

How Six Nations united to end bingo trouble

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OHSWEKEN — Even the reserve recognized as perhaps the most stable and progressive in Canada was affected by the disruptive influence of bingo promotion and seemingly unlimited money.

The Six Nations Reserve has a record second to none in Canada in terms of education, employment, progressive implementation of community development and generally level-headed thinking but these things did not spare it from gambling fever.

It began in 1986 when Reg Hill, a well-known businessman on the reserve, decided to start super-bingo patterned on games in vogue on U.S. reservations.

Police moved in to stop operations almost as soon as they began. This was Canada, after all, and bingo games are stiffly regulated. Hill was eventually convicted of a minor charge and given a nominal sentence.

But arguments of sovereignty were raised and Hill vowed to fight the matter in court, making eloquent statements to the press about the rights of people. The self-proclaimed hustler had become a champion of native rights.

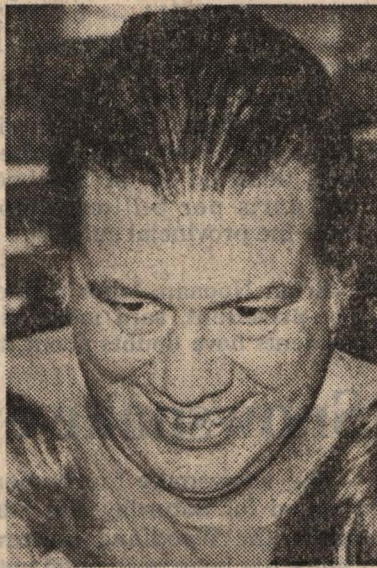
Hill claimed that Ontario law has no jurisdiction on Indian reserves. The claim was to be oft-repeated in regard to bingo on other reserves.

He had what appeared to be unlimited funds. He had built a sumptuous restaurant and erected four steel-arch warehouses.

He paid cash for everything and made well-publicized donations, particularly \$10,000 worth of hay to a poor Indian reserve in Manitoba.

He gained supporters, some of whom formed a women's auxiliary.

A warrior society of volunteers appeared when such groups were novel. Members gave interviews to reporters



Reg Hill
Lost support

and spoke of native rights, economic development, one-industry reserves and the inherent value to the community of tobacco dealers. Throughout 1987 and 1988, the issue intensified, threatening to split the reserve as badly as it would later split other reserves.

Elected council under Bill Montour, recently acclaimed in 1989 to another two-year term as chief councillor in reserve elections, (no relation to Art Montour) had received reports that the society was patrolling roads at night, stopping senior citizens on their ways home.

Trying to help

The society said it was only trying to help. It had a telephone number people could call. There were regular meetings where Hill or his lawyer would hold forth on important subjects. A young social-worker was hired to oversee planned community service projects.

But for some reason, the progressive ideas of the group did not catch on, and although the press both on and off the reserve had eagerly reported Hill's generosity, natives turned on him.

A sports association trying

to raise money to attend a tournament out of the country refused a rather phenomenal donation from Hill, preferring to work for its money.

Hereditary chiefs declared against gambling and bingo for private profit, saying that traditional law forbade both these things and warrior societies besides.

The chiefs feared for the community under such influences. Things began to pall for Hill.

Elected and hereditary councils did a very unusual thing. For years, both bodies had ignored each other.

It was virtually traditional that they be at odds, but suddenly in September, 1988, history changed.

The rift between councils had existed since 1924 when parliament outlawed hereditary government, installing elected councils.

Longhouse people (those holding to the hereditary system) declined to accept elected council but that fall, the wound finally healed.

Elected councils issued a strongly worded joint declaration that the warrior society had no legal right to act as peace officers on the reserve, that all Ontario laws and reserve regulations shall apply . . . to be enforced by the Ontario Provincial Police.

In October, 1988, the society staged a highway blockade at Six Nations in support of Indians out west and against a police raid at Cornwall.

Many Six Nations residents resented the society acting as their representatives without permission, some saying so in letters to the editor.

The society folded in November, 1988. Hill left the reserve a month later. It was over. Equilibrium had been restored and with it, a new and welcome co-operation between hereditary chiefs and elected council. Bingo had come and gone.