



Elders Chair: William “Bill” Bobolink Active Follower of Tradition

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Interview and photograph by Patsy Gordon

As a plane flew low just above the treetops, and semis, trucks and cars passed by on the noisy and busy nearby highway, Bill and I sat down outside to begin our visit.

Bill was born William Bobolink on April 16, 1921 to his proud parents, Jim and Jenny Bobolink, although he is not sure of where he was born he knows it was either in Sugar Point or Bena. Bill remembers even before turning one year old, being securely tied into a high chair so he wouldn't fall out and being in a log house with green wallpaper keeping an eye on his mother while she canned. He said, "I really know how that place used to look"! For all of his 82 years, Bill has lived in both of the communities at one time or another. He was raised there with his three brothers and one sister, all of whom since have passed on.

Bill married Ima White in 1984. They have 4 daughters and one son. They made their home in a 16 by 20 foot house in Sugar Point that Bill built himself. This is where they raised their children.

Not unlike so many of our Indian elders today, Bill did not learn the English language until he was seven years old and had attended school in Sugar Point in a one room school house. Bill said, "I didn't know one word of English at that time". He picked up a few words at a time by listening to the teacher and other kids in school until he eventually learned the entire English language. Bill's father would walk him and his brother David to school every day, and then Bill said after school they would run the three and a half miles home.

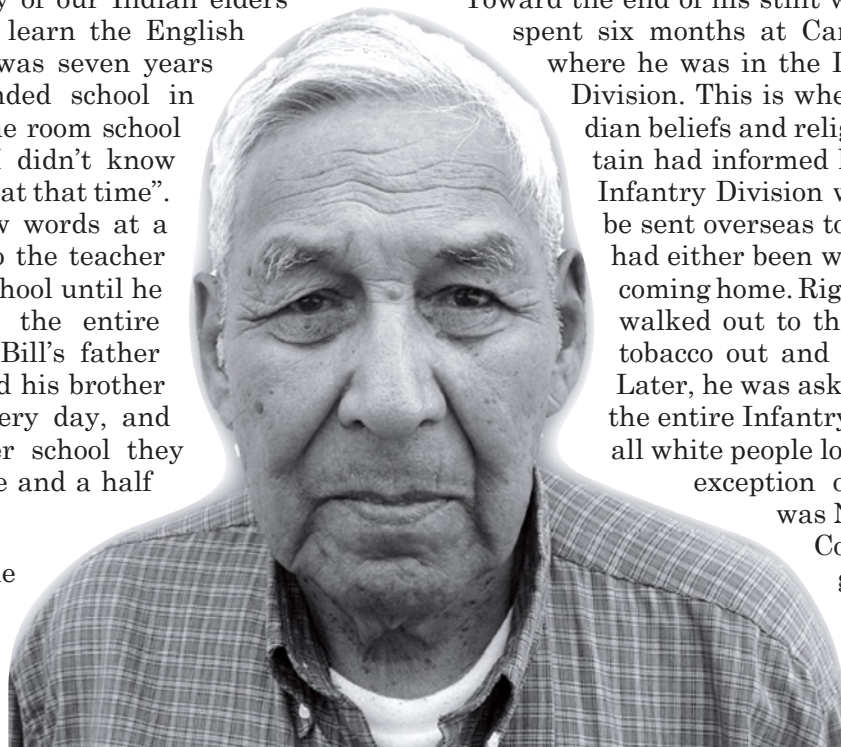
He told me of a time that he recalled in particular, about one of the other students teasing

him. Bill hauled off and hit him. The teacher came and asked him what happened. Even though he couldn't understand what the teacher was asking him he knew what she wanted to know. Bill said, "gee bug ah tah wah", which in Ojibwe means, I slapped him. Bill further explained to his teacher in his language that the other student was bothering him. Bill went on to complete the 7th grade in that school.

Bill says, "That's the worst mistake I ever made" (not finishing high school). He has been asked to speak to the students at the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School on occasion and has made it a point to tell them how important an education is.

In 1943, Bill entered the Air Force and became Buck Private Bobolink. His specialty was to assist the airplane mechanics with fixing the airplanes. He remembers one of his Air Force buddies always calling him "Chief" in good humor and was well respected by the other enlisted men.

Toward the end of his stint with the air force, Bill spent six months at Camp Housey in Texas where he was in the Infantry Replacement Division. This is where Bill recalls his Indian beliefs and religion started. His Captain had informed him that being in the Infantry Division would mean he would be sent overseas to replace soldiers that had either been wounded, died, or were coming home. Right then and there, Bill walked out to the nearby park to put tobacco out and talked to the spirits. Later, he was asked to speak in front of the entire Infantry Division. Bill recalls all white people looking at him with the exception of a Lieutenant who was Native American from Colorado. He asked the group to raise their hands if any of them had Indian blood in



them. Everyone in the room raised their hands. He asked them for tobacco and all of the soldiers either took tobacco from their tins or broke their cigarettes and gave Bill tobacco. He then prayed to the spirits in front of the group in his own language. During this ceremony, Bill asked the spirits to guide him and to let there be peace wherever he was to go.

After being stationed in France for a few months, Bill next served in Bond, Germany. While receiving his rations and ammunition at camp one day he heard yelling and crying coming from behind him. People were jubilant and hysterical at the same time. Bill wondered what all the commotion was about. Then he heard, Adolph Hitler had just committed suicide. Bill said, “My prayers for peace had been answered”.

He was honorably discharged on Valentines Day in 1946. He was happy and relieved to get home just time in time to be with his wife Ima, and to witness the birth of their oldest daughter, Gloria, born on March 5th of that year.

Today, Bill is a spiritual leader and belongs to the Midewin Society. Bill explained that he went through 3 degrees of midewin and 3 ceremonies to become a medicine man. He originally had done this for his

brother and sisters that died, but eventually started providing spiritual services wherever he was needed and whenever he was asked. Bill said his brothers also belonged to the Midewin Society although they never became spiritual leaders. He says “I don’t like to talk about my way, but I will do spiritual work for people that ask for my help”. He says, “Sometimes I don’t have the money, or my old car will break down, but my pipe always gets me there”.

Bill has two pipes that he uses for his ceremonies. He has given both of them names. One pipe he has named “Little Thunder” and Bill uses this pipe for healing ceremonies. His other pipe is a red stone pipe and he has named it “Little Eagle” which Bill uses for pow-wows, meetings, and other ceremonies. ■

