

the News
Fit to Print™

The New York Times

Late Edition
New York: Today
windy, high 64. Tonight
diminishing winds, low
sunny, high 64. Yesterday
54. Weather map is on

IX . . . No. 51,675

Copyright © 1999 The New York Times

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1999

\$1 beyond the greater New York metropolitan area

For Indian Nations, Virtual Trade Routes

By JONATHAN LESSER

ON a recent trip to visit the Catawba Indian Nation in Catawba, S.C., Dan Umstead, a member of the Oneida Nation of central New York, was shown centuries-old pottery of Oneida design excavated there, some 800 miles from home. For members of the six-nation Iroquois Confederacy, which includes the Oneida, it was once common to travel half a continent on foot to trade with other Indian nations. That trade became much more difficult in the 19th century, when many tribes were moved to reservations.

As some Indian nations, thanks in large part to gambling, have flourished economically again in the 1990's, nation-to-nation trade has become a hot topic among tribal leaders. The modern version of nation-to-nation trade involves goods ranging from T-shirts to computers, and the trade routes are virtual rather than physical. The marketplace is the Internet.

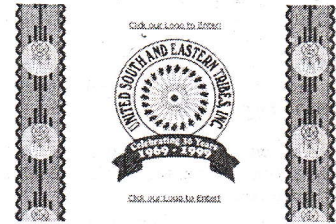
Mr. Umstead, for example, is the

The Web expands tribe-to-tribe commerce across the country.

Oneida's manager of Internet services. At a meeting in June of leaders of the United South and Eastern Tribes, or USET, a nonprofit intertribal organization, Mr. Umstead unveiled the Nation to Nation Trade Forum, an on-line bulletin board (bbs.oneida-nation.net) aimed at connecting the organization's 23 member tribes to discuss trade.

"The USET committees thought that the idea of reaffirming these traditional trade ties between nations was good," Mr. Umstead said. "But let's take it a step further, into the 21st century." The Web site even has a fill-in-the-blank model of a bilateral trade agreement; it is available for downloading, although that service has had no takers so far.

Keller George, president of United South and Eastern Tribes, estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the organiza-



tion's member tribes are on line. Those who are not, like the small Gena band of Choctaw Indians in Alexandria, La., who are currently starting a deck-chair business, can market their products to different Indian nations through the tribal organization's Web site.

"We're just trying to get back to the basics of how the Indian people a long time ago did nation-to-nation trade, by finding out what products they had to offer," Mr. George said. "Then it was done on a more personal basis, but today I think we can do it with technology."

One tribe that is not on line yet but plans to be by the end of the year is the Unkechaug tribe of Long Island, which sells its organic coffee to the Oneida of both New York and Wisconsin and to the Winnebago tribe in Nebraska.

The coffee is already available on line at Allnative.com, a Web commerce site (www.allnative.com) owned by the Winnebago that also sells Indian-made crafts, computers and clothing.

"There is significant production and development going on in Indian country," said the Unkechaug chief, Harry Wallace. "There is also a significant marketing ability."

A hurdle facing both Mr. Wallace and Mr. George is the potential for on-line fraud. How can the Indian traders be sure that they are dealing with people who are in fact American Indians? The use of passwords has been discussed, but Mr. George says he is not worried about the future of his new venture over all.

"Our people have been survivors because we've been able to adapt to whatever was there for us," he said. "We've gone from using natural resources to using technology. If we don't take advantage of the technology that is there for us today, then shame on us."