

Josephine Commanda Beaucage, Ban

On April 15, 1904, at Beaucage Village, Nipissing Reserve the second child of Paul and Mary Ann Stephans Commanda was born. Josephine is the granddaughter of Semo Beejesick Commanda, Ban, his doodem the Duck (Bird). Her father Paul Commanda, Ban, was the head guide in the Carnegie Expeditions and as a guide for commercial tourism camps. Her sister, Margaret (Nellie) Commanda, Ban, was an entertainer and native rights activist under her native and stage name, Princess 'Wah Nese' Red Rock. She had three other siblings, Veronica, Annie and Paul who entered the spirit world as infants.

In her undated autobiography, Josephine recalled her early education was at 'a nice big schoolhouse', the Beaucage School. She relates that her father was on the Labrador expedition in June of 1914 when her mother passed away. As her father Paul's work with museums kept him away from home, his only option for childcare was to place his children in the residential school at Spanish, Ontario.

Her years at the school she described as lonely at first and cried a lot and related further that it 'was the best thing that ever happened to us'. She found the school strict in that native language was discouraged. Josephine was a fluent speaker of Nibisiing Nishnaabemwin never losing her language despite the education policy of that day. Her attendance at the school was during the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic and described the impact on her school mates. During that time, she experienced the isolation and quarantine from her father, as no visitors were allowed.

Josephine attended this school where she completed her education in 1921.

Josephine married her husband Angus Beaucage, Ban, in 1923. She related in a recorded interview that her husband was from Garden Village and his family believed in "trying to keep the natural ways of the native people."

Angus guided for tourist camps in the Temagami area and as a couple resided in Temagami. As a couple they worked in commercial tourist camps in the summers between the years 1938 to 1950. Josephine's job duties with these camps were responsibilities as cabin girl, laundress and second cook. In May of 1950 she worked for Ontario Northland as a shipping and





receiving clerk and Angus was a Captain on delivery boats. Beginning each Fall, they worked their trap line. Under her husband's tutoring she learned to handle a gun, run an outboard motor, to dress furs of beaver, mink and otter and in her words was 'pretty good when it came to handling a canoe'.

By the summer of 1959 her work towards cultural revival commenced. Josephine and Angus were hired to demonstrate beadwork and tanning of hides at a Niagara Indian Village. She began her teaching and counselling career with the Continuing Board of Education in 1966 working with families from Sioux

Lookout. The next year she began her work assisting families from the north to situate and culture manage their move into city life. By December of 1968 she worked for the Y.M.C.A. on Spadina Avenue in Toronto counselling and working with youth aged 16 to 22 years of age. In June of 1970 she began her work with the Board of Education instructing young adults in beading and leather work. In July of 1970 her husband Angus passed away. She kept busy acquiring employment with Indian Crafts of Ontario and began her work visiting reserves "to improve their craft work and to teach them different patterns." Josephine's agenda, diaries placed her on thirty-three Reserves where she taught beading, fur dressing and leatherwork. Amid this time of teaching, she was proud to state that she exhibited her own artisan work at the 1974 Canadian National Exhibition.

Her autobiography relates two events she held dear to her heart. In 1972 she attended a conference in Sudbury, Ontario and met Chief Dan George. Her humour can be seen in her autobiographical reference to this encounter. She was urged by her students to ask since to ask Chief George to marry her. She said in an attempt to get his attention and speak with him and since it was a leap year, she asked "*Chief, you are a widower and I am a widow this being a leap year, I've come to ask you to marry me*". He looked at me with a big grin and said that he would be very happy to marry me. I presented him with a beautiful beaded glass case as a souvenir."

Her second memorable event was that she was chosen to go to Rome for the Beautification of Kateri Tekakwitha in June of 1980. She was honoured to wear her regalia at the Vatican's St. Peter's Square and assist at the Mass officiated by Pope John Paul II. She was 'thankful to have taken part in all the undertakings and programs' which she described as 'beautiful and touching'.

Josephine was an advocate of native teachers in the education system when on her travels she realized she knew native teachers with qualification but did not see them employed in the schools in the communities she visited. Not only did she advocate for the hiring of native teachers she also performed recognizance



reporting work for the needs of native people on the Reserves she brought her cultural revival classes too.

Mrs. Josephine Commanda Beaucage was featured in ten different magazines and periodicals. She was recognized for her lifetime work receiving the 1994 Ontario Senior Achievement Award and The Catholic Women's League of Canada acknowledgement of forty (40) years of service.

Josephine has many great and grandchildren who are Nation Members at Nipissing.

Josephine Commanda Beaucage has been the inspiration and featured in the Lake Nipissing Beading Project. Her story will be a part of the Nipissing Nation Exhibit on Nipissing Notables, an acknowledgement to those Nipissing who contributed to the heritage and culture of our Nation.

