

# Pageant educates us about native

# history

OHSWEKEN — For the third consecutive year it has been my privilege to be the playwright for the annual Six Nations Native Pageant. Last year the title of the play presented was *The New Beginning*. It chronicled the founding of the Six Nations Indian Reserve on the banks of the Grand River after untold ages south of the Great Lakes. I say untold ages because parts of our oral tradition, in the native languages, refer back to the time of a Great Deluge or Flood. That's really going back a long way.

The year before that we told the story of Tecumseh, the Shawnee war chief who died fighting the Americans who were attacking southern Ontario. After the British regular soldiers ran away from this battle which took place near Chatham, chief Tecumseh's troops inflicted enough damage on the Americans to make them go back to Detroit. You could say Tecumseh died saving southern Ontario from the Americans. Did you ever read this in any history book? There should be a monument to him at least as tall as the one for General Brock at Queenston.

This year, the subject of the Six Nations Pageant is the Fighting Tuscarora, Chief Clinton Rickard. Chief Rickard was one of the founding members of the Indian defense League of America. Through the efforts of the IDLA and Chief Rickard, this border between the U.S. and Canada was opened to allow North American natives to cross. The Jay Treaty of 1794 had guaranteed the right of North American natives to cross the border with their possessions. This was also written into the Treaty of Ghent which ended the War of 1812.

However, by the 1920s North American natives were being turned away at the border by Department of Immigration officials who were practising racial discrimination. They used immigration laws which had been passed to keep out Orientals.

Through an intensive campaign of letter writing and making speeches the remarkable Chief Rickard was able to get enough support to have a bill passed through the U.S. Congress. This bill gave back the right to cross the border accorded to natives by

the Jay Treaty. It was signed into law in April, 1928, by U.S. President Calvin Coolidge.

The IDLA decided that a celebration for this great victory was in order. The first Free Border Crossing Celebration was held in July, 1928 across the bridge at Niagara Falls. This is where some of the Baptists from the Medina Church on the Six Nations Indian Reserve had been refused entry to the U.S. earlier in the 1920s. Delegates used to go to week-long revival meetings at the Cattaraugus, Tonawanda and Tuscarora Indian Reservations near Niagara Falls and Buffalo, N.Y. Sometimes they were allowed to cross and sometimes they were turned back. It depended on the whim of the immigration officers.

The Free Border Crossing Celebration has become an annual event. Later the Six Nations Pageant was started by the IDLA to show in story, song and pageantry the glorious history of the Six Nations. What the rustic setting at the Forest Theatre lacks in comfort, we hope will be made up in atmosphere and authenticity.