

A traditional New Year's celebration

JAN. 1990

OHSWEKEN — Last year, the New Year was ushered in at Ohsweken by an unusual celebration. The Iroquoian Institute headed by Yvonne and Jake Thomas brought together Indians from South America, Central America and North America for a potluck supper, singing and dance demonstrations. This year the event was repeated on Saturday evening, one night before New Year's Eve. Again this unusual event just about filled up the Community Hall in Ohsweken.

As the evening began, Kevin Deere, a Mohawk, first tested the microphone and then introduced Jacob Thomas. The starting time had been advertised for 7 p.m. so naturally it started promptly at 8:15. This is called, "starting by Indian time." As Mr. Thomas facetiously explained, we know when to stop but we don't know when to begin.

Many of those attending arrived well after 7 p.m. I myself did not get there until 7:30 and I still had plenty of time to talk to friends and acquaintances and look at some things being offered for sale by our native brothers from Guatemala. I bought a T-shirt with the words Guatemalan Peasant Committee of the Highlands, written across the chest. I will tell you more about this in a later column.

Mr. Thomas began speaking in English for the benefit of those who do not understand Mohawk or Cayuga. He referred to

Our Town George Beaver



No Yaw (with emphasis on the first syllable). In the old days this celebration of the New Year was much more important than Christmas. The morning of New Year's Day was the time the Iroquoian children went house to house "to get their doughnut dolls." When I was boy it was called, "going out No Yawing." The children were only supposed to go out until noon. In the afternoon the grownups could go out for No Yaw if they wished.

When I was a boy growing up on the Six Nations Reserve, I usually received doughnuts, cookies or cake for No Yaw. If I happened to receive a "doughnut doll" or a doll-shaped cookie I always kept it as long as I could and ate it last. It was more interesting than getting round doughnuts and cookies or square pieces of cake.

After Mr. Thomas had spoken for a few minutes in English, he switched to the Cayuga language for the official Opening

Address. Many of those present did not understand Cayuga, so Kevin Deere followed with a short Opening Address in English.

He reminded everyone gathered in the hall that they should be thankful for arriving safely and to be thankful that they were in good health. He mentioned being thankful for "Our Mother, the Earth," who provided a place for us to live and where we could grow our food; water; medicinal plants (the medicines); grasses; foods such as berries (our sustenance); animals that gave up their lives so that we could have meat on our tables (our four-legged brothers); birds; forests; winds; the sun; the moon; the Thunderers and the Messengers of the Great Spirit (angels). Last of all we should be thankful for the Great Spirit who watches over us and cares for us all, his children.

After this speech, there was a potluck supper followed by singing and dancing by Aymara Indians from Bolivia, South America, Mayan Indians from Guatemala, Ojibway Indians from this area and Iroquoian Indians from the Six Nations Reserve. In a later column I will tell you some surprising things I learned from the Aymaras and Mayans.