

Heroic continued

was a spontaneous action by people who believed there was no other way to stop the corruption of the community and the terror which had begun to paralyze the leadership.

Those who set up the barricades were neither fanatical or malicious; they were parents, grandparents, teenagers and young adults so concerned about the destiny of their families they would place their lives in jeopardy in a last, desperate act to prevent all out war.

While on the surface it may have seemed as though it was anti-gamblers versus the gambling advocates in truth the root causes of the struggle were deeper and more profound.

Ever since the destruction of Akwesasne's traditional land and water based economy in the 1950's the Mohawk people have attempted to tailor their skills and creativity to fit within a cash market system. Pollution brought about by Alcoa, Reynolds, Courtalds and Domtar contaminated wildlife, earth, air and water eliminating fishing as an industry and laying waste to the large cow herds on Cornwall and St. Regis islands.

Another factor was the rapid population growth at Akwesasne. Since World War Two as the number of Mohawks doubled, then tripled with attendant demands upon the limited natural and financial resources of a small reservation.

One of the logical responses to the economic crisis was to promote businesses which would provide badly needed jobs for young adults entering the work force in ever increasing numbers. The internal political divisions made central planning virtually impossible and denied the people a united Mohawk community whose needs would have been ideally governed by a single entity.

Without question, the overwhelming majority of Akwesasnores wanted that government to be the one with the strongest claim to true aboriginal sovereignty, and that was the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs. They wanted leaders who exemplified the traditional values of honesty, humility, patience and spirituality; leaders best found within the Longhouse.

The people knew the Mohawk Nation was up against formidable odds in its efforts to survive. New York State had created and empowered the St. Regis Tribal Council in 1892 to replace the Nation Council, an act copied by Canada seven years later when it imposed the band council system on the "Canadian" side. Traditional Mohawk leaders were imprisoned for resisting Canada's actions and one man died in defense of the Nation.

Ever since then the people have sought to replace the latter two systems with one governing council which would eliminate the international border and pool the community's collective intellectual and physical resources to create a truly singular Akwesasne.

The people did not want a return to the bad days of 1979-80 when we came perilously close to civil war, again because of the Tribe's attempts to enter into secret land deals with New York and trying to hide its actions by using force to silence its critics, primarily Mohawks from the Longhouse.

Peacemakers such as the late Julius Cook assumed leadership to persuade the people there was a creative alternative to communal tensions if the three Mohawk councils would agree to meet and form a common front on such issues as the environment, land claims, jurisdiction and economic development.

With the election of Rosemary Bonaparte, Brenda LaFrance and Harold Tarbell to the Tribal Council, along with Mike Mitchell, Lloyd Benedict, Mary David, Angela Barnes and the other "good minds" at the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, the people had their best chance to secure peace and true unity.

From 1986-1988 the three councils, or the "Tri-Council", met regularly to discuss ways to heal the historic divisions. The inherent creativity of the Mohawks came up with many sound, practical ideas to pool resources and realize the dream of a stable Mohawk nation

with one national government.

Plans included the building of a central high school with a thoroughly Mohawk curriculum, a community hospital, athletic center and elderly care facility. There was to have been one peacekeeping service upholding a distinctive Mohawk Justice Code. There would be common economic development plans which would have created a Free Trade Zone along with various trade and commerce agreements with other Native nations.

The land claims issue would be addressed by all three councils with plans for an agreement with the Power Authority of the State of New York concerning the use of our territory to generate electricity. This deal would not have involved the cession of any land and would have brought the community a minimum of \$33,000,000 in annual rental payments (this was in 1988 dollars). In addition, Akwesasne's immediate territory would have been significantly expanded with the newly acquired lands available for homes and families.

Unity was a threat to those among us who had begun to see our collective rights as a thing to be exploited for their own gain. These were the people who saw the "Tri-Council" as a menace to their smuggling operations; by 1987 many of them began to convert their profits into illicit casino operations which they were prepared to defend with heavily armed "security" forces.

We knew then the so-called "Mohawk Sovereignty Security Force" was created to protect the casinos and smuggling so naturally there was resistance to its actions. The defeat of Rosemary Bonaparte, by three votes, in the 1988 tribal elections meant the opportunity to unite had been lost. Acts of defiance against the three councils increased but none of the leaders were prepared to condone the use of force to stop either the smuggling or the casino operations.

The people acted on their own initiative with predictable results. Disputes led to confrontations in which some people were hurt. Throughout 1989 the tensions escalated despite appeals to the US to uphold the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua and remove the issues of contention: the slot machines, gaming devices and smuggled tobacco.

There were some raids but it seemed the casino operators possessed remarkable information as to when the FBI and State Police were to enter Akwesasne. While some machines were confiscated the games continued.

Finally, a last, desperate meeting was held at the Kanatakon Community Center in early March, 1990 during which the MSSF, or "warriors", met with the other men of Akwesasne to work out a compromise to avoid the gunfire which had become frightfully common. The men at that critical session agreed to put down their weapons and work together but when the spokespersons for the MSSF informed their leaders of the peace deal the plan was rejected. The result was the roadblocks, erected by people who believed this would compel their opponents to abide by the will of the community.

That spring was a particularly bitter one as the temperatures remained cold, the skies heavy with thick gray clouds which dropped snow and rain on the blockaders. However after an initial week of clashes, the people began to adjust to quiet roads and a night without the glare of neon.

The anti-gamblers wanted a moratorium on gaming until the people could hold a community wide referendum similar to the one of 1987 which turned down casinos but was ignored by gambling proponents. In 1990 the "anti's" were determined to hold out until the three councils could assure the people there would be an overall disarmament and ongoing negotiations to resolve the anarchy which was consuming Akwesasne. For many of them, the experiences of manning the blockade, while dangerous, was also liberating for they had a unique opportunity to defend their principles. For them it was a moral struggle for the very soul of the Mohawk Nation.

In the end, the absence of a

peacekeeping force to keep the sides apart meant a final clash was inevitable. As the warmer temperatures arrived there were an increase in the number of incidents marked by shootings, car smashes and fist fights. The anti's lived through a month of verbal abuse, car fires and physical assaults but in the end their resolve could not withstand the intense gunfire aimed directly at them during the terrible night of April 25.

Repeated appeals to former New York Governor Mario Cuomo to have the State Police enter Akwesasne to stop the violence were turned down. As hundreds of rounds were fired at the barricades the people knew someone would have to die before help arrived.

The barricades were torn down after the people fled into the night, some leaving so quickly as to have no time to take their vehicles. The cars were torched and some were crushed with a bulldozer as the pro-gamblers fired their machine guns in victory amidst the smoke and ruins.

There was a small lull after the fires which ended on April 27th when Brian Cole, a brave a Mohawk man as there ever has been, was almost beaten to death. Hundreds of Mohawks fled their homes believing the rumors that certain houses were targeted for destruction and anyone who resisted was to be killed. The pro-gamblers and "warriors" held most of Akwesasne but lacked the discipline to effect a complete takeover. On the outside, Mario Cuomo was ready to recognize them as the governing agency for Akwesasne, once that was done the wheeling and dealing to extinguish Mohawk land rights in exchange for casino licenses could begin.

There were pockets of resistance where a few crazy people thought they might actually hold out until the Canadian militia and National Guard could come in. On Cornwall Island the Travelling College was turned into a refugee and communications center while in Snye the riverside home of David George Jr. had a half dozen men form a defensive arc and dig in.

From April 27th to May 1st the men at the George residence had thousands of shots fired at them but they did not break. The battle was not continuous but the attacks on the George home came in waves, most of which took place at night. I was there during that time, as were my brothers David and Dean along with my brother-in-law Cartoon. We had Tony LaFrance Jr with us, as was Perry Thompson for part of the time.

We did not think we were there to defend the Nation but we refused to be driven from Akwesasne by forces we believed were wrong and at its center, truly evil. We were bound to risk our lives to protect the sanctity of this one home and thereby give courage to the refugees.

We secured our area and waited for help. On the evening of April 30th we were joined by Ron Lazore, Brian David, Larry "Cochise" David, Joe Lazore, Harvey Arquette, Ken Lazore, Kevin King and Dave Francis. They arrived as the sun set followed by Eric Siebling, a Canadian Press reporter, and Ryan Ramirez, a CP photographer.

The climatic battle began at 9:30 the evening of April 30th and continued with short breaks until 8:00 am the next day. We had gunfire directed at us from three sides, including the river. There were men shooting at us from the shore of St. Regis Village while snipers were set on Yellow Island to cut off any escape by water. A high speed boat was also used to fire at our men.

There should be some kind of tribute to those fighters; they could have left given the odds against their survival. But they elected to become Mohawk fighters, calm under fire and deliberate in their actions. The manner in which they fought would have brought great pride to the Mohawks of former times.

Greatly outnumbered and poorly armed our crew fired whatever we had at the enemy. We were running dangerously low on ammunition until Ernest King risked life to bring us two canister of bullets at 4:00 am some 45 minutes before Harold JR Edwards was shot on Smokey Hollow Road, at a place over the crest of a hill and far removed from our range.

Some 90 minutes later, Mathew Pyke was shot in the back by a sniper on Yellow Island. Mathew could no longer stand aside and was coming to our aide. He was driven from his vehicle by intense gunfire fired directed at him from a group of "warriors" on the hill behind the George residence.

Others had also elected to try and break the siege at great personal risk. Steve Lazore, Francis King, Dave King, Robbie White, Sonny Caldwell, Steve Barnes, Roger Mitchell, Bruce Roundpoint, Sturge Lazore, among others, were on his way before the bullets drove them back.

Mathew died as a result of his wound but not before the enemy was beaten. While he was on his way to the hospital our group charged the hill and drove the "warriors" away; by 8:00 am the battle was over.

The complete story of what took place during that time has never been completely told since some feared retribution and others simply wanted to return quietly to their families. The men who fought that day never sought recognition or honors but surely they merit great respect for their bravery. They endured that terrible night with dignity and honor; those men should take their rightful place as true Mohawk patriots.

A decade has passed but despite the sacrifices justice remains as elusive as it did in May, 1990. Perhaps the majority of Akwesasne Mohawks would prefer to just get along and forget but they must know by now peace will never come until the truth is liberated.

It is sad to see those who planned and ordered the assaults on the barricades and against the George home have grown rich in the 1990's and now find themselves in positions of power. Some of their group are serving prison terms but for the most part whatever pangs of remorse or guilt they might have felt have been eclipsed by other concerns.

Not once has any of their group had the strength of character to stand before the people and say what happened in the spring of 1990 was wrong, it was a mistake. Until that happens, the healing so many have prayed for cannot take place and the bitter experiences of 1990 mean nothing at all.

Aliens continued

with unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle, failure to comply, driving to the left of pavement markings and unlawful possession of marijuana. Moses pleaded guilty during arraignment in Burke Town Court Tuesday morning and was ordered held in the Franklin County Jail at Malone for 30 days, or until he pays a fine of \$215. Moses was not be charged with smuggling due to his age.

However, Border Patrol agents did seize the van Moses was driving; a 1992

Pontiac registered to Robin Oakes of Hogsburg.

A companion in the car with Moses at the time of the arrest, identified as 18 year old Alex Tarbell of Bombay, was questioned and later released.

It was only a week ago, April 19, that border patrol officers arrested 4 illegal Chinese aliens in the Town of Chateaugay. During that bust, two other alleged smugglers from the North Country were taken into custody.

They included 18 year old Mitchell Oakes of Cornwall and 18-year-old Monica Schaefer of Constable. Only Oakes was charged with Alien Smuggling.