks.

"Working with native clients, we reinforce the positive things they do so they will have the energy to work on changing the negative things."

The problems of native alcoholics are magnified for those who belong to the Confederacy, which adheres to the Longhouse culture, Mr. Bomberry said. They are removed from and dominated by both modern native and white societies.

Because the Longhouse culture is based on traditional beliefs, the first step in treating its clients is to help them regain their perspective.

"Their beliefs are their foundation. Everything they do in life relates to them. You have to reinforce that there is nothing wrong with their beliefs."

Since many of these beliefs are based on living in harmony with the natural world, Longhouse followers are more sensitive, more attuned to feelings and forces than the average person. They must be able to trust the counsellor before they are able to begin treatment.

"You have to show faith in this person. If it's not from the heart, it's not going to reach the heart."



Expositor Photo

Joe Garlow is one of those fighting alcohol on the reserve



Expositor Photo

Reva Bomberry, co-ordinator of the Six Nations Crisis Intervention Centre, supervises the work of 52 volunteer counselors.