

"The native people are still here where our ancestors are buried. We haven't gone away."

— Ron Yob



PRESS PHOTO/PAUL L. NEWBY II

Persistent: Ron Yob spent months wading through the federal bureaucracy in his efforts to bring a treaty, signed by one of his ancestors, back to the area.

Indian chief's descendent brings landmark pact to GR

Treaty that will be displayed
forced Ottawa bands
out of Grand River valley

BY PAT SHELLNBARGER
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — The place has changed since Maish-ke-aw-she met here with other Ottawa and Chippewa chiefs to sign a treaty with the United States government.

His great-great-great-grandson, Ron Yob, chair of the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians, stood near that same spot the other day, across the river from the new convention center, hotels and construction cranes, and talked about what went on here 150 years ago.

"This is where our village was, right

*Articles of Agreement and Convention made
and concluded at the City of Detroit in the State of Michigan
this Thirty First day of July one thousand eight hundred
and fifty five between George W Manypenny and Henry
C Gilbert Commissioners on the part of the United States and
the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan parties
to the treaty of March 28th 1836.*

Changing a way of life: This is a portion of the 1855 Treaty of Detroit, which relocated the Grand River band of Ottawa Indians as well as other native Americans around the state.

here," he said, indicating the sweep of lawn in front of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum.

Thanks to Yob's persistence, the document his ancestor signed here in 1856 is coming home and will be dis-

played for a month in the Ford Museum.

For the past century and a half, the handwritten treaty has been stored in the National Archives and Records

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TREATY

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF WITH DISPLAY

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Administration in Washington. It is known as the 1855 Treaty of Detroit, although it wasn't signed by this area's tribal chiefs until July 31, 1856.

Its purpose was to remove the Indians from the Grand River valley to land in Oceana and Mason counties.

The idea of private property meant little to them, but here was the U.S. government offering each 80 acres if they would leave what had always been theirs.

"It's like going out and telling a squirrel, 'Here is your land,'" Yob said. "The native viewpoint was, 'this is yours and mine.'"

Some took the offer and later lost their land for nonpayment of property taxes. Some refused to leave. Some left and came back.

"It just divided the tribe is what it did," Yob said, but he added: "The native people are still here where our ancestors are buried. We haven't gone away."

Officially, 2,184 American Indians live in Kent County and 622 in Ottawa County, according to the U.S. Census bureau. The Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians has 706 members, Yob said.

The idea of bringing the treaty back to Grand Rapids occurred to him a year and a half ago on a visit to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. He recalled reading a letter to an Ottawa elder years earlier, saying the original treaty was in the National Archives.

He contacted the National Archives and Records Administration and asked that it be temporarily displayed in Grand Rapids.

"Nobody would ever tell me, 'No,'" said Yob, 57, "but they kept referring me around. I just kept at it."

The Ford Museum, which is part of the National Archives, agreed to host the exhibit, but

IF YOU GO

Viewing history

What: The opening of a display of the 1855 Treaty of Detroit

Where: Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, 303 Pearl St. NW

When: 1 p.m. Saturday

Admission: Free

still the government agency stalled.

In June, Yob, a Grand Rapids Public Schools teacher, was in Washington to testify before a Senate committee on Indian affairs. While there, handed out letters, asking several members of Congress to help bring the treaty home.

Back in Grand Rapids, he got a call from Don Holloway, the Ford Museum's curator. The National Archives had rented.

So it was that Yob stood inside the museum, signing an agreement with the federal government, on the approximate site where his great-great-great grandfather had marked his "X" to the treaty July 31, 1856, almost exactly 150 years ago.

On Saturday, the exhibit will open with American Indian songs, drums and a feast. Ottawa and Chippewa elders from around the state will again gather on the banks of the Grand River to commemorate what happened here in 1856.

Admission to the museum that day will be free. The treaty will remain on display until Aug. 27, then return to Washington.

Yob is modest about his efforts to bring it here.

"Somebody tells you to pick up a loaf of bread on the way home, you do it," he said. "This is what I'm supposed to be doing, so I did it."

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