

Peel's newest town can take pride in the name it bears

They gathered near the banks of the Credit River on that day in 1805 to sign the first of the agreements which would turn over the Mississauga Tract to the whites.

The 10 chiefs affixed their hieroglyphic signatures and one of the white representatives wrote their names alongside each of the symbols. Then the trade goods — a couple of kegs of rum, some rifles and some blankets — and the cash — five shillings for each of the 10 chiefs — were turned over.

And with that, the Mississauga Indians quietly began to vanish from the Southern half of Peel County, as quietly as they had arrived several hundred years earlier. For that, always, has been the way of the Mississaugas, a tribe to whom violence has been as alien as it was natural to their neighbors, the Iroquoian tribes of the Six Nations.

Today, many of the first residents of Mississauga have been absorbed into other tribes, as is the case with those who moved to the Sarnia and London areas. Just one Mississauga tribe retains its name — the Mississaugas of New Credit.

And just west and north of Hagersville, the last of the real Mississaugas are proving that the Indian in Canada can be a first-class citizen all the way, any time he chooses.

"Almost any weekend we get people driving out here who want to see the tipis and the squaws at work," grins Chief Fred King. "We have a hard time convincing them that they ARE on the reserve."

Don't believe it

The confusion is understandable. Indeed, the only readily-discernable difference between the tiny, 14-square-mile Mississauga reserve and the white lands which surround it on two sides is that the Indian houses appear better-kept.

There are only half a dozen shacks on the entire reserve, and all of them are coming down. Most of the homes are fairly new, and the older houses have been spruced up. Even the pioneer cemetery on the southern limits is undergoing a face-lift; the old, crumbling stones are to be re-arranged this spring and the cemetery itself converted into a small memorial park.

Which is not surprising when one stops to consider that the 600-odd Mississaugas of New Credit this year have only three people on welfare... and for two years in a row had no welfare cases at all.

There are Mississaugas who receive assistance — war pensions, burned-out pensions, mothers' allowances — as do their white neighbors. But welfare for the sake of welfare is out.

No free rides

"I figure I have to work for a living," says Chief King, who handles welfare payments. "And when some fellow who doesn't need it comes to me looking for welfare, I just tell him 'Look. I have to work. Why shouldn't you'"

Chief King has been chief since 1950 except for 1960-1. He obviously speaks for his people. They could throw him out of office if he didn't; chiefs have been elected for two-year terms ever since the New Credit Mississaugas left the Credit River in 1847.

How has the Mississauga reserve prospered at a time when Indian reserves across the country are being held up as blots on the national honor?

The most logical answer appears to be the whole Mississauga approach to their relationship with the white man.

The sale of the Mississauga Tract could be typical. Indian tribes all over this country today are clamoring for compensation for lands sold for a song in pioneer times. But the Mississaugas aren't.

Schoolteacher Lloyd King, a distant cousin of the chief's, acknowledges that the Mississauga lands were sold for a pittance. Yet, he notes, "land did not mean something permanent to the Indian. If the country was hunted out, its soil exhausted, he could move on."

Today's Mississauga Indian, like the Mississauga white who sold his farm for a few thousand dollars and now sees a couple of acres selling for the price he obtained for the whole farm, regrets he didn't hang onto the land. But he doesn't go around brooding about it.

Made the grade

And, somehow, the Mississauga has succeeded in assimilating and yet not assimilating.

There is no racial or color bar to speak of in Hagersville; no store hotel or business premise where an Indian is unwelcome.

Mississauga children attend school in Hagersville or Brantford from Grad 6 onwards, play on Hagersville



Postman John Brant and wife stand beside their attractive home — typical of houses on the reserve.

ball and hockey teams. Inter-marriage between Mississauga and white is no more uncommon than inter-marriage with the Six Nations tribes whose reservation bounds the Mississauga reserve on the north and west.

There is no industry on the reserve other than farming, which means most of those of working age are employed off the reserve. Chief King, for example, is the dynamite man at Haldiman Quarries in Hagersville.

The old language is practically unknown on the reserve; everyone speaks English. And where to this day tribal religion remains strong on many reserves, the Mississaugas, almost to a man, are United Church.

Yet the young Mississaugas who leave the reserve to further their education often return as graduates. Three of the four reserve school teachers are Mississaugas, as an example. And higher education is very much the Mississauga goal today; several young men from the reserve are now in university, study-

ing to be doctors, engineers and lawyers... among their own people.

"Our population has increased 22 percent since World War II, Chief King says.

New awareness

There IS a definite awareness of Indian heritage among the Mississaugas, and it is exerting itself today. On the New Credit reserve, for instance, quite a movement has begun to have the Mississauga tongue taught in school. And individuals like Loyd King are trying, now, to compile a tribal history, for much of the Mississaugas, history has been forgotten.

Mrs. Sylvester LaForme, wife of one of the five councillors, has begun a small but thriving business making moccasins and Indian dolls; she would like to see more young people become involved in that field, or in pottery-making, for which the early Mississaugas were known.

Yet the Mississauga heritage is as much Canadian as Indian. A Mississauga named William King, no relation to the chief was a bugler at the Battle of Queenston Heights, and other Mississaugas fought for the Crown in the defence of York during the War of 1812, as well as at the Battle of the Beaver Dams.

There were Mississaugas in Canadian uniforms in World War I and six Mississauga boys died in World War II.

Chief King himself spent four years in the Canadian Armored Division overseas; his war ended 17 miles west of Berlin. His brother was wounded on D-Day.

Compassion, too

And the Mississauga has earned the gratitude and recognition of the white in other ways, too.

There were, for instance, the British immigrants who settled near the Mississauga lands on the Credit in the early 1800s. Life was hard, and many of them were destitute.

Many of them would not have pulled through had they not received help from the Mississaugas — who used money they had obtained from the sale of their lands to buy the whites food.

Today's Mississaugas take real pride in the fact that their name is perpetuated in the name of Canada's newest town.

And Canada's newest town has every reason to take pride in its name... and the people it recalls.

Story and photos by ERIK WATT



Mrs. Sylvester LaForme shows visitor moose and deerhide moccasins. She also makes deerhide-clad dolls, in background.