[Nutley Was Setting For Indian Thanksgiving Feast | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961]

Nutley Was Setting For Indian Thanksgiving Feast

FROM IRVING S. KULL

ABOUT where the mobile radar equipment is installed on the former Yountakah Country Club golf course, the Indians of the lakes and woods of Jersey held their Thanksgiving ceremonial dance every year.

Their corn having been harvested for the winter and it being still too early for deer hunting, the Lenni Lenape Indians made their annual trek to the seashore to catch fish and to gather shells which, long before the Dutch settlers "invented" wampum, the Indians used for cooking and eating utensils.

On their way down from the highland lakes, they gathered in the lush green valley where the present Third River flows into the Passaic and camped under the trees for the ceremonial dances, often lasting three or four days during which the Indians thanked their Gods of sun and rain and earth for a bountiful harvest.

To the harvest ceremony, which long antedated the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving, they gave the name "Yantacaw," spelled in the early records in a dozen ways as it sounded to the ears of the Dutch-Yanteco, Jantacach, Yantokah or Yountakuh all appear in the early records.

A sort of Thanksgiving, the Indian "Yantacaw" ceremony was also like the traditional Harvest Home celebrations. The meeting of the tribe on the banks of the "Yantacaw" River brought together, once a year, the many families of the Lenni Lenape who hunted and farmed their own strip of forest or valley.

There were feasts as well as ceremonious dances, and the early records show that our Indians made a potent corn liquor which flowed freely during tribal Thanksgiving here. After meeting old friends and several days of feasting, the whole tribe would head for the shore and gorge on shellfish and seafood, apparently feeling the need of salt food after a summer of game and freshwater fish.

The story of the Indian Thanksgiving has been made a labor of love by Frank Speer, of 307 Prospect Street, considered the outstanding authority on Nutleyana. Through years of patient research, he has been able to reconstruct most of the ceremony and has been able to locate the setting of the "Yantacaw" harvest dance as the present Federal Telecommunication Laboratories site.

"It is now possible to say that the Lenni Lenape Indians were the first humans to inhabit the sandy, wind-swept shores and the thickly wooded highlands which make up New Jersey, today," Speer told the Nutley Sun, in sketching the

results of his research.

“We know, too, that the Lenni Lenape came here from what is now the corner of Canada between Lake Erie and Lake Michigan. Apparently hunters from the tribe made the long trek across the mountains about 1,000 years ago and found a rich land wholly empty of humans. They returned to the cold corner between the lakes and told of their discovery. The tribe divided and many Lenni Lenape came and settled in this game-rich land.

“They were here when the Dutch came, and they remained to dispute the way to the English colonists who came here from Connecticut at the bid of Governor Carteret in 1665. They sold their river land to the English, and, gradually, were squeezed back from the fish-rich Passaic to the highlands where they camped around the lakes. In time, civilization followed them there and it is a matter of record that in 1868 the last of the Lenni Lenape migrated to Canada whence the tribe came originally 900 years before.

“Nutley is rich in relics of the Lenni Lenape. It is not so long ago that arrow flints were dug up every spring in Nutley gardens, the three inch arrow heads for deer and other big game and the little inch long flints for pheasants and other birds.

“In their annual pilgrimage to the sea, the many families of Lenni Lenape met at the junction of the Third River and the Passaic every Fall after the Summer crops were gathered. Part of Nutley stands on that ceremonial ground and many of our streets of today follow the trace of Indian paths back from the river towards Povershon Hill or the Watchung Mountains. It is a matter of record, too, that a favorite camp site for tribes coming across Povershon Hill was at the spring which poured from the earth at what is now 556 Centre Street.

“The Lenni Lenape Indians were happy, gregarious fellows which explains why they enjoyed the Harvest Home affairs. Unlike the Iroquois, across the river in New York, they were not quarrelsome. They got along, too, with the early Dutch when the white man moved in on them, but research has shown us that our Dutch ancestors drove some mighty unfair bargains. “We found records of one deal that interested Nutley directly - a transaction whereby Christopher Hooglandt, a merchant of New Amsterdam, used a go-between, Jacob Stollelson, friendly with the Lenni Lenape, to get a deed for the land which, today, contains all of Paterson, Clifton and Passaic. That was in 1680 when land was cheap, and the ‘honest Dutchman’ paid off in trade-goods, mostly blankets, kettles, knives, powder and liquor. “Nor were the Dutch any more scrupulous in creating wampum as a sort of gold standard. The shores of Jersey were filled with shellfish, but the Dutch succeeded in imposing their own kind of wampum shell money and for 70 years that was the established currency for trade throughout New England and this section of New Jersey.

“Contrary to popular belief, wampum was not an Indian invention. The Dutch

were driven to it by an edict that would not allow the Dutch colonists here and in New Amsterdam to have any small silver currency, on the grounds that if silver coins were sent to the New World they would speedily find their way into the pockets of the British and the French, to the detriment of the Lowlands.

"To meet the need for a currency, the Dutch invented wampum, using two kinds of shells, the quahaug, or hard clam, and the periwinkle, the purple or black wampum which was the most valuable. The Dutch passed laws prohibiting the counterfeiting of wampum in horn, bone, stone, mussel shell or wood.

"The idea spread, and after the Lenni Lenape adopted wampum, the Iroquois and Algonquins took it up. The British saw how successful it was and in 1627, the Dutch sold 50 pounds worth of the shells to the English in Massachusetts where it took the British nearly two years to plant it with the Indians.

"A wampum factory was established in the old Dutch colony at Passaic by Robert Campbell, as late as 1770, and even until 1844 wampum still circulated in parts of New Jersey among the farmers. Rich Indians displayed their wealth by stringing the purple and black shells on strings and making belts or necklaces.

"The word itself comes from the Lenni Lenape language and means mussel. The Dutch called it 'sewant.' The Jersey Indians strung the shells together on string and counted their wealth in fathoms-a fathom being the distance from the tip of your little finger to your elbow. A fathom of wampum equalled five English shillings or four Dutch guilders.

"The value of wampum fluctuated, depending on what the colonists had to sell and how anxious the Indians were to buy it. There is a record of a proclamation by the governor of New Amsterdam, dated 1673, increasing the value of wampum by decreeing that six white and three black wampum shells shall equal a Dutch stiver instead of eight white and four black. A stiver was one-twentieth of a guilder."