

Seneca-Cayuga Tribe's Greencorn Feast, Ancient Rite

by Velma Nieherding
EOC Correspondent

Early in August, when the corn is at the exact milky stage of maturity, the ceremonial leaders of the Seneca-Cayuga tribe, meet and name the date for the annual Greencorn Feast.

An Ancient Rite of the Iroquois

The Greencorn is not an Oklahoma tourist attraction although some come to witness the impressive ceremonies of the first day. It is an ancient rite of the Iroquois, so old

accompanied by a turtle-shell rattle. It is when the war whoop is sounded when the rain dance begins.

The Long House (or church) built in the same style as the Iroquois Long Houses of the people of New York and Canada is open on all sides. The people begin to gather inside, sitting on long benches. Members of the North clan sit on the north side; members of the South clan sit on the south side. (This will be explained later.)

Before the ceremonies begin, one of the Pot Hangers, a man, will paint the ones who are to participate. These are

Mrs. Diebold: I will explain the worship of the Seneca-Cayuga Indians according to their relation to the Bible, of which we do not use since our people ages back (and a few do yet) spoke only the Indian language. Yet, they worshipped one God, who is our maker, or the MAN WITH MANY VOICES, since He understands all races of people.

We begin our services of worship in the Spring of the year with the Sun Dance and the Seed Dance. Later on, as I explain you will understand why we call these the Sun Dance and Seed Dance.

We have our Strawberry Dance thanking God for the first fruit of the season. We have the Blackberry Dance for our grandmother, the moon.

And now this (The Greencorn) is our final week of worship and thanksgiving to God for the many blessings given us during the year. We also observe Christmas and New Year and Easter time as you all do.

I know that the majority of you people here have read the Bible, so the first chapter Genesis is carried out in our way of worship:

*God made the heavens and the earth
God made the sun, the great light, to shine by day.
God made the moon and stars to shine at night.
God divided the light from the darkness, calling the light day and the darkness, night.*

God brought forth the grass, the herbs yielding seed and the fruit trees yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself upon the earth.

God said "Let there be light in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night and let there be seasons and for days and for years, and so it was."

In our prayer, which is the beginning of our ceremonies, our speaker prays after a whoop by some of the Singers and Pot Hangers, signaling to heaven that we give our thanks for these words which will be spoken by our speaker:

*Here is the prayer:
"We thank thee, our Father, or our Maker in heaven, who made the heavens and the earth, that knows no evil. We thank thee for the sun that thou hast made from the beginning to give light to all the world by day. We thank thee for the moon and the stars that watch over us at night, by giving light at night help our crops to grow. We thank thee Father for the rain, lightning and thunder; the seasons, which produce our planting and harvesting, for watering the earth. We humble ourselves that thou wilt watch over us and not destroy us by wind, storms or lightning.
Thank Thee for the angels who guide us day by day. We thank thee for the watchful guidance over our children that they may forever be in thy care.*

We thank thee for the Workers of our Father (Pot Hangers) for their untiring effort and by their firm belief that has made it possible once again to give our thanks to our Maker in Heaven for the bounties received throughout the year. If it is thy will that they shall be blessed for their work in thy favor. We thank thee Father for all blessings bestowed upon our people throughout the world, whatever their needs may be that thou wilt assist them for by thy power alone we are able to live from day to day." (End of Prayer)

Mrs. Diebold continues:

"In the naming of babies, they are brought before our speaker who blesses them in giving them an Indian name as in years ago. At that time all Indians had only an Indian name and it was, or is, our belief that after death and reaching the gates of heaven, you are asked your Indian name. That is why the older Indians stressed the importance of teaching your children

their Indian name."

Following the baby naming, the child, if a boy, is carried about the Long House accompanied by a song and a turtle-shell rattle. Girls are simply handed back to their mothers.

The writer once asked the speaker why only boys are carried about the Long House in the special ceremony. He replied, "The boys must grow up to be tribal leaders. In the old days they would have grown up to be warriors. The girls must take care of the home and children."

The Rain Dance follows the baby-naming ceremony. The men go outside the Long House and give four whoops signifying the four seasons and the rain, thunder, lightning and wind. When a dancer dances back and forth before the drummer he is repeating a prayer given at the opening services.

A Short Historical Note on the Senecas

Historians have never agreed that these Senecas were a part of the tribe proper of New York State. They were called "Senecas of Sandusky" when they were removed from Ohio in 1832, along with a group of Shawnees and a few Wyandots. The Cayugas joined them later on their 67,000 acre reservation and in 1936, the tribes were reunited as "Seneca-Cayuga."

One tribal member, Mrs. Jewel Horvat, who has done considerable research into old rolls and records believes that anthropologists are wrong in calling them a separate tribe. Names on some of the rolls go back to the time the tribe was with the Senecas proper in New York, and the Iroquois Long House with its six nations.

Originally there were five nations of the Iroquois with a council called the Long House, reputedly founded by the Mohawk, Hiawatha, (Handsome Lake), toward the end of the 16th century. Its members were the Seneca, Onondago (where the council fire was kept), the Cayuga, Oneida and the Mohawk. Around 1715 the Tuscaroras moved from North Carolina and were admitted as a sixth nation to the League.

The Senecas of Sandusky were the first tribe to arrive in what is now Ottawa County, following the decision of the Government to create Indian Territory. They reached their new home on July 4, 1832.

Their new land was well-timbered, threaded with streams and rivers and with game for the taking. It was the envy of other tribes. Located farther west the Osage once made an offer to trade their lands and a large payment of money in exchange for the

Senecas' reservation. The Senecas refused to trade.

The Seneca-Cayuga Tribe Today

Today the tribe is well organized with a business council, an office in Miami and working with several grant programs. Last year a long-time dream materialized when the tribe built a Medical-Dental clinic, east of Miami near the Will Rogers turnpike. It was dedicated April 29, 1978 and opened May 15. The clinic is leased and staffed by Indian Health Service personnel and provides services for 29,000 Indian people of northeast Oklahoma. The tribe has a progressive young chief, James Allen, who is involved in later-tribal matters and works with Indian health services in Oklahoma. It recently has received funds for a housing program.

Although leaders regret the loss of much of the old culture, they nevertheless keep teaching. Two years ago Mrs. Diebold taught a language class and Ruben (Dutch) White, her brother teaches young boys of the tribes the songs and chants for the different ceremonies.

There is a romantic, legendary history of the Seneca-Cayuga, not possible for this article. The old legends are sometimes forgotten until a visitor from Canada, or a writer, such as Carl Carmer in his book on New York State folklore "Listen for a Lonesome Drum" tells of the slow roll of drums from the depths of Cayuga Lake. The sound grows louder until it can be mistaken for gun fire. Scientists have studied the causes of this phenomenon for many years but have not solved the mystery.

The Senecas say the roll is from the death drums of their people. After the Sullivan expedition of the Revolutionary War destroyed their crops, ravaged their land and killed many of them, survivors beat their water drums in sorrow. Now they return and renew their grief.

Anthony F. C. Wallace in "Death and Rebirth of the Seneca" gives an account of Handsome Lake (from which the romantic poem Hiawatha was written) the prophet who brought the present religion used in the Long House Ceremonies to the people when they were weakened by war, the ravages of liquor, and removal to other lands.

And George Catlin wrote in 1832: "There are no better people to be found than the Seneca Indians — none that I know of that are by nature more talented and ingenious; nor any that would be found to be better neighbors."

It's time for another Greencorn. But if you visit Bassett Grove remember: the Greencorn is not a drum beat or the feathered warrior adjusting his ankle bells. It is not even very colorful. Except to tribal members the ceremonies may seem repetitious and tiring. Yet, those who understand it marvel at the beauty and simplicity of it and the hope that the Seneca Cayuga will never lose this part of their culture.



Minnie Thompson

Tribal Interpreter for the Seneca-Cayuga tribe at Greencorn.



Corn Maiden

Alexandria, with mother, Angela Perry at Greencorn.

that none remember its origin. It is a thanksgiving ceremony, thanking the One Above for a bountiful harvest. It is the time of the confession dance and the naming of babies born the previous year. It is a time when certain friends of the tribe sometimes receive an Indian name as a special honor.

It is a time for renewing old friendships for the people who camp in the lovely setting of the Bassett Grove (in eastern Oklahoma) ceremonial grounds where the Seneca-Cayugas have been meeting for over a century. (This year the ceremony was held Aug. 6-7.)

The first day the ancient ceremonies are renewed and speakers recite ancestral history, speaking in the tribal language. It is a time of sacred tobacco sprinkled on the flint-struck fire inside the Long House; of the soft beat of the water drum; of special songs

clan colors. The men are painted with three vertical lines about the eyes. The women are painted with a small dot on each cheek. Coals taken from the fire burning under the beef is carried into the Long House by Bob White, the principal ceremonial leader. A clay pipe is passed around to each of the Pot Hangers and each take a puff on it.

The Pot Hangers, known also as the Workers for God supervise all ceremonies. Early in the morning of the first day they begin their duties. The men build a flint-struck fire over which two big pots will be hung; one to cook the beef and one the corn which is cut from the ear and cooked in the meat broth, making a delicious corn soup. This is the ceremonial feast which will be served following the religious rites.

People have brought offerings to the Long House. Gifts from garden and field are piled in an altar-like enclosure in the center. Melons, fruit, corn, cabbage, squash, all to be divided among the campers later.

When Bob White, tribal speaker opens the first day ceremonies, he will pray beside a small fire burning in the middle of the Long House. The prayer is to Havenny, the literal translation of which "He is a Great Chief." Wisps of sacred tobacco smoke are fanned by an eagle-feather fan. The little woven ever-shuck basket holding the tobacco is dropped into the fire and burned each year.

Ruby Diebold Translates the Language

Mrs. Ruby Diebold, head Pot Hanger and a ceremonial leader and language teacher, translated for the writer what is said in the opening ceremonies. She did this, she said, because some people visiting the Greencorn do not understand the tribal language and do not realize they are witnessing a religious ceremony as important to the Seneca-Cayugas as those of their own churches.



Ha-do-wah-jenie

Patty Harjo laces her son, Sean, on to a cradle board before he received his name in 1977. Sean received the name Ha-do-wah-jenie (Peace Maker).



Special Ceremony

Ruben (Dutch) White, ceremonial chief, performed ritual blessing of the earth at ground breaking of Seneca-Cayuga Health clinic. Also participating in ceremony were Ruby Diebold and Clara Whitetree (holding shovel).



Ceremonial Leaders

"Dutch" White and Bob White, ceremonial leaders teach songs to two young tribal members.



Head Pot Hanger and Ceremonial Leader

Mrs. Ruby Diebold teaching Seneca-Cayuga language class.