

Mohegan Tribe

<http://www.mohegan.nsn.us/Heritage/ourHistory.aspx>

History

When does history begin? Like humanity everywhere, Native American people trace their past in more than years. Scientific evidence shows Native American presence in the area for 10,000 years. But oral history begins with creation, when the Great Spirit created the earth. The earliest clans of the Delaware Tribe included the Wolf clan, or Mohegans, who settled in upstate New York. After migrating to Connecticut this group became today's Mohegan Tribe.

The Mohegan story can be told through the history of its remarkable people.

As with any culture, traditions and symbols serve to connect us to our history, our spiritual life and each other. One of the tragedies for many Indian tribes is that years of repression have caused these traditions to be lost. Still, one of the most unifying traditions for the Mohegan people survives today. The Wigwam, or Green Corn Festival is all at once a celebration of thanks, a symbol of Tribal survival and the chance to feel connected to other Tribal members, past and present. It is held at the end of summer, with the corn harvest.

Traditions

The Wigwam, or Green Corn Festival

Before the arrival of the Europeans, Mohegans held several celebrations throughout the year to give thanks to the Creator for the earth's many gifts. The annual Wigwam Festival, or "Corn Thanksgiving," was most important. Tribespeople thanked Mundu, the Creator and Great Mystery for the gift of corn, a source of both spiritual and physical sustenance.

The name "Wigwam" comes from the word Wigwomun, meaning "welcome" or "come in the house." In many ways, the Wigwam was a community open house and homecoming. Both corn and home play central roles in the celebration.

History

In early times, the festival was held on the site of the current Mohegan Church, at a "fair tree." But the tradition started to fade in the 1800s with increasing pressure for the Tribe to Christianize and assimilate. Medicine Woman Emma Baker revived the festival just as Tribal lands started to break up in 1860. She incorporated it with the activities of the Mohegan Church Ladies' Sewing Society, making it a source of Tribal solidarity. Inspired by the chance to retain their identity at a dark moment, the Tribe became determined that this should happen.

Corn

Corn gains increased significance when it is parched and ground as yokeag. Mohegans have beaten corn with a mortar and pestle since the earliest times. The act of grinding yokeag ties Mohegans to their ancestors and each other, particularly through women. Grinding yokeag is a part of the Wigwam festival and it might be served a number of ways, including on ice cream. But corn is also served as the traditional succotash, a combination of corn and beans, two of the "Three Sisters" of traditional Mohegan agriculture (with squash being the third).

The Wigwam Arbor

Emma Baker's Wigwam festival included building a brush arbor. It took eight to ten men to cut and set the poles and then weave birch saplings along the top and sides, forming a large enclosure. One entrance was at the east end, and one at the west, which led to the cook house. Tables were set up for meals and to showcase items made by tribespeople. The first table was the candy table, followed by the table of baked goods. In the middle was the "fancy table" featuring everything from baskets and carving to beadwork and aprons. Locally grown food was served at mealtime: clam chowder, oyster stew, succotash and yokeag.

The Wigwam Today

Like many traditions, the Wigwam festival celebrates tradition even as it evolves. For many years in the 20th century, the festival helped raise funds for the Mohegan Church and for Mohegan activities, and was held in September, after the harvest. Nowadays, it gives us an opportunity to get together and share some aspects of our culture with the community at large.

In 2003, in an effort to scale back and return to its roots, the celebration returned to Shantok after many years at a local high school. In keeping with tradition, it includes crafts and food items for sale, plus traditional dance and storytelling.

Oral History

Culture expressed through oral tradition tells a different and often deeper story than historic records can.

Oral tradition is a selective, yet democratic form of spoken record-keeping. Indigenous cultures pass down their oral traditions through

select culture-bearers; these individuals have been trained since a young age to interpret their traditions. However, unlike written record-keepers (whose writings were and are still inaccessible to many), spoken records (when recited) are subject to the correction and refutation of an entire community -- whether the members are literate or not. Furthermore, stories passed down through oral tradition are fully understood by the story-keeper, enabling him or her to update archaic language and make the story more intelligible to succeeding generations.

Makiawisug, or the Little People

The rocks of Mohegan Hill are the home of the Makiawisug, or Little People. After nightfall, the call of the Whip-poor-will signals their arrival. They are good spirits, but the Mohegans know they must be treated with respect, according to tradition. It is important to leave baskets of food, such as corn cakes and berries, or even meat in the woods for them. Wearing moccasin flowers for shoes, they gather the gifts at night. In fact, Makiawisug means "whip-poor-will moccasins."

They have their own rules of etiquette. Those who see the Little People should not look directly at them, they think it's rude. If they catch you staring, they might point a finger at you, rooting you to the ground, while they take your belongings. Another rule is don't speak of them in the summer, when they are most active.

But in return for kindness, they taught the Mohegan people how to grow corn and use healing plants. They keep the earth well and grant favors for those who honor their ways.

When the English settlers came and disrupted the traditional way of Mohegan life, many forgot to help the Makiawisug. As a result, many Mohegans and Makiawisug fell ill. At this time of Bad Spirits, there lived a medicine woman. One night, during a terrible storm, she heard the whip-poor-will. When she looked outside, the bird wasn't to be found, but a small boy stood in the rain on her doorstep. It turned out he was a grown Makiawisug named Weegun, who told her to come help someone who was sick. Though the storm was fierce, he led her through the woods a long way.

Suddenly, the storm seemed to stop as they began to descend into the ground. They were in the realm of the Little People. Weegun led her to a beehive shaped chamber of rocks. Inside, a very old woman lay in bed, very ill. The Makiawisug told the medicine woman that this was Granny Squannit, who must be made well. Granny Squannit is very powerful, and she is known to cause storms when she argues with her husband. Her illness was the reason for this storm. Worse, healers often look to Granny Squannit when the need is dire for help in healing, and here she was the one who was sick. The medicine woman treated Granny Squannit for nearly a moon before she got better. In return for restoring Granny Squannit's health, the Makiawisug gave the medicine woman a basket of gifts and told her to remember them. She was blindfolded and taken back home.

Only when she returned did she open the basket. Inside were quartz crystals, painted skins and bunches of herbs.

Famous Mohegan Chiefs and Important Historical Figures

Uncas, Sachem and Statesman

The early 1600s was a critical time of change for Connecticut tribes. The pressure from rapidly expanding European settlements created competition for land and resources, while disease was decimating Indian populations at an alarming rate. Within the Pequot Tribe at that time, a dispute erupted between the Pequot Sachem (head chief) Sassacus and Uncas. Uncas left with his followers, calling themselves Mohegan, or Wolf People, like their ancestors. Each tribe had its own idea of how to deal with European conflicts.

Uncas (1598-1683) became Sachem of the Mohegan Tribe, which favored collaboration with the English. The Pequots under Sassacus chose to fight them, with other local tribes taking sides. Seeing the loss brought on by continued fighting, Uncas befriended the European invaders. This controversial decision left Uncas and the Mohegans in an uneasy alliance with the English in an ensuing war with the Pequots. But staying true to their word, the Mohegans helped the English defeat the Pequots.

Uncas settled his people in a village at Shantok, which the Tribe defended from a Narragansett invasion sparked by European as well as Indian conflicts. Finally, the Mohegan Tribe's affiliation with the English kept its people relatively safe during King Philip's war and beyond.

Fidelia Fielding

Fidelia Hoscott Fielding is considered the last speaker and preserver of the Mohegan Pequot language. She and her grandmother, Martha Uncas, conversed in their native dialect. Four diaries she left are now preserved and used in the reconstruction of the Mohegan and other related Indian languages. Fidelia called herself Dji'its Bud dnaca, meaning "Flying Bird." Following Fidelia's marriage to William Fielding, she continued to live in the traditional Mohegan lifestyle. She remained something of a loner, and did not participate in the Green Corn Festivals or Church Ladies Sewing Society meetings. Fidelia was the last to live in the traditional style log dwelling.

Fielding passed on many Mohegan traditions to Gladys Tantaquidgeon. From her, Gladys learned the stories of the Makiawisug, or Little People. She also gave Gladys a belt once belonging to Martha Uncas.

Medicine Women

Emma Baker (1828-1916)

A major force in celebrating and preserving Tribal culture in the late 1800s, Emma Baker is credited with revitalizing the [Green Corn Festival](#), or Wigwam. She incorporated it into the goals of the Church Ladies' Sewing Society in 1860, just before the break-up of the reservation. The festival helped galvanize Tribal solidarity during a time of fragmentation. It was Emma who recorded the desecration of the Norwich Royal Mohegan Burial Ground. She led the Church Ladies Sewing Society in their matriarchal role considering new chiefs and discussing land claims. She also chaired the Tribal Council and represented the Tribe before the Connecticut legislature. She gained and passed on a knowledge of traditional herbal medicine.

Gladys Tantaquidgeon (1899-2005)

Trained by her three "grandmothers" in traditional herbal lore, Gladys is credited with preserving much of Mohegan history and culture as a living part of Tribal life and heritage. Her long life spanned the last days of those who lived traditionally to federal recognition and the Tribe's revival. She passed on a rich oral history from previous medicine women who spoke the Mohegan language and had heard the stories of another time. From the century's early chiefs and elders she learned of a culture that was nearly extinguished. Her understanding was deepened from her studies in ethnobotany and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania under Dr. Frank Speck, a noted anthropologist who studied Indian culture. She herself studied other tribes and learned of the many connections and differences among them. In 1931, she co-founded Tantaquidgeon Museum along with her brother, Harold and father, John. In the 1930s she served as a community worker for the Bureau of Indian Affairs among western tribes and lived for years among the Lakota Sioux, helping them deal with unbearable poverty and cultural oppression. During the 1940s she worked as a specialist for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. When she returned to her own tribe in 1947, she spent the next years expanding her knowledge of Mohegan history and culture. All of this helped the Tribe prove its inherent sovereignty and unbroken heritage and gain federal recognition in 1994.

Modern-day Mohegan

The Mohegan Tribe gained federal recognition as a sovereign nation on March 7, 1994. However, we have existed as a tribe in southeastern Connecticut for hundreds of years and as part of the indigenous North American population for 10,000 years. We've lived together, celebrated our traditions together and struggled to survive together as a tribe through many dark years. Our local community knew us as Indians. For more, see the interactive [Timeline](#).

Federal recognition has given the Mohegan Tribe the opportunity to conduct itself as a sovereign nation. To get there, the Tribe had to meet strict [criteria](#), but was able to meet these high standards of proof and answer questions about [why the tribe would take the trouble](#).

Preservation Projects

Dolbeare Burial Ground

One of the more difficult issues the Mohegan Tribe has dealt with over the years is the desecration of burial grounds. One such instance was when the state took control of the Shantok lands, and removed the grave markers from the George and Hannah Dolbeare family, including those of their eight children. The Museum Authority was able to locate the actual Dolbeare graves. In 2001, the Tribe replaced the grave markers back to their original locations, restoring the integrity of this final resting place.

The Mohegan Language Restoration Project

Fidelia Fielding, the last fluent speaker of the Mohegan tongue died in the early twentieth century. At that time, many parents had stopped teaching the language to their children, for fear of retribution by teachers in local schools. An extensive project is now underway to restore the language and begin teaching it to all interested Tribal members. The project pieces together the fragments found in the written documents owned by Tribal members. These fragments were recorded by Fidelia Fielding and anthropologist Frank Speck almost a century ago. In addition, the Mohegan Tribe is working with other neighboring tribes who have similar dialects. The project includes the creation of instructional videos, tapes and books.