

Natives look back on a decade

By George Beaver

OHSWEKEN — Some day Six Nations Indian Reserve residents may look back on the 1980s as the "good old days." If nothing else, it will be recognized as a period of unprecedented growth. For example, if someone had gone to sleep for 10 years, something like Rip Van Winkle

(or Rip Van Every), he wouldn't recognize Ohsweken when he woke up.

There have been well over a dozen changes in this village during the decade and they have all been for the better. The Six Nations Council started the 1980s off with a bang and a beautiful new administration

building. It replaced the respected Old Council House, which is now used as a public library.

Almost like mushrooms, other imposing buildings began to rise near the new administration building. A medical and dental clinic with the Cayuga name Gane Yohs (Ga-nay-yoas), which means "a place of healing," was built. It also contains a pharmacy and a meeting room. Next door is the Iroquois Lodge, a clean and well-run home for the aged.

Behind the administration building, called by some the new council house, is a newly-built complex of small apartment buildings. The street itself is new and has been named Bicentennial Trail to commemorate the 200 years that the Six Nations have lived here along the Grand River after millenia south of the Great Lakes. This curving, U-shaped street now

has other houses built, or half-built, along its entire length.

Beyond Gane Yohs, near where the street rejoins Chiefswood Road, is a small subdivision built especially for senior citizens. Although it still lacks a few finishing touches, some retired people have already moved in.

Right in the middle of all these new buildings is probably the greatest pride of the village. That is the Iroquois Village Centre Mall. It has a small supermarket, a restaurant, a laundromat, a post office and even a small art gallery.

Another new building houses the Six Nations police offices. This reflects a change in attitude of the Six Nations Band Council, which 10 or 15 years ago was less willing to assume the responsibility of policing the reserve. Council was also more content to let the Department of Indian Affairs manage (or mismanage) most of the other business of the reserve, too.

The main corner of Ohsweken now has a traffic light so the children can cross the street more safely. And three miles north of Ohsweken the Grand River is spanned by a new million-dollar bridge near where we used to cross with a small squeaking ferry. I remember one summer a truck with a load of gravel drove on to the ferry and flipped it right over.

This dangerous incident is not what prompted the department of highways to build the bridge. What got them moving

on it was the refusal of the Six Nations Council to grant them access rights for a new bridge near Caledonia. The Six Nations still owned the tow path area beside the Grand River. When the province agreed to build the Chiefswood Bridge, which had been needed for many years, the band council agreed to let the highways department cross their tow path land.

There have been many more changes, both in Ohsweken and on the rest of the Six Nations reserve. Someone waking up after a 10-year nap might even wonder if he was still on the reserve. There seems to be a new confidence, especially among some of the young people. This is probably the most positive change of all.

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And now all of a sudden, because of multiculturalism or whatever, they're saying it's not so bad to be an Indian. And you have all of these people, who for the past 40 years were satisfied with looking and not being Indi-

an, wondering what is going on because they were told Long house people are pagans.

Amos: I think a lot of it has to do with the political climate. The 70s were when Indians started to raise their heads and stand up politically.

Tom: I agree with you. It has been so suppressed and now all of a sudden it is alright to be an Indian. And some of the difficulty we have on the reserve is that we people who have been taught and brainwashed that it's not alright to be an Indian. We have key people in positions who head schools and health services who are not comfortable being Indian but who live on the reserve because they don't pay tax on their land.

So being an Indian to them

ends up being a little bit of a tax benefit. Being an Indian is a lot more than that.

Personal highlights

Amos: Being philosophical about where my community is going now I think getting my education in the 70s has allowed me to use it in helping my people to come to grips with it in the 80s and to be proud of who we are.

We've never had thinkers either. We've always been willing to just survive to be accepted. Now we've sort of raised our heads and said we can survive and let's think about it.

The 80s have been a philosophical decade, to think about who I am and how all my traits from my culture can fit into this decade.