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For those who equate reservations 'with tar-paper shacks and abject poverty, the first sight of the Seneca Indian Nation's Allegany Reservation in southwestern New York State is an impressive surprise. The story behind these new homes and the hopes that go with them is equally impressive.

It is a story of men who turned adversity into triumph. Most of these men are Senecas led by their forceful and articulate President, Martin Seneca. But one, a prime mover, is a Choctaw from Oklahoma -- Sidney Carney.

Carney is in the employ of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The story of Carney and the Senecas could be said to have its beginnings in 1794.

The Seneca Nation was among the Six Nations who signed a treaty with the young United States in 1794 which guaranteed them the right to certain areas of New York. Some of the lands were later sold by the Indians. The remaining Seneca holdings comprise two reservations -- the Allegany and the Cattaraugus. The Allegany stretches in a narrow band for 40 miles along the Allegheny River. A strip of 10,000 riverfront acres was designated several years ago by the Army Corps of Engineers for a reservoir site as part of the Ohio River Basin development. The water will be backed up by the Kinzua Dam, 20 miles downstream.

When the Corps of Engineers' announced its plans to dispossess 133 Seneca families, a total of 830 people, a nationwide protest ensued as the Senecas fought a losing battle through the courts to retain their land.

The Government and the Seneca Nation eventually came to an agreement whereby the Senecas would receive approximately $3 million for the seized lands and another $12 million for a program of rehabilitation for the distressed community.

The money was appropriated by Congress in 19164. Today, two years later, the transformation of the area is evident to the most casual visitor. Where a scattering of shanties and shacks had dotted the verdant countryside, there is now a vast reservoir to hoard the river waters. And on the highlands above are ramblers and ranch houses where 133 dispossessed families have started life anew.

Sid Carney proved to be a powerful catalyst in the rehabilitation of the Senecas, as the tribe set about developing comprehensive plans, including guidelines for investment, education and industrial development.

Carney brought a stream of consultants to the reservation to measure its potential for industrial and tourist development. Meanwhile, the Community Facilities Administration, the Public Housing Administration, the Area Redevelopment Administration, the Accelerated Public Works Program, the Manpower Development and Training Program, the National Park Service, and the Forest Service were also rung in on the planning.

The Quakers, friends of the Senecas since before the Treaty of 1794, sent a representative to give

further assistance to the Tribe.

The first challenge was the relocation of the 133 families. Two new town sites -- Cold Spring and Jimerson town (named for a prominent Seneca family) were selected. Both are at the northern end of the reservation.

In these towns, modern homes, -- both ranch style and split level -- have been constructed on lots ranging from one to three acres, some of them beautifully wooded. The homes have all utilities and many luxuries -- wood paneling, fireplaces, extra bathrooms. The tribe figures their average worth at $12,000, excluding land, in an extremely conservative estimation. It is easy to see that most families intend to stay put. Shrubs have been planted and the struggle to grow grass on the rocky soil has begun. From outside, the scene is typical of suburbia anywhere.

From the inside there is a difference. The decor of these homes is strongly Indian. Pictures, paintings, pottery, baskets and countless other artifacts are in evidence as a reminder of the heritage these people share.

While many husbands work in a nearby Salamanca, N.Y., furniture factory, or for the Erie Railroad, most wives still cling to tradition at home. Weaving and basket making are part of the tradition.

Although most Senecas are Christian and few still fluent in Iroquois, the traditional "Longhouse," site of ancient religious ceremonies and traditional dances, was rebuilt on higher ground. Several Christian churches of very modern design are under construction in the new villages.

Even the dead share a new environment. From individual family plots scattered over the reservation 3,800 graves were relocated in two cemeteries in beautiful settings on the hillsides above the two new communities.

Although the relocation has been painful, the Senecas are not dwelling in the past. They fully expect to provide, on their own terms, all the benefits of modern society for the members of the tribe.

Tribal rolls contain 4,132 names. Roughly one-third lives on each of the reservations, with one-third living off the reservation. The Cattaraugus Reservation is the larger of the two and is made up largely of level lands equally suitable for agriculture or industrial sites. It is there that the second phase of the Seneca's improvement program can be seen.

The walls are already rising for a $400,000 manufacturing plant, the first building on what will be a 66-acie industrial park. The factory is owned by the First Seneca Corp., an organization principally financed by the tribe. The plant will be run under contract by the U.S. Pillow Corp. and will employ more than 100 Indians.

The industrial park is but one project that the Tribal Council and Carney have devised.

On the banks high above what soon will be a reservoir 29 miles long, the tribe plans to construct "Seneca Overlook," a motel - pool - golf course facility for travelers on New York State's Southern Tier Throughway, now under construction across the southern part of the reservation.

On the waterfront, downstream, will be built "State-Line Run," a complete water-based recreation and camping facility, set in beautiful wooded hills and mountains within a day's drive for millions of

recreation seeking Americans.

The Council wants a feasibility study on its plans to build "Iroquoia." This would be a $9 million re-creation of several Indian villages as they were at the height of the Six Nations' power. The purpose, aside from financial gain, is to portray the role the Indians played in the development of America.

Indicative of the progress already made by the tribe are the two modern community buildings, one on each reservation) from which the Council directs operations and plans for the future. They are ultra-modern in design and furnishing -- down to touch-tone telephones-- and in addition to offices contain libraries, kitchens, gymnasiums, and craft rooms.

The lettering on the office doors includes SNEF (Seneca Nation Educational Foundation), SNHE (Seneca Nation Housing Enterprises), and SNICC (Seneca Nation of Indians Cemetery Commission).

Of these, the first holds the key to the success of the Seneca story, and as a result has received $1.8 million of the award money. The tribal Educational Foundation will assist Senecas of all ages to obtain the education necessary to compete in modern America. It is already providing transportation to remedial reading classes in nearby public schools; it has received numerous applications for its college assistance program; it has joined with the Ford Foundation and the local school district for a thorough study of Indian educational problems; and it is supporting a management training program to ready Indians for supervisory positions in the new pillow factory.

In addition, the Foundation has been providing financial assistance to 53 students enrolled at schools ranging from colleges, through business schools to vocational schools. It has hired two part-time guidance counselors who meet with Senecas of all ages who have questions about improving their education. Last summer it sponsored a Neighborhood Youth Corps program which employed 95 young people, between 16 and 21, with support from the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The President of the Foundation is an attractive and knowledgeable Seneca widow, Mrs. Maribel Printup, who, as Carney‘s secretary, is the only other Bureau of Indian Affairs employee on the reservation.

The Senecas know that if they are to sustain this growth and improvement, they must have a continuing reserve of trained and educated people who can provide the leadership and the skills to operate these new enterprises. In 20 years, they believe, the Educational Foundation can provide the tribe with its own Sid Carney to maintain the progress that he helped begin.