

Oneidas: No reservations about their tribe's accomplishments

By Quincy Dadtzman

Sentinel staff writer

Oneida — From his office, Purcell Powless, chairman of the Wisconsin Oneida Indian tribe, looks out on a reservation that is a striking contrast to most other Indian reservations in the United States.

Powless, 61, has led the tribe during a decade in which the Oneidas have proved, as one tribal member said proudly, that "being Indian doesn't necessarily mean being on welfare."

Powless is modest about taking credit for the tribe's accomplishments, but a sheet he passed out tells an impressive story:

● The first Oneida bingo games started in 1976 in the basement of the old Oneida Memorial Center. Ten em-millions served 8,000 players; the tribal budget totaled \$2.4 million and 40.1% of the Oneida labor force was unemployed.

● In 1986, the Irene Moore Activity Center provided 122 jobs to tribal members and welcomed 396,866 bingo players; the tribal budget topped \$34 million; the tribe employed 464 members and the unemployment rate had dropped to 28.8%.

● The population of the reservation has grown in Brown County from 1,802 to 2,033 and in Outagamie County from 2,472 to 4,481 in the same period.

● An economic study last year credited bingo with paying \$1,427,356 in salaries and having an \$8 million economic impact on the tribe in 1985.

● The same study showed the tribe's impact on the Green Bay area economy as growing from \$7.2 million in 1976 to from \$100-170 million in 1986.

Janice Skendadore Hirth heads the Oneida Airport Hotel Corp., which operates the Oneida Rodeway Inn, the only airport motel at Austin-Straubel Field.

"Women have an important place among the Oneidas," she said. "Women head the bingo operation; I'm here at the motel; there are women in positions of

humanitarian than the men."

Bobbi Webster, one of the tribe's six public relations representatives, explained:

"The Oneidas have traditionally been matriarchal. Historically, the clan mothers selected the chiefs. There were war chiefs, hunting chiefs, chiefs of many kinds. Councils of chiefs made a lot of decisions, but the women always spoke up at council meetings.

"Women still have a very strong voice in tribal government. Oneida women never have been submissive or quiet. Still today, some of the most vocal voices of tribal council meetings are the women's."

"An Indian woman has two stereotypes to beat — she's a woman and she's Indian. — on the outside that she doesn't face within the tribe."

Work on the inn, the newest motel in the Green Bay area, started June 6, 1985. It accepted its first guests exactly a year later. Hirth said occupancy of the \$10.5 million, 202-room hotel was 30% ahead of projections as of last week.

A landmark on the reservation is Holy Apostles Episcopal Church. Early Oneida migrants quarried the stone, cut the logs and built the church with their own hands. The children who attend the Oneida School are the seventh generation of Wisconsin Oneidas.

"I send my children to the Oneida School because they will have Indian role models there; they can grow up proud of their heritage, able to look anyone in the face and say, 'I'm an Indian.' That's important. That will make them able to do better no matter where they go in the future," said Webster.

Much of that pride, the Oneidas believe, goes back to the tribal programs that bingo has paid for, including:

● A 50-bed nursing home, a health care center and pharmacy and a day-care center that serve both Oneidas and non-Indians in the area.

● The Norbert Hill Center, which houses day care and Head Start programs; the tribal school, and headquarters for the Business Committee, accounting department, job training program, higher education program, public relations office, conservation and public safety offices, the Law Library and Computer Center, and other tribal administrative offices.

● The Oneida Nation Museum.

● The Oneida Printing Enterprise, which the Oneidas purchased from the Lac Court Oreilles Band of Chippewas and moved to the reservation; the industrial park; Transit Authority; a maintenance garage and several elderly housing projects.

Bingo revenues also help pay for the Oneida Civic (recreation) Center, Oneida Senior Center, Oneida Housing Authority, Domestic Abuse and Alcohol and other drug abuse prevention and treatment programs, a food distribution center and a community library, which all serve both Oneidas

Powless likes to point out to residents of nearby Green Bay that money earned by tribal members is almost entirely spent off the reservation. Only gasoline, cigarettes and quick-stop grocery items are available on the reservation.

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Enterprising Indians Prosper in Bleak Economy

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ONEIDA WIS. (AP) - The Oneida Indians, one of the six nations of the Iniquoi, are on the move economically while other tribes are in trouble.

The Oneidas are a proud tribe, proud of their computer center, school, industrial park, tobacco enterprises and new \$12.5 million hotel.

"Just 20 years ago we didn't have anything," says chairman Purcell Powless, 61, in his modest office in the Norbert S. Hill Center, a former Catholic seminary. "The tribal council met in someone's home or some old church basement. The only recreation area we had was a baseball diamond."

Now, he says, "We're an aggressive and progressive tribe."

The tribe once held 65,435 acres in northeastern Wisconsin under an 1838 federal treaty. The members met in December, the Interior Department issued a report.

Admittedly, the Oneida have something that many other tribes lack: location.

The reservation now encompasses both a rural and an urban area, from the southwestern border of the city of Green Bay in Brown County into a portion of Outagamie County. Its hotel and the Irene Moore Activity Center, better known as the bingo hall, are across the highway from Green Bay's airport.

Its 32-acre industrial park is on the edge of Green Bay.

The reservation, in the towns of Hobart and Oneida, now consists of 2,741 acres.

Currently 2,161 Oneidas live on the reservation, but so do 11,732 non-Indians. The tribe estimates that an additional 650 Oneidas live in the Green Bay area. The tribe collects no taxes. Homeowners pay their property taxes to the township.

"The Oneida Rodeway Inn, the tribe's 202-room hotel, opened last June after the Indians negotiated a franchise arrangement with the London-based Rodeway organization.

The hotel has become a center for workshops and seminars on Indian issues. There have been sessions, for instance, on Indian education and history, and recently the National Congress of American Indians and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency met there to discuss pollution problems on reservations.

The tribe also is underwriting the \$20,000 cost of an exhibit entitled "Wolves and Humans" at the New Museum of Minnesota and St. Paul.

On the drawing board is a professional office building to be constructed on a 107-acre site in Green Bay that the tribe purchased recently for \$300,000.

There are problems, though. Unemployment among Oneida members is estimated at 22 to 23 percent, compared with the statewide figure of 7.1 percent, according to the latest statistics available. The Brown County figure was 6.4 percent.

But Powless points out that unemployment among the Oneidas was 25 percent a decade ago.

"There has been a mass return to the reservation as conditions improved," he says. "Many couldn't find jobs, so the unemployment figure didn't drop as dramatically as you'd think."

The bingo hall, one of the few in the nation operated by tribal members rather than on a contract basis, employs 100 persons, all Indian, earning 600 to 700 dollars a week. A lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court in Milwaukee in July 1985 by Brown and Outagamie counties, the city of Green Bay and the town of Oneida and Hobart.

The governments contend that Oneida leaders are trying to assert jurisdiction over the entire 65,000-acre reservation. The case is still pending.

"Tribal leaders say that while there is some friction between Indian and non-Indians in the area, they don't regard it as serious. Gordon McLeester, the tribal secretary, said, "From my personal opinion, there's always differences between the two cultures. There will always be whites who don't like Indians and Indians who don't like whites. But I think the relationship between the two cultures is good," he says. "Except for the five local communities and us - they don't recognize our treaties - we have no problems."

Powless agrees.

"Compared to what it was, our relationship with the community is good," he says. "Except for the five local communities and us - they don't recognize our treaties - we have no problems."

Mr. McLeester:

I am currently a student at the University of Texas in Tyler and am doing a paper on this article. Could you please send me any information you might have to enhance this article.

I should like to pursue the success of this particular tribe in contrast to the Indians on the reservations who are laboring under oppressive circumstances.

I should like also to focus on how the Indians have always been enterprising; that it is the white man's greed which has choked the ambition out of the Indian.

Can you send me any information to go along with this article.

Have you as a tribe been harassed because of your commission?

Due Date for my paper

Ben Wheeler, TX. 75754

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MAR 02 1987

ONEIDA TRIBE OF INDIANS OF WISCONSIN

Monday
for Charlie J

Thank you,
Jo Marquis
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