

Warrior societies break Great Law of Six Nations

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Akwesasne Indian reserve and St. Regis are not the only native communities torn by disputes over sovereignty, cigarettes, bingo or gambling.

A definite pattern has occurred on six exclusively Iroquois reserves from Oneida, N.Y., to Brantford, three of which are totally Canadian.

In almost all cases an ad hoc warrior society has been formed which defends the cigarette trade, bingo or gambling as the right of a sovereign nation, sometimes being backed by dealers and operators themselves, often sharing offices and telephones.

At an Iroquois reserve near Oneida, N.Y., in 1989, Leon Shenanooah, a hereditary chief, withdrew support of a planned bingo operation after prolonged protest by the 50-member Grand Council of Iroquois Chiefs. He then came head-to-head with a warrior society, a group of militant and armed volunteers who support bingo operation and claims of sovereignty.

At Kahnawake reserve, a Mohawk enclave close to the city centre at Montreal, the local warrior society which blockaded a major bridge in June, 1988 — protesting a huge combined police raid on tobacco dealers — operates out of the Mohawk Nation office, a reserve faction that claims native sovereignty and operates a controversial super-bingo palace against community and elected council wishes.

Considered Illegal

The bingo hall there opened in September, 1989, offering prizes considered by the Quebec to be illegal. Arrests of bingo personnel and some patrons were made despite sabre-rattling by the warrior society that prepared blockades again in preparation for new raids.

A full confrontation did not take place since provincial police turned warrants over to native police who made the arrests piece-meal, avoiding nose-to-nose conflict, according to Quebec provincial police.

On the Akwesasne reserve, the local warrior society is headquartered at a bingo-jack hall owned by Loran Thompson, a former hereditary sub-chief. The

society has two telephone lines which ring at the hall.

Weapons are stock-piled there and the man who worked for the management company that helped Thompson build his business is now involved in another controversial bingo project on the Kanasetaki Indian reserve north of Montreal, 60 miles inland.

At Tuscarora reserve near Lewiston, N.Y., community-wide disputes have been long-standing over cigarettes, suspected drug-trafficking and bingo.

‘Warrior societies and gambling are outside the ring . . . We no longer make war on each other.’

Thugs roamed reserve roads intimidating citizens.

At Cattaraugus reserve, south of Buffalo, N.Y., native leaders have considered imposing taxes of their own to control the cigarette trade.

There have been warnings. In 1987, Syl O'Hara, then director of special investigations for the Ontario Ministry of Revenue, told Robert McCarthy of the Buffalo Evening News that his agents were watching Indian reserves but were stymied by the magnitude of the job.

O'Hara said that some tobacco shipments had been traced directly to the St. Regis portion of the Akwesasne complex. He added that there were indications of involvement by mob factions in the cigarette trade in western New York.

Karl E. Felsen, of the New York State department of taxation and finance, said at the same time that his office had suspicions of mob involvement because of sophisticated smuggling techniques used by natives to get tax-free tobacco back into Canada. He believed that the situation was too lucrative to escape the attention of organized crime and that if it wasn't involved, it would be.

Links between reserves themselves are obvious. A Six Nations

tobacco dealer was arrested and convicted of possession of smuggled tobacco in Cornwall.

Art Montour, the main spokesman for the Akwesasne warriors made at least one trip to Six Nations in 1989, trying unsuccessfully to get support for his group, in company with representatives of super-bingo operations at Kahnawake.

Larry Square, a member of Montour's group, told an Albany, N.Y. Sunday Times Union reporter, Robert Whitaker, last September that his society is

tied to the Kahnawake warrior society at Montreal.

However, hereditary chiefs on all reserves where they have adherents have unanimously denounced smuggling, gambling, private bingo and warrior societies themselves as detrimental to native community.

Huron Miller, 74, of Six Nations, the foremost teacher of the Great Law, the basis of the Iroquois Confederacy since before the white man's time, is adamant.

“Warrior societies and gambling of all kinds are outside the ring. They are illegal under the Great Law. Societies claim that they protect sovereignty and uphold the Great Law, but societies in general were outlawed and buried along with the hatchet in the original ceremony that formed the confederacy way back in history. We no longer make war on each other.

“We no longer maintain armed groups. Under the Great Law, we are supposed to live in peace with each other . . . and societies are breaking the law.”

He believes that if one Iroquois reserve goes down, all will follow like a row of toppling dominoes with disastrous effects on Canada as a whole.