

Local elder "Jake" Thomas dead at age 76

Continued from front page

Nations elder capable of speaking five of the six Iroquoian languages (Tuscarora was the only language he did not feel comfortable using, he has said).

In 1984 Thomas completed course work to earn a Native language Instructor's Diploma sponsored by Lakehead University and the University of Western Ontario. In 1992 he was appointed to the Board of Governors of McMaster University.

In 1994, Michael K. Foster, Curator Emeritus at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and a friend and collaborator of the late chief, wrote, "underlying Chief Thomas's many involvements is a special concern that the Iroquoian traditions somehow be passed on to younger Iroquois, fewer and fewer of whom speak the original languages that are the vehicles of those traditions. For him it is not enough to dictate texts to anthropologists and linguists for the sake of scholarship and posterity: urgent steps need to be taken to insure the widest possible dissemination of the old culture."

One of those urgent steps, and

one that has caused controversy between Thomas and orthodox Longhouse traditionalists, was a decision in 1992 to recite the Great Law in English.

Thomas gave his first five-day recitation of the Great Law in English at the community hall in Ohsweken in January of 1992, and a nine-day recitation eight months later in September at his home.

Two years later, in June of 1994, he gave a similar 12-day recitation, also in English and also in a tent in front of his home.

"I get a lot of criticism for reciting the Great Law in English," Thomas told the Tekawennake at the time. "But few of our people know their traditional language [so] you try your best."

The Great Law, known as the Kaianerenko'wa in the Mohawk language, is the cornerstone of Iroquoian society, setting out the rules of interaction among member nations, clans and individuals.

Some traditionalists then, as now, resented what they believed to be Thomas's attempt to "popularize" the Great Law beyond the

confines of the Iroquoian people, both by presenting the story in English and by allowing non-natives to observe, causing a rift within the Longhouse that persists to this day.

But Thomas met his challenges in 1994 as he had those before and since; with his well-known mixture of honesty, pragmatism, and wry humour. "Many non-Natives are looking for spiritual guidance," he observed simply. "We all need it."

Foster would later write that Thomas told him, "I think the white man needs to understand. It isn't that he's going to take the Law and use it himself... They already did!" Thomas' joke refers to the widely held Iroquoian belief that core tenants like peace and security contained in the Great Law formed the framework of the 13 US colonies' Constitution.

"So what should we be afraid of?" Foster recounts Thomas saying during the conversation. "If they want to learn it they have a right to. That should have been done 500 years ago, to study and respect the Confederacy. Maybe

we wouldn't have the problems we have today if they would have studied our people, [and would] now understand and honour and respect [us]."

Thomas kept up his schedule of reciting the Great Law, presenting it at the Six Nations tourism centre in '96 and right up to the present, literally until the day he died.

Bill Woodworth is an architect by training, a student of Jake Thomas' by choice, and a friend, he thinks, by divine intervention. Over the weekend he accompanied Jake and Yvonne to Ganondagon, NY, a Seneca cultural site located south of Rochester. He had planned a film collaboration with the Thomas's and was with them to scout possible locations.

"He had just finished an abbreviated version of the Great Law to about 60 young people, for their leadership and elders gathering," recalls Woodworth.

"He finished on Sunday with the last part of the Great Law and there was a brief ceremony where two people sang, stirring ashes into him. Then they formed a cir-

cle and shook his hand and thanked him. And that really was his last teaching."

Woodworth had been planning a filming of the Great Law in Mohawk, in a traditional setting, possible at the Kanata Village in Brantford, complete with simultaneous translation into English and the other Iroquoian languages "so people from every nation could hear it in their own way," he says.

The project was to be funded by the Centre for Spiritual Democracy. They are still interested in going forward with the project, says Woodworth, although obviously now in an altered form.

Woodworth said Thomas spoke of death on Sunday. "He had a sense that all the work he was doing was shortening his life. But he was quite willing to continue for the sake of our culture... For that reason he was sacrificing himself, in a way, for the people."

Woodworth described Thomas's mood that day as a state of "equanimity, of completely being given over to the Good Mind, and that's the feeling I had when being around him."