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Seneca traditionalists see no good in gaming

By DAN HERBECK
News Staff Reporter
5/19/2004

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ROBERT KIRKHAM/Buffalo News

Rhoda Leaffe is a Seneca Nation traditionalist who wants nothing to do with money from casinos and gambling.

"If someone from the nation walked up to my front door with \$1 million cash and said, 'This is from gambling,' I'd tell them to take it back," the 81-year-old woman said. "I don't want it."

Most of the 7,300 Senecas seem to have embraced, or at least accepted, the idea that casino gambling holds the key to their financial future.

Many hope that, over the next decade, hundreds of millions of dollars in casino profits will allow them to build new homes, better health and recreational facilities and pay for the college education of every tribe member who wishes to go. Some envision the casinos providing employment opportunities for tribe members.

But some Senecas - Leaffe among them - see nothing good coming from gambling, no matter how much money comes rolling in.

Many of the gambling opponents are observers of the traditional Longhouse religion. Longhouse Senecas believe in the 205-year-old prophesy of Handsome Lake, a charismatic tribal leader who believed gambling and drunkenness were "evil practices" that would someday lead to the nation's destruction.

"We Longhouse people are a minority on both reservations, but we have strong beliefs," said Leaffe, a widow who worked many years as a secretary and as a mental health counselor.

"Longhouse people are against gambling. People become addicted to gambling. It breaks up families. Now, we're going to be making money off all that, and I don't like it."

Leaffe said her work as a counselor showed her how much damage gambling and alcohol can do. It disturbs her that the Seneca Nation now sells alcohol at its casinos.

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"I've been around alcoholics all my life, and I've seen it destroy more people than you could possibly imagine," she

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It also upsets her to see people becoming problem gamblers.



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"I see the nation taking busloads of senior citizens to the casino in Niagara Falls. I know a lot of these people can't afford it," she said. "That bothers me."

Leaffe is skeptical about promises from Seneca leaders that the gambling profits will benefit all Senecas.

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"When I hear about all this money that is supposed to be coming in, I tell people, "Don't hold your breath," she said. "Our nation has a history of promising things, but not doing them."

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