

Manitoba's Elijah Harper a

OHSWEKEN — Only time will tell but I believe we have a new native hero to go along with such giants as Tukumseh and Thayandanegea (Joseph Brant) in native history. The man I refer to is NDP MLA Elijah Harper. The NDP before his name refers to the New Democratic Party and the MLA means he was elected to the Manitoba legislature. In the future he may be called the killer of the Meech Lake Accord.

Mr. Harper was born one winter day 41 years ago in northern Manitoba. His father, Allen, and mother, Ethel Harper, were out on their trapline working at their traditional livelihood. Eventually there were 13 brothers and sisters and Elijah was raised by his grandparents. He was taught the old spiritual teachings of

his people by them and these would later stand him in good stead.

At the age of eight he was sent away to a boarding school where for eight more unhappy years the school tried to turn him into a young white man. He returned home to take up trapping but found he was not trained for that kind of work. He could see how the white society was grinding down his people and he decided to fight back. To help his people he would need an education, so he went back to school. Mr. Harper eventually made it to the University of Manitoba. With other students, such as Phil Fontaine, he helped found a native association. They forced the engineering students to apologize for a satirical newspaper that had nothing in it but pictures of drunken Indians. There was enough racism around without that.

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Our Town

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Elijah went home and later became chief of his band. In 1981 he became the first treaty Indian to be elected to the provincial legislature. He was re-elected in 1982 and even served in Howard Pawley's cabinet. He was preparing himself for his destiny.

About 10 years ago, he was one of the chiefs who went to London to ask the Queen to

make sure the indigenous people were treated at least as fairly in the new constitution as the so-called "founding races." In 1982 when the Queen came to Ottawa for the signing ceremony Elijah Harper refused his invitation to attend.

All the native people got in the constitution was an undefined guarantee in Section 35 of "existing treaty and aboriginal rights." For the next five years, until 1987, the First Ministers concentrated on protecting the status quo and then blaming native leaders for "not moving."

In 1987 the co-called Meech Lake Accord was drawn up in secret with not just the natives, but with all ordinary Canadians, on the outside looking in. Then they waited for Mulroney

true native patriot

to decide when to roll the dice for the final time.

Ethel Blondin, a native Member of Parliament from Canada's north, cried the night it appeared that the way had been cleared for the passage of the accord. Its passage would have been an affront to every native in Canada who wants at least the same amount of input into the way he or she lives as all others in Canada. That's why Harper blocked its passage.

And that's why he should be regarded as a true native patriot.