

Nipissing First Nation  
Public Library

Chief  
Semo Commanda  
1828-1938

Anonymous

14607

Semo and his wife Mary (Semokwe)



## *Former Chief of Nipissing Indians Passes This Morning*

A link with the far past the years before white man set foot in this district, was severed this morning when Simon Commanda, better known as Semo Commanda, died at his home at Beaucage, Nipissing Indian Reserve.

He was 110 years old February 4, this year, and claimed to be the oldest man in Canada.

The former chief of the Indian, a man who lived under seven monarchs and who acted as guide for the engineers who staked out the C.P.R. line in this area, had been ill since Sunday of this week. He contracted influenza which developed into pneumonia. The aged Indian had been up and around as recently as Saturday Death occurred at 5.41 a.m. today.

### **Last Request**

Conforming with the last wish by Mr. Commanda before his death, arrangements have been made to bury the body at Beaucage. The service will take place at 10 o'clock, Monday morning, and it is

expected that Indians from all parts of the district will attend to pay last respects to their former chief.

The crisis in Mr. Commanda's illness occurred Wednesday night, and at that time the attending physician, Dr. G.W. Smith, North Bay, advised the family that there was no hope for his recovery. The last rites of the church were administered by rev. Father J.C. Humphrey and Rev. Father J.F. Buchhelt, North Bay.

Survivors are his second wife the former Mary Laronde, whom he married 51 years ago; two sons E. Paul, a guide, and William, employed by the C.N.R. at South River; and three daughters, Mrs. F. Descheno, Toronto, and Mrs. A. Swanson, and mrs.J. Couchai, both of Yellick.

Mr. Commanda's colorful life passed through important periods of history. He came to what is now known as Nipissing district 107 years ago and saw the various phases of civilization take over what had been dense wilderness. There was not a single white inhabitant in the district when he came to Lake Nipissing region in 1831.



He was beloved for miles around and admired by white men who respected his shrewdness and qualities of character.

### **Here Since 1831**

According to a computation made by Mr. Commanda last year for the Nugget, he came to Lake Nipissing district in 1831 at the age of three years with his parents. At that time, there was no sign of habitation outside Indian settlements on the north and south sides of the lake.

His parents made the trip by canoe from Lector Mountain, near Hudson, on the St. Lawrence, just below Quebec City. Although it occupied "many moons", Mr. Commanda said the trip was uneventful.

Even in those days when there plenty of whites down around Quebec, then a thriving city, and up the Ottawa River as far as Pembroke, there were only struggling group of white settlers. At Pembroke, then just a camp with here a rude log cabin, the last groups of whites were left behind.

Further up the Ottawa River, at Mattawa, there was a Hudson's Bay Company post, with a single white man in charge, after that, nothing but the red man's wilderness. A few years later another post of the Hudson's Bay Company was established on an island in the west arm of Lake Restoule, but when Simon Commanda first came to Nipissing, it was still a virgin forest.

When the Commanda family decided that they had gone far enough into the wilderness to find the good hunting they sought, they were part way across Lake Nipissing in their frail birch-bark canoe not far in fact, from where Simon Commanda died today, at Beaucage Point.

At that time, the first essential for the support of life was that there should be plenty of game and fish. Grains and vegetables were grown but in the meagre quantities, and hunting was the chief occupation of the men of the family. What little grain or vegetable the women-folk could bring to harvest stage were just a change from the steady meat diet. They played only a small part in the struggle for life

### **First Lumberman**

## **First Lumberman**

In the middle 1850's a new force came to Nipissing. David moore saw in the district the great promise it held as a lumbering country, and that great industry was born. For the first few years it fought it's way along slowly, then gradually gained impetus until it carried the whole district along with it. Nobonsing Lake was the site of the first lumbering operations, and to that point Simon Commanda-- the a full-grown man of 30--made his way to the first winter operations were carried on.

Later J.R. Booth and other legendary names of the industry made themselves felt in the district, but for many years Simon stayed with the pioneer David Moore.

The Riel Rebellion of 1896 found Simon--then a man in middle life, fighting on the side of the British in that brief uprising. In his long lifetime, this was the one occasion on which he bore arms. There were no Indian wars in Nipissing, and there were no other battles of any account during the period in which he would have been listed as fit for service.

Before he left the fight in the Riel Rebellion, Simon had been married for the first time--married by a white missionary, the forerunner of civilization which was to come into Nipissing. He had not been used to the ceremonies with which the white man attended occasions like marriage, and when the missionary started to pray at the ceremony Simon became frightened and vanished into the brush. How long he stayed is not recorded but eventually he came back and the wedding was finished.

In 1879 or 1880 tales began to come to Nipissing of the "ironhorse" which was approaching from the east. Location parties of surveyors were even then making their way through the bush, marking out the trail the Canadian Pacific Railway was to follow. Headquarters for the survey parties were at North Bay and to that point went Simon Commanda--then more 50 to be taken on as a bushman, and continue westward from North Bay with the surveyors. For several seasons he continued westward with the surveyors, but eventually left them to come back to Beaucage on Lake Nipissing.



Born at a spot known as the picturesque "Lake of Two Mountains" since renamed Oka, Simon came to the Nipissing district as a youth. He was first married to Philomene Couchai, of Duchesnay Creek, near North Bay. Their three children have since died. Fifty-one years ago--when he was 50 years old--Simon, then a widower, married Mary Laronde, an Indian girl from Pembroke.

Of their family two sons and three daughters are still living. They are E. Paul Commanda, noted Nipissing guide; William, South River; Mrs. F. Decheno, (Louise), Toronto; Mrs. A. Swanson (Agnes), Yellek; and Mrs. J. Couchai (Anna), Yellek.

Grandchildren, great-grandchildren and even great-great-grandchildren are beyond the number. Records of family which traced Simon's descendants were lost in a fire which destroyed the Commanda home at Beaucage five years ago. Descendants are living in such far spread points as New York City, Temagami, Toronto and Cochrane.

He continued in the employ of the C.P.R., however working on the construction engineering

party from Mattawa to North Bay and followed this with another period spent in the lumbering industry.

### **Big Pow-Wow**

Sometimes during the reign of Queen Victoria--just when Simon is not quite sure--there was a big gathering of Indians here. What the purpose is another hary point, but it would appear that it was on the occasion of the Queen' Golden Jubilee. For many days there was merriment and feasting on the shores of Lake Nipissing, but just why, the 108 year old man cannot recall.

For twenty years Semo held the position of Chief of the Nipissing Indian Reserve, and during that time saw the construction of the North Bay--Sturgeon Falls road divide the property of his braves. For months he opposed the building of the road--never was won over--in fact, only through the invention of the government was permission granted for the road to be built, and then over the objections of the chief.

## **Under Seven Monarchs**

Living under seven monarchs was the distinction of the grand old man of Nipissing. Born in 1829, he watched with interests developments under the reigns of George IV, William IV, Queen Victoria, Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII, and George VI.

He had vivid recollections of the centenarian, including Confederation the introduction of the lumber industry to the north, the entrance of the railroad, the appearance of automobiles, radio, telephone, news of Victoria's accession, the Boer War, the Great War.

The history background of the Commanda family is interwoven irrevocably with progress in the North.

Chief Rotten-Wood an outstanding personage in the Ottawa tribe of Iroquois, acquired the appellation which made Commanda a noted name throughout Ontario. Many lakes and streams and localities take their names from it.

According to the ex-chief's colorful account of how his grandfather received the new name, he told of the war of 1812.

"That was a big war" Simon reflected. "That was a fight between the English and the Americans. You know the English were short of men so they came up here to get our people. They wanted help. My grandfather, Rotten-Wood, was the chief. He liked the English so he took the Indians down to fight. But you know the Indians didn't know what the English soldiers said. My grandfather did. He could speak English. So the English soldiers told my grandfather what they wanted the Indians to do. He told them when to start fighting and when to stop. He told them when to get up in the morning and when to go to bed. The Indians heard the big English officer was called commander. Only they couldn't say the word very well and they called him 'Commanda'. It pleased my grandfather so he kept it."

And Commanda, the family has been known as since.