

Birthday of poet marked by students

OHSWEKEN — During the first week in March, I came down with the flu. Before anyone asks what that's got to do with the price of tea in China, I'll hasten to tell you why I mentioned it. While I was sick, on March 10, the date of Pauline Johnson's birth passed almost unnoticed. I say almost unnoticed because it was remembered by the staff and students of the J.C. Hill Elementary School in Ohsweken.

E. Pauline Johnson is the poet from the Six Nations Reserve who lived during the last century. Among her memorials is the Pauline Johnson Collegiate on Colborne Street in Brantford. She wrote several books of both prose and poetry but was best known during her lifetime as a performer who recited her poetry wearing Indian buckskin.

She lived during a time when there were very few ways for an unmarried woman to make a living. Her decision to perform on the public stage scandalized her sisters living in Brantford. Her independent stance would have made her a heroine to modern day feminists. She soon became a celebrity with her dramatic performances. Her travels took her across the Atlantic and across Canada several times. She eventually settled in Vancouver. For the most part, she made a comfortable living but she did

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not get rich. However, she was known to royalty.

At a time when racism was thought to be normal, Pauline Johnson was not ashamed to be known as an Indian. Even today some people think her writings show too much Indian-ness. She saw injustice first hand and it is to her credit that she did not flinch from writing and speaking about it.

About 30 years ago, some of us who belonged to the Six Nations Teachers Association decided to make March 10 a special day in the 13 Six Nations schools. We named it Pauline Johnson Day, we envisioned it as the Indian equivalent of St. Patrick's Day. On Pauline Johnson Day we hoped to teach the boys and girls, and later, all the residents of the reserve,

to wear something Indian, just as people wear green on St. Patrick's Day. We wanted native people to be proud to be native and to show it.

It was an idea whose time had not yet come. This special day idea gradually became neglected and largely forgotten. The response at the J.C. Hill school this year makes me hopeful that this concept might yet be revived.

At the very least we should make a greater attempt to restore Chiefswood, the great house where Pauline was born and grew up. Even after more than a century, it is still an imposing structure but it needs a new foundation and lots of other work. To this end the Chiefswood Museum Restoration Committee was formed last year and is raising funds. A current project is selling T-shirts with the Chiefswood logo on it. Last summer an outdoor concert at Chiefswood with Buffy St. Marie was fairly successful.