

False Faces And Fast Foot Work.

At the end of January, when the days are appreciably longer, the Senecas gather in the "Long House" to hold their New Year festival. Originally a week, today's festival takes only two or three days.

Early on the morning of the celebration, two men, called "Keepers of the Faith" visit each house in their community to extend a personal invitation to the ceremonies. They wear ragged blankets and false faces (wooden or corn husk masks) and carry turtle shell rattles. Upon entering each house, they salute the family, stir up the ashes on the hearth and sing a song or two.

The New Year Feast is one of thanksgiving. Prayers are offered for good health and prosperity. The False Faces reappear to scare away the evil spirits. Songs are sung by the keepers of the faith, with the people joining the chorus. Then, the great Thanksgiving Address is made by one who can repeat it accurately from memory, while he sprinkles sacred tobacco on the fire.

The dance follows. Two singers take their places in the center of the room: one, with a drum; the other, with a turtle shell rattle. The dance songs are usually short and begin on a high note. The mendance in single file around the singers, then the women join in. Fast foot work is necessary to keep time with the music and the rhythm of the rattles. When the dance is over, corn soup and unleavened corn bread are served.

A STRAWBERRY ~~FEAST~~ Punch Is Served

At the height of the strawberry season (middle to late June), there is a festival to thank the Great Spirit for this excellent fruit. A game of lacrosse is played between rival reservation teams. Then there is an address in Seneca, a few short dances and a feast of strawberries, including a special strawberry punch.

~~CORN ~~FEAST~~~~ Songs Tell How Corn Was Given To Senecas

As soon as the green corn is ready for use, dances and ceremonies lasting two or three days, commemorate the event. A staple food of the Iroquois from earliest days, a world of tradition and legend has grown up around corn. These legends are repeated in songs, some of which, they say, accompanied the gift of the cornplant from the mother of the Great Spirit.

The food at these feasts consists of succotash, boiled and baked squash, and green corn roasted with the husks on in the open fire. Hominy and soup, both made from corn, are served.

In all of the Seneca festivals, those who participate go home at night, returning the next day. They do not camp in the manner of western Indians.

A FEAST FOR THE DEAD

Although missionaries have discouraged this feast, it is not confined to non-Christian Indians. Often Christian Indians have requested that the feast be given for them.

The night preceding burial, a "wake" is held, during which the family provides food to the mourners. A small plate of food is also set in the room of the deceased, so that the departed spirit may be refreshed on its travels.

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After burial food is set aside for the dead for ten days. On the eleventh day comes the Feast, celebrating the spirit's completion of its journey to the Indian heaven. All near relatives and close friends attend, bringing with them articles of food.

The company gathers in the best room of the house and brief greetings are exchanged. Then a man comes forward and gives the Address to the Dead, acknowledging that death has been ordered by the Creator and that, in the course of years, all present will join the deceased in the next life. Following the address, all the personal belongings of the deceased were formerly either given away or placed in the grave. Now, nothing is placed in the grave and only a few things are given away.

~~Seneca~~ Lacrosse - AN Ancient Seneca Game

Lacrosse is a very old Seneca game, still played by the New York and Canadian tribes, often in competition with each other. Senecas make the lacrosse clubs themselves of hickory strung with deer thongs, as well as the deer-skin ball.

There are seven players to a side. No player may touch the ball with hand or foot, but only with the lacrosse racquets. It is a rough game, but no gloves, shin or knee guards are worn, as in white university teams. If a player is hurt, he leaves his club on the field for the use of a substitute.

Goal posts are about eight rods apart, giving the players a chance to show what fleet runners they are and adding considerable excitement to the sport. There is no time limit; the number of winning goals are agreed upon before each game.

~~Seneca~~ "Snakes" figure in Winter Sport

This game is a winter sport, played in deep snow. Snowsnakes are made of hickory with the greatest exactness and skill. They must be between five and seven feet long, and a quarter of an inch thick. The head is round, about an inch wide. The tail tapers at the end and curves slightly to fit the fore-finger, and slightly turned up, and pointed with lead to give momentum when the "snake" is thrown down the trough. The trough is made by dragging a small log down a slope or on level ground for a distance of three to four hundred yards.

Opposing teams, of six members each, agree on the number of points to constitute the game - usually ten. Points are gained by those throwing the snowsnakes the longest distance. The game requires dexterity and muscular strength, for if a "snake" is not thrown correctly, it will bury its head in the trough and break; or, it may jump the track and land in the snow outside the trough. Either of these count as penalties against the players. Each team has its trail marker and referee to assure accuracy. Also its "snowsnake doctor" cares for the snakes, talking to them as he rubs them with wax and oil, so that they will glide easier down the trough.

Opposing players address insulting remarks to the snakes in Seneca - telling them they run like "fat woodchucks" instead of agile snakes. These various remarks are always followed by much laughter from the spectators.

Peach-Stone Game — An Exciting Gambling Game

This is a betting game played with a bowl of walnut wood and six peach stones. The stones are ground down to an oval shape, reducing their size by one half, the pits are removed, and the stone burned on one side to blacken them, then smoothed and polished. Four, Six, eight, or ten players take part, two playing at a time. Managers watch the game, deciding which rules to follow and holding the stakes.

The first player throws his five stones into the bowl. Should he turn up all black or all light stones, this counts one for him and he may retain the bowl for another throw. Failing to make a count, he must surrender the bowl to his opponent. If the other player turns up five stones of the same color, the first player has to give him four beans. If the process is repeated, the remaining bean goes and the first player must give up his place to the next player on his side. The game continues until all the beans in the bank have been played out. It now becomes the duty of the managers to provide the players with the five beans -each supplying beans to his side-until his own players until one side has all the beans.

The stakes are never high -they couldn't be because the Senecas are not well-to-do Indians -the betting is done more to provide excitement than anything else. Spectators watch the game until the small hours of the morning. There are shouts of glee for the winning side, groans of disappointment for the losers and much hilarity is shown. When the bets have been paid off, refreshments are served.

FALSE FACES STILL SCARE AWAY DISEASE AND MISFORTUNE

In ancient times, there was a special dance for the False Faces, because they were believed to be evil spirits without bodies, arms or legs -merely hideous faces darting from tree to tree in the deep woods. They were so terrifying that to look upon them was to become paralyzed. These faces had power to send plagues and disease among humans.

A secret order called the "False Face Society" was founded by the Senecas and other tribes of the Iroquois League, members of which are now confined to non-Christians. The primary object of this society was to propitiate these demons, but in later years the society was believed to possess the art of healing such ailments as nose-bleed, bruises, swellings, cuts etc. When a person was troubled with one of these ailments, the Mistress of the False Face Society, the only woman member allowed, called the Society together. Various ceremonies were performed, including the False Face dance, in which the patient participated. After the dance, the False Faces departed, carrying with them whatever had been prepared in the way of refreshments. They never unmasked before non-members.

Carved from living basswood trees, the wooden masks are supposed to possess some of the life and spirit of the tree. The basswood is selected because of its absorbent quality to draw out disease, and for its medicinal properties -tea made from its bark is good for colds and its astringent sap is used to heal stubborn wounds. The mask maker would visit the basswood tree at sunrise on three successive mornings and smoke the sacred tobacco at its foot. As the smoke rose to the sunrise, songs were sung asking the tree to share its heart with whoever was to receive the sacred gift. On the third day, an outline of the face was drawn on the bark and the cutting began. If the ax struck firmly in the wood, all was well. The tree was thanked for its gift and the cutting out of the marked portion continued. Later the chunk cut would be carved into a "face" and colored according to the maker's taste. Coarse hair would be affixed making it even more hideous and terrifying to the spirits of disease and misfortune.