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Mohawk hymns rarely heard

OHSWEKEN — Recently, I taught the choir of the Ohsweken Baptist Church to sing *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night* — in Mohawk. This was not as difficult as it sounds. Since they already knew the tune, I showed them how to read Mohawk phonetically to supply the words. We also had the benefit of a tape done by the Tyendinaga Mohawk Choir to help us.

When I was growing up, at least one Mohawk hymn was sung at every church service. As time went on, fewer and fewer people were able to join in. Soon Mohawk hymns were heard only on special occasions. Now they are heard only at a few funerals.

In October, 1990, the Ohsweken Baptist Church or, more properly, the Tuscarora Baptist Church, will be celebrating its 150th anniversary. It was founded in the Tuscarora Village on the north side of the Grand River in 1840. It was later moved to the village of Ohsweken. For years it retained its Tuscarora name. Some of the original Tuscarora families, such as the Jonathans and Mt. Pleasants, still attend.

Perhaps by October of next

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George
Beaver



year, the choir will be able to sing several hymns in Mohawk. I also have the tape of a Tuscarora hymn. Maybe they'll want to learn that too.

While I was still teaching elementary school, we often put on Christmas concerts for the parents. This usually meant a lot of practising of musical numbers by the children. One boy had his own version of some Christmas carols. One day as I passed his desk, I heard him singing "While shepherds washed their socks by night, all seated on the ground." It probably helped him to keep his interest up when things got boring.

When I was a boy, the Christmas program at the Medina Baptist Church on the Six Nations reserve was never called a concert. It was always called "the Christmas tree." For weeks, even the boys who didn't come to Sunday School, talked about coming to "the

Christmas tree." It was the highlight of the year before television. Even serious parts were good for a few laughs.

Recitations by children were a big item on the program. One little boy who had practised for weeks came out from behind the curtain and confidently yelled out the title of his poem: "What a Little Boy Can Do." Then he looked around at the big crowd and promptly burst into tears.

None of us believed in Santa Claus, so it was all right to poke fun at him. One story I remember went like this. A Sunday School teacher had been telling the children about the devil. On the way home a little girl asked her friend: "What do you think? Is there such a thing as the devil?" Her friend replied, "No. It's like Santa Claus. It's just your father."

Of course, now that we all believe in Santa Claus, I'd never repeat such a story.

Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the region. George Beaver is a Six Nations reserve resident and was a teacher and principal on the Six Nations and New Credit reserves for 33 years.