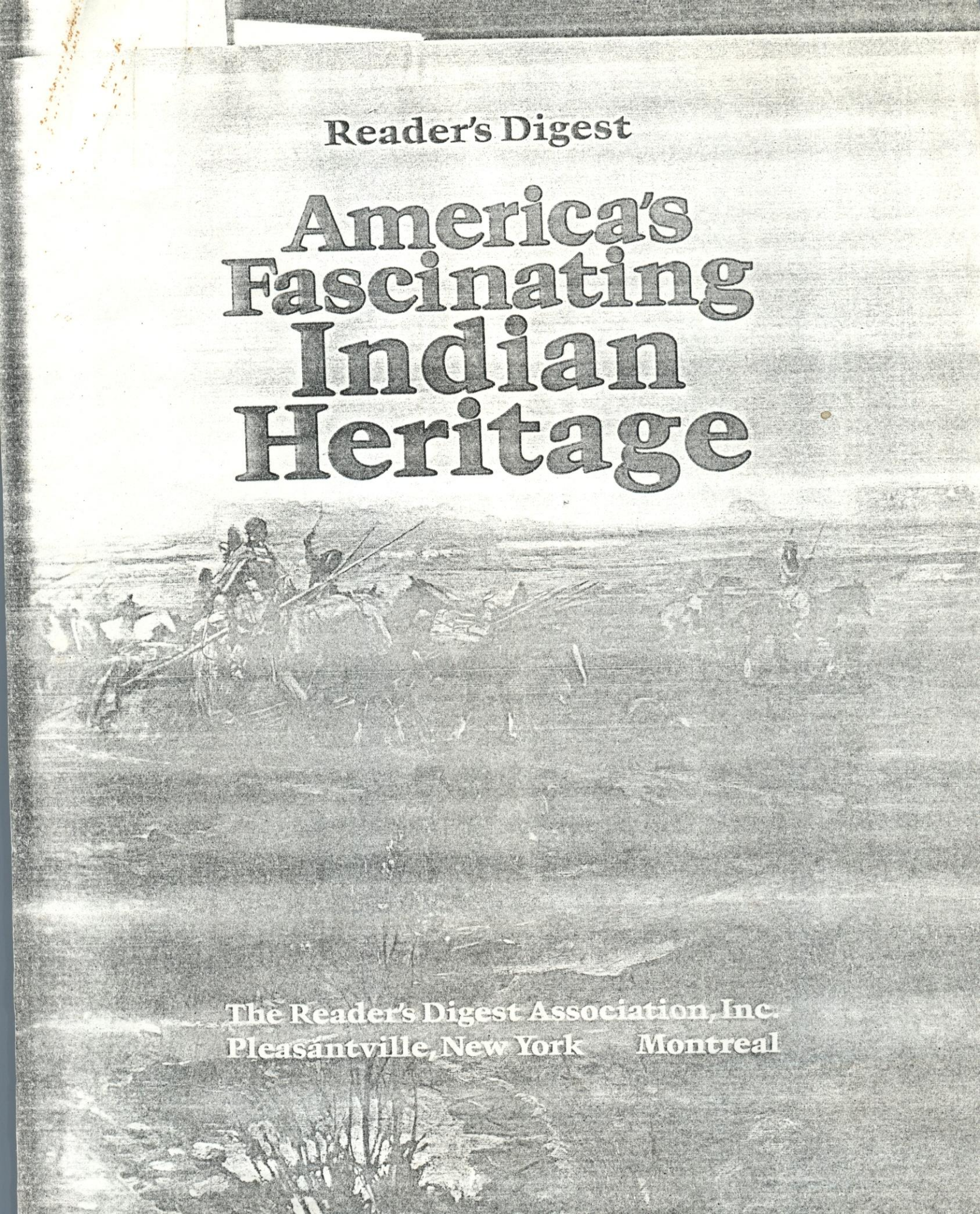
Reader's Digest

America's Fascinating Indian Heritage



The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.
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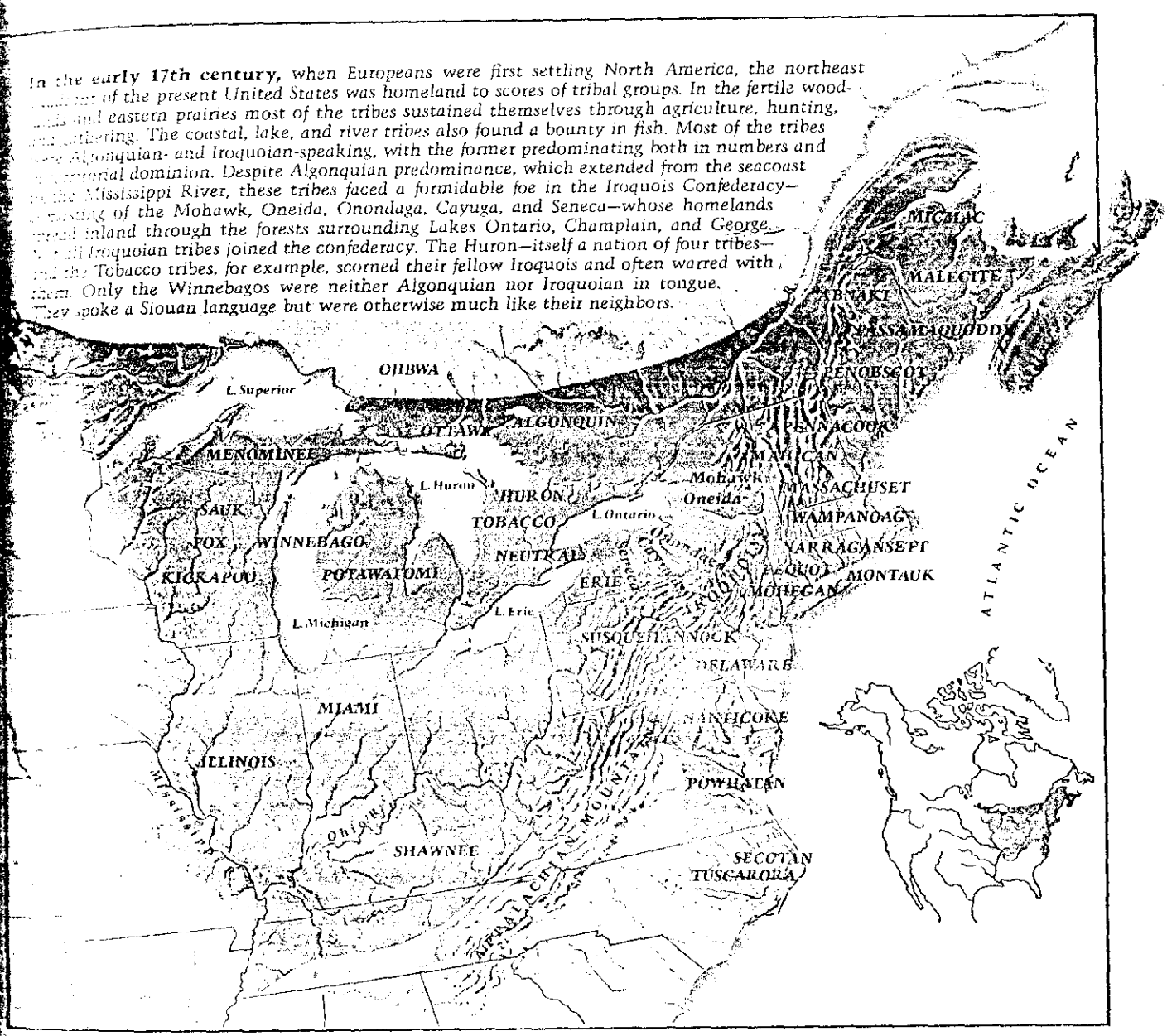


weather, both men and women wore skin loincloths plus lightweight deerskin shirts as protection against the sun. Most clothing was decorated with porcupine quills, eagle feathers, and shells. Both sexes wore large quantities of bead jewelery.

The area comprising present upper New York State, extending on the west to the St. Lawrence Valley basins of Lakes Ontario and Erie, was Iroquois territory. It was a terrain of dramatic contrasts: of low, fertile river bottoms and valleys cradled among mountains; of the five deep and parallel Finger Lakes, which seemed to have been gouged out of the earth by a giant hand, of maple trees that supplied syrup, of marshes noisy with geese, and rivers filled with vast numbers of sturgeon, bass, and shad.

Along the present Canadian and American shores of the western Great Lakes, Algonquians were the majority of the population. Some—like the Ottawas and the Potawatomis, in the deciduous forests bordering Lakes Huron and Michigan, and the Sauks and Foxes to their west—were partly dependent on agriculture. The Iroquoian-speaking Hurons also lived here in a swath of farming country between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay, in modern Ontario.

West of Lake Michigan and to the south was a region half forest and half plains. This area offered its inhabi-

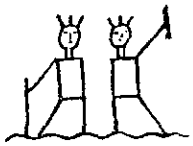
Families generally were outside in fine weather, cooking their food at a second fireplace by the door. They stored surplus food in silos dug deep into the cool earth, lined with marsh grass, and covered with insulating bark. Each village had a sweathouse beside the creek. Built of stakes and mud, it was low, windowless, and had a door so small even children had to crawl inside. Here, once or twice a week, men, women, and children took turns steaming themselves free of ailments and melancholy by pouring water on piles of hot rocks. When they could stand the heat no longer, they emerged and tumbled naked and glistening into the river. If it was winter, they rolled in the snow.

Clean and "purified" after their "saunas," the Delawares would spend hours restoring sweated-off body paint. The term *redskin*, applied by Europeans to Algonquians in general and the Delawares in particular, was inspired not by their natural complexion but by their fondness for vermilion makeup, concocted from fat mixed with berry juice and minerals that provided the desired color.

After using sharpened mussel-shell tweezers to pluck their heads bare except for a central cock's crest, the men would streak their faces and bodies with bright red ocher and bloodroot, as well as white and yellow clays. Women carefully rouged their cheeks, eyelids, and ear rims.

In summer Delaware children scampered about naked, the men wore only soft deerskin breechclouts, and the women, knee-length skirts and headbands of wampum. The Delawares were tall, lithe, and straight-featured with prominent cheekbones. In winter both sexes dressed more warmly, with fur shawls and robes woven of downy, waterproof turkey feathers.

"He created the sun and the stars of night."



"Those who were strong and those who had power came away, separating from those who remained living there."

"Things turned out well for all those who had stayed at the shore of water frozen hard as rocks, and for those at the great hollow well."

Mysterious "Key" to the Origin of the Delawares: The Walum Olum—Legend or History?

In 1836 a botanist from Kentucky named Constantine S. Rafinesque published a remarkable article entitled "The Walum Olum, or Red Score," in The American Nations *magazine. Rafinesque's translations of the Walum Olum purported to be the history of the Delaware Indians from earliest days to the arrival of the whites. But the Walum Olum remains to this day a subject of scholarly debate, and many experts have questioned its authenticity. The story was supposedly derived from a collection of sticks upon which the original pictographs had been etched.*

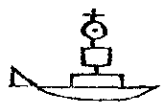
Rafinesque, a teacher of botany and natural science at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, obtained "some of the original Walum Olum (painted record)" in 1820 from a Dr. Ward of Indiana. "In 1822," Rafinesque continued, "were obtained from another source the songs in the original language . . . but no one could be found by me to translate them. I had therefore to learn the language . . . to translate them, which I only accomplished in 1833."

Copies of the pictographs made by Rafinesque unquestionably refer to people crossing "the water, over the frozen sea." This might well be an allusion to the Bering Strait land bridge. Others describe the munificence of Manitou, the Great Creator. Still others refer to specific chiefs and spirits, such as Grandfather of Boats. Altogether, the pictographs express a strong belief in a vast spiritual order and reflect a reverence for all life and all nature. However, no one knows if the Walum Olum dated back hundreds of years, were of 18th-century origin, or were merely a figment of Rafinesque's imagination. The author never produced the original sticks for scientific study and, if they ever existed, they have long since disappeared.

One theory is that the Delawares were, by the mid-1700's, a tribe in disarray and decline, having been among the first to feel the effects of the white man's culture, diseases, and rapaciousness. Forced from their homes along the Middle Atlantic Coast, the remnants of the tribe traversed the mountains and found temporary shelter in the Ohio Valley. There tribal leaders attempted to impose something of a cultural revival. The Walum Olum may have been part of an effort to revitalize the Delawares by the creation of an epic that traced, in fictional terms, the story of the tribe's migrations and heroic endeavors. Several of the copied pictographs, together with Rafinesque's translations, are reproduced at left and below. They recount the earth's creation, the departure of the peoples from Siberia, a golden age of peace and, finally, the coming of the white man to America's shores.

"When all were friends Wolf Man was chief; and he was the first of these."

"When Master of Boats was chief, they went after the Snakes in boats."



"...persons floating in from the east: the Whites were coming."

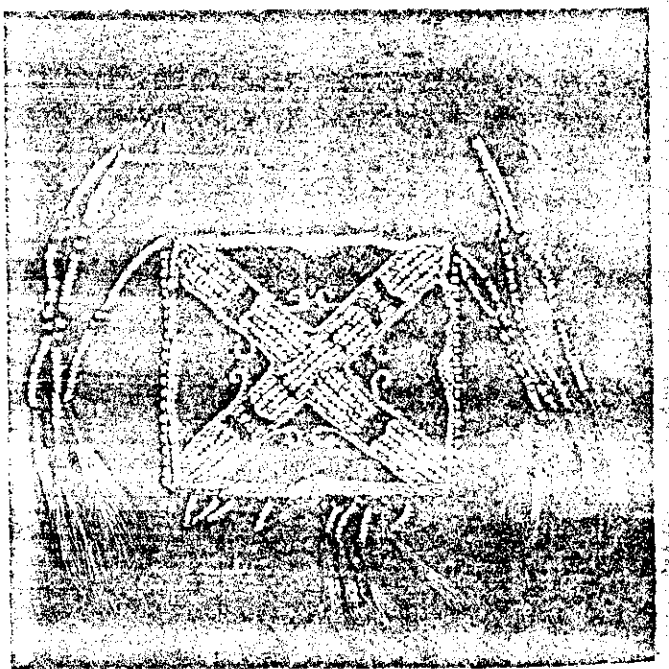
"...friendly people with great possessions: who are they?"

Two women of a Massachusetts tribe *tend kettles of boiling maple syrup in a sugar camp as other Indians gather birch-bark buckets filled with raw sap. The trees were tapped in March by cutting a downward-slanting gash in the trunk. A spout was then inserted and a bucket placed beneath it to catch the sap. When sugaring was done, the Indians broke camp and stored their equipment. Among the tribes of the Northeast maple sugar was used as a seasoning for all kinds of foods.*

strongly democratic people and conveyed their views to him through councillors. No declaration of war or treaty of peace could be concluded without a solemn assemblage of these tribal elders. They sat in a half-moon surrounding the sachem, ringed in a larger half-moon by their children, who were present to learn the ways of their tribe. Not until there was a chorus of approval from the adults did the sachem consider himself authorized to "take up" or "bury" the tomahawk.

Religion for the Delaware, as with most Algonquian tribes, revolved around the Great Spirit, a term that evoked creation, godship, and a host of spiritual forces inhabiting all things in nature. To a Delaware, those forces were everywhere, warming him, feeding him, healing him. The spirits listened to prayers and answered in the form of sunsets and snowfalls, favorable winds and spring rains. All things had souls. A twig, a stone had a life of its own, just as men, women, and animals did.

Old age was regarded as a high honor by all Algonquians, and death released the spirit into regions where pain, sickness, and sadness did not exist. The deceased was buried in a shallow grave, unconfined by any coffin, for the soul must be free to travel on the 12th day. In a world beyond the grave, the dead lived on, existing much as they had on earth, save for a freedom from the sorrows common to the living.



Embroidered with porcupine quills, *this Pennacook pouch combines traditional design with decorations of European beads and iron bangles. The quills, colored with vegetable dyes, were soaked until flexible and wrapped around thread sewn to skins.*

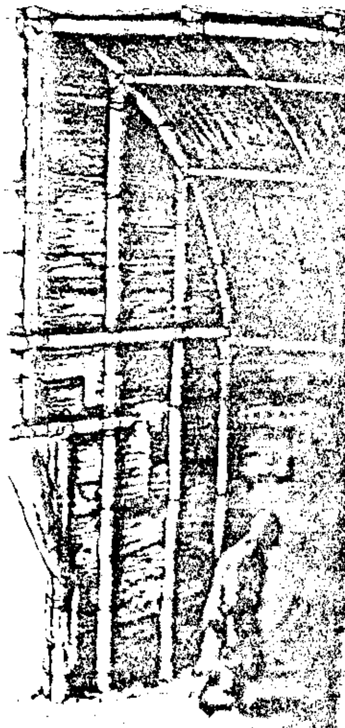
they married and went to live in the longhouses of their wives. Conversely, when a woman married, her husband immediately moved into her longhouse.

The longhouse lineage of families was the basic unit of Seneca society. Lineages in turn built up into clans, clans into moieties (that is, half-tribes), and moieties into whole tribes. A young man had to marry outside his clan, preferably with a woman who had not even a distant blood relationship with his own mother and her female relatives.

Except for the men's weapons, clothing, and personal possessions, all property belonged to women, from the longhouse itself down to the farming tools. A wife was expected always to be well dressed, even if her husband was shabby. If he or any kinsman was killed in war, she was entitled to demand an enemy captive in compensation. Her kinsmen would then have to go out and take one, even if it meant starting another war. When the captive was brought, she was allowed to adopt him or consign him to torture or death as she pleased.

Rising to seniority in the longhouse, she gradually acquired considerable political power. Every one of the eight Seneca councillor-chiefs was appointed by the clan mother in consultation with other women of her clan, and should he fail in his duties, the same women could remove him from office.

There were sound, practical reasons why women had such control over property and politics. The Seneca was an ambitious, warlike tribe, eager to push its western door farther and farther toward the upper Great Lakes, thus gaining access to a wealth of beaver furs that white traders so coveted. Military expeditions were sometimes far-ranging, and warriors might be away as little as three days or as much as three months. When they returned, they were soon off on the chase, for they loved hunting almost as much as fighting. In between times many of the men would be off on trading expeditions. Though there were always some young men left behind to protect the village, most aspects of community life—looking after the old, caring for the young, and tending the crops—were left to the women. They planted, weeded, and harvested no fewer than a million bushels of corn a year as well as huge quantities of squash, beans, and sunflower seeds. What they could not eat fresh they stored in underground granaries. When their husbands returned from the hunt, bowed under the weight of deer, elk, and beaver carcasses, it was a time for feasting on rich, thick stews of meats and vegetables, hot corn dumplings, mushrooms, ash-baked apples, nuts, and berries.

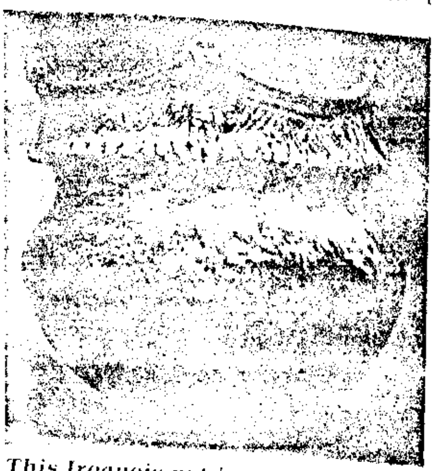


This longhouse interior [illegible] *quarters of two* [illegible] *out of the doz-* [illegible] *shared the* [illegible] *might be 100* [illegible] *only slept on a* [illegible] *the earth and* [illegible] *that ran the* [illegible] *the house for storage.* [illegible] *items as corn, tobac-* [illegible] *with food, and* [illegible] *were kept. Beneath* [illegible] *other goods* [illegible] *snowshoes, bows, spears, and* [illegible] *baskets were stored.* [illegible] *activity went on in the* [illegible] *corridor. There cooking* [illegible] *each serving two families,* [illegible] *maintained, and women* [illegible] *corn into meal, as* [illegible] *privacy could be* [illegible] *by lowering curtains between the compartments.*

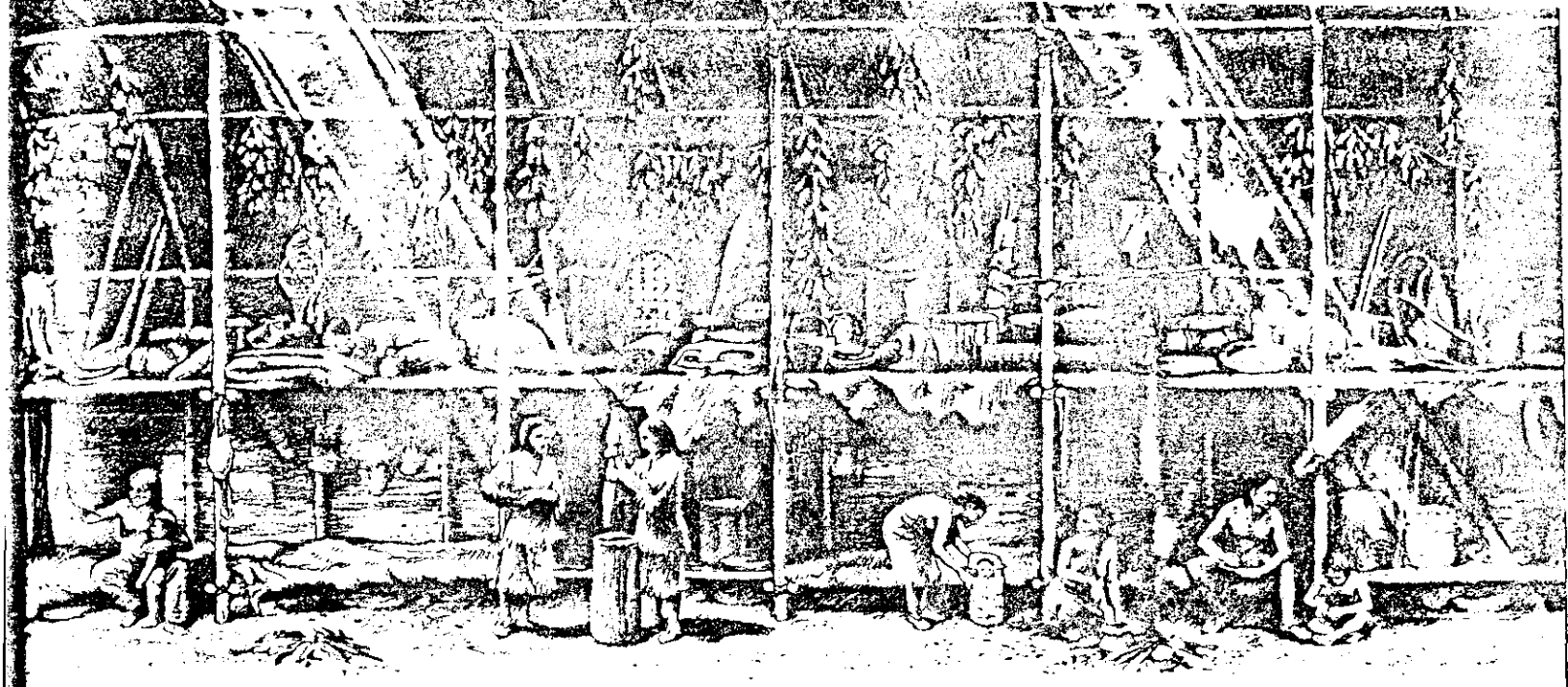
Perhaps the most important of a woman's [illegible] bilities was to bear children, thus assuring the [illegible] the tribe. When their time came, young Seneca [illegible] could be seen retreating into the forest. [illegible] privacy of trees and shadow, babies were [illegible] in spring water or snow, wrapped in [illegible] back to the returning village.

Two powerful influences worked upon [illegible] baby as his consciousness dawned [illegible] hood. A soft compress of maize powder [illegible] sting to the infant's navel, once the [illegible] cord had been removed. Breasts [illegible] nourished the child until it was three [illegible] Woven cornhusks provided a mat for [illegible] boy or girl played with dolls whose [illegible] the silk of the cob.

Because the father was frequently [illegible] was the primary [illegible] affection, and [illegible] ing in her [illegible] not to spoil [illegible] She encouraged [illegible] boys with [illegible] from corns [illegible] ties of the [illegible] Both boys [illegible] eat spanning [illegible] tony was [illegible] cakes dipped [illegible] would be [illegible] nose [illegible] with [illegible] Should the [illegible] mother [illegible] hu[illegible] worms [illegible] purifying [illegible]



This Iroquois pot *has a projecting collar with a figure motif. The deeply incised wide collar with its upward turning points was a unique Iroquois design.*



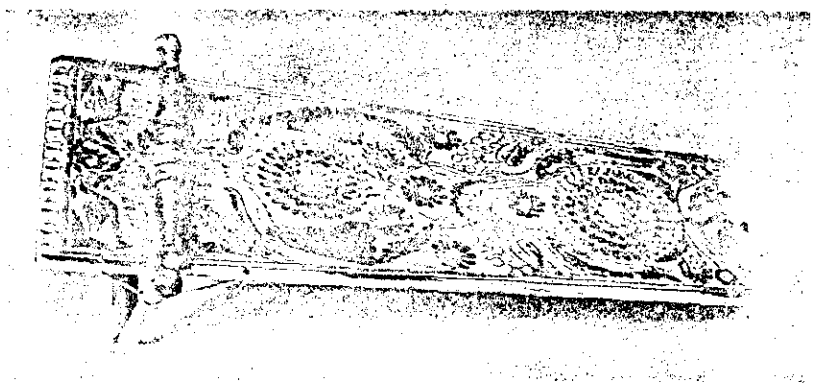
he got filthy with dust, sweat, and bear's grease, she scrubbed him clean with dried corncobs.

From about his eighth year onward, the child became increasingly aware of his or her duties. A girl did light chores in the longhouse or went with older women to work in the fields; a boy was free to wander off into the woods for days on end—usually with a group of friends—living off berries and tubers and such small game as he could snare or shoot with his bow and arrow or with his blowgun. When he killed his first deer, unassisted, with bow and arrow, he could join adult hunting parties. During idle hours he was permitted to play with girls, often in openly erotic fashion.

When puberty arrived, a boy occasionally went back to the woods, this time in the company of an old man of the tribe. The boy was made to test his masculinity by bashing himself against rocks until he bled. He would have to besmirch his body with dirt or ashes and recount his dreams in great detail so that the old man could identify his "guardian spirit." Back in the village, the young adolescent would fondle some symbol of that spirit—a rock that looked like a deformed animal, a chunk of bone carved into a nightmarish face—and dream of the day when he would become a man and be off on the warpath, like all true men.

As "keepers of the western door" of the Longhouse, the Seneca tribe had a reputation for military ferocity equaled only by their eastern partners, the Mohawk. Seneca warriors, indeed, made up over half of the Iroquois fighting force—an army so terrifying it was called the Nation of Snakes by its Algonquian neighbors.

Before the formation of the league, Iroquois tribes were still living independently of one another, and Seneca warfare was largely a matter of private blood feuds carried on by an endless succession of small raiding parties. The victims were as likely to be fellow Iroquois as foreign Algonquians. Casualties were not very high at first, because the purpose of an expedition was to settle minor scores. A brawl in some Cayuga village might end in the killing of a visiting Seneca; compensation in the form of a captive would then be demanded by his clan. In order to get such a captive, the Seneca raiding party might be obliged to kill three or four more Cayugas, whereupon the bereaved tribe would promptly send out its own raiding party, and so on. The net effect of these petty hostilities was gradually to escalate, decade by decade, the amount of blood spilled in every blood feud, until there were so many scores to settle on all sides that the tribes lived in a state of perpetual, debilitating war. The Iroquois were literally bleeding themselves to death. Meanwhile, their much more numerous neighbors, the Algonquians, inflicted a series of humiliating attacks upon them. The elders of the Five Nations grew increasingly worried. "We cannot restrain our young men," they complained.



European missionary influence *is evident in this Mohawk cradleboard, its back covered with a festive floral motif of many hues. A turned wood cleat, resembling a chair round, supports a shelf that covered the baby's head, protecting the infant from injury should the cradleboard be dropped.*

wsnakes: A Seneca Sport of Strength and Skill

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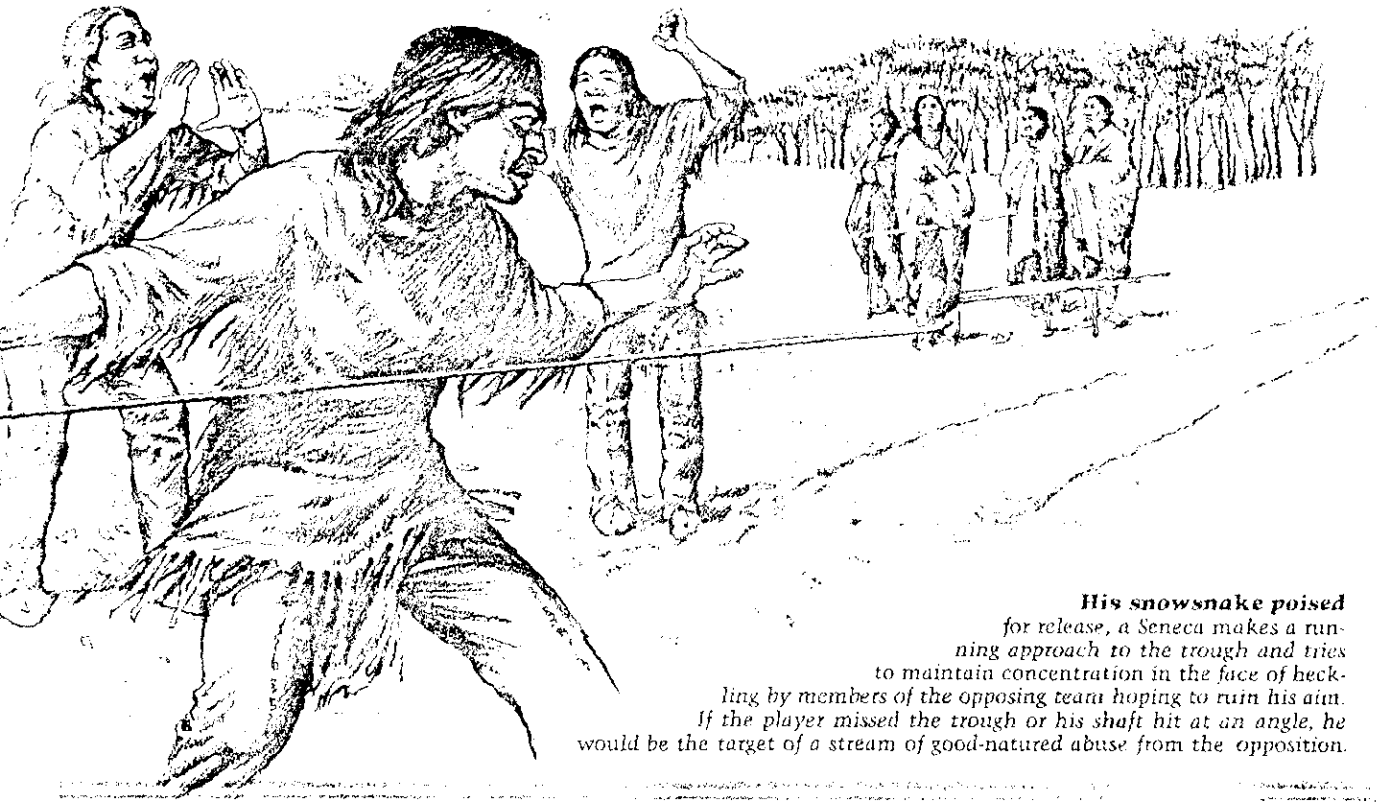
Snowsnake sticks might be as long as nine feet or as short as five, and were made from hickory, maple, or walnut. They were superbly designed for speed and, if skillfully handled, traveled their icy course with the velocity of a loosed arrow. To give a stick sufficient weight, its conical head was tipped with lead. Each shaft was about an inch wide at the crown and tapered off to less than half an inch at the tail.

To make a trough, the Senecas dragged a smooth-barked log lengthwise through the snow, repeating the process until the trench was about 1,500 feet long and 10 to 18 inches deep, its bottom and sides packed down into a smooth, icy surface. Any number could play the snowsnake game, either as individual competitors or as members of opposing teams. In addition to active participants, each side had snowsnake "doctors" who cared for the sticks, rubbing them with "medicine"—beeswax or animal oils—to reduce their friction. Contests were refereed by umpires who made certain that the rules of the game were strictly observed.

The game ended when every contestant had had his turn, and the distances were all tallied. Winners collected whatever had been bet on the outcome.



His snowsnake poised *for release, a Seneca makes a running approach to the trough and tries to maintain concentration in the face of heckling by members of the opposing team hoping to ruin his aim. If the player missed the trough or his shaft hit at an angle, he would be the target of a stream of good-natured abuse from the opposition.*

they were noted. Some of these were medicine dances, but others might be an expression of exuberance. There were, for example, head-butting dances by the Buffalo Society; a Bear Society dance that climaxed in a feast of strawberry jam; a dance in which the False Faces appeared as clowns; and a dance by warriors of the Husk Face Society who were dressed in women's clothing.

The mood of the ceremonial turned solemn once more on the fifth day. Faithkeepers removed the body of the white dog from its pole. The remains were burned, and the soul of the dog ascended to the realm of the Great Spirit, to convey the villagers' thanks for the numerous blessings of the year that has gone by.

On the sixth day the Sacred Feather Dance was performed, followed by the Thanksgiving Dance. The last day of the celebration was taken up by the Rite of Personal Chants, in which each adult male sang his own song. Finally, there was the Sacred Bowl Game that everyone played until the contest was completed.

After a week of occult searching, dancing, games, general tumult, and fun, quiet gradually descended on the village. Now was the time to recall the skill of the dancers, the antics of the clowns, the personal chants, and all the other activities of the Midwinter Ceremonial. A new year had begun.

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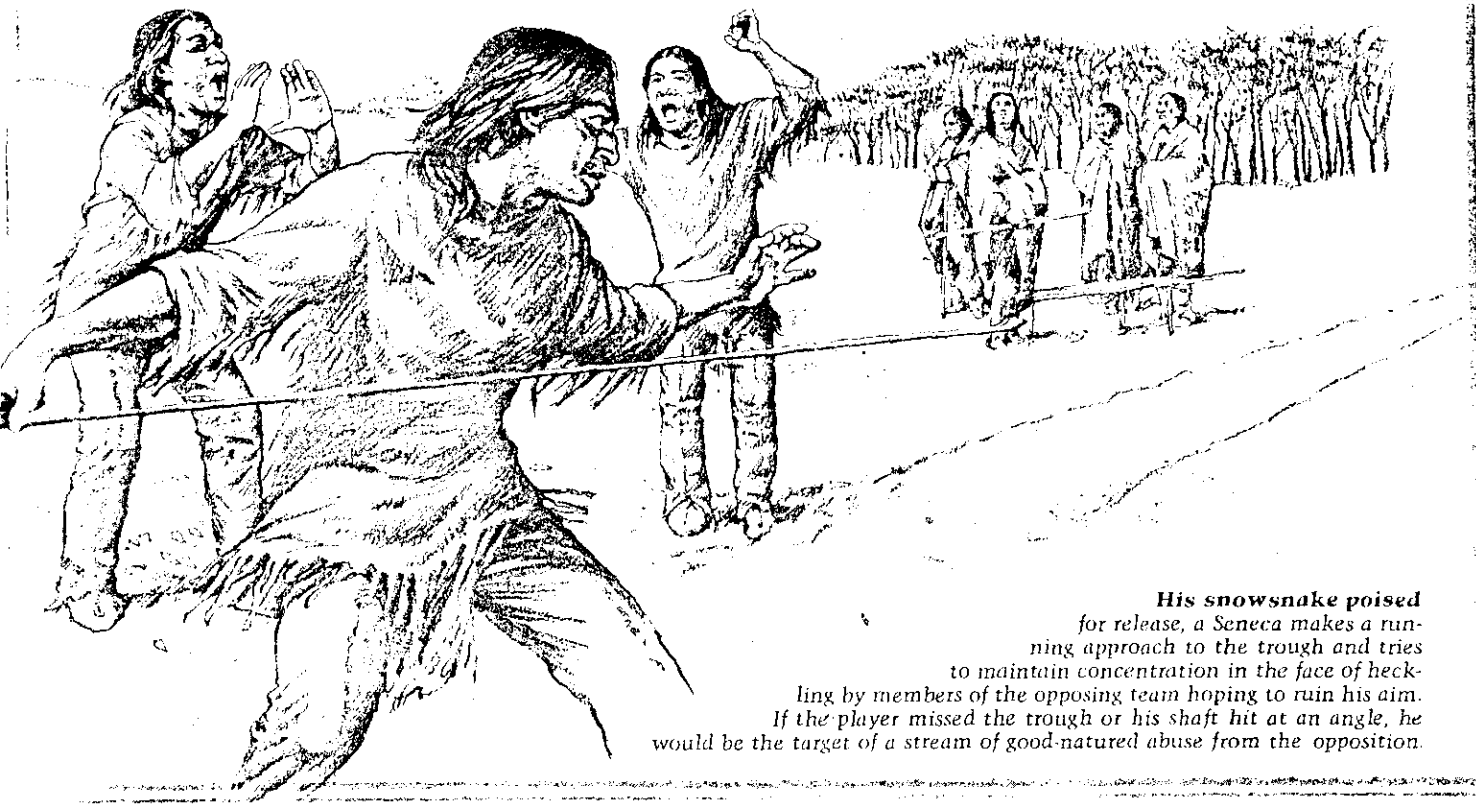

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Harvesting wild rice, *as depicted by 19th-century artist Seth Eastman, requires a tribesman to maneuver the canoe and two women workers to gather the grain. Beating the stalks with paddles, the women garner about half of the rice grains, the rest falling to the bottom to germinate.*

After harvesting, the rice was dried—by leaving it in the sun or by placing it on a scaffold over a slow fire. Then the rice was beaten to remove the tough hull and, finally, the grain was put into a birchbark tray and winnowed on a windy day. A favorite food among Great Lakes Indians, wild rice was served boiled with maple sugar or as part of a stew.

injuries. Men suffered and died in these encounters. But this was man-to-man or band-to-band combat and rarely, if ever, was there a wholesale bloodletting that left hundreds of women without husbands and their children without fathers.

"Wild Rice Men"

Summer was also life-giving, and no other Algonquian tribe greeted the season more enthusiastically than did the Menominee or, to use their full name, Menominiwok, meaning "Wild Rice Men." No other tribe ate such huge quantities of the "good grain" nor harvested it with such fervor. The Menominees relied entirely on the natural sowing cycle, but the mere act of gathering wild rice ensured propagation of the plant and thus a bumper crop for the next year.

In the late summer, when the wild rice stalks were almost ripe, the Menominees poled their canoes through the shallows to tie the tops of the stalks in bundles. Two or three weeks later, when the ripening was completed, the flotilla of canoes came again. Tribes of men and women drifted slowly through the reeds pulling the stalks over the gunwales of their small craft and beating the plants with sticks to release the seed-bearing husks. At least half of the husks fell into the water and sank to the muddy bottom, thereby renewing the cycle of growth.

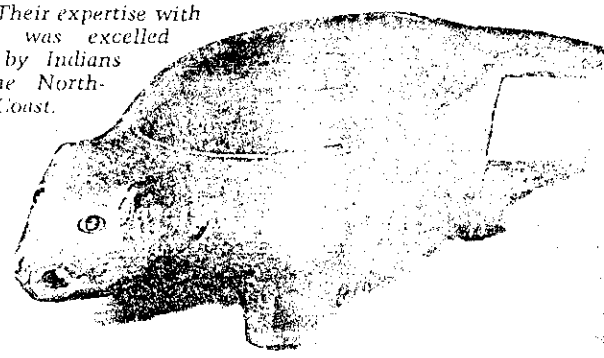
Once ashore the harvest was threshed to separate seeds from husks. It was backbreaking work, but the results usually provided more than ample grain for the tribe's needs, and nothing was a greater goad to labor than the thought of a steaming dish of boiled wild rice seasoned with maple sugar.

The Menominees were medium-sized people with large brown eyes and light skins. Men wore shirts, breechcloths, and leggings of deerskin. Women wore deerskin tunics over shirts of woven nettles, buckskin leggings, and soft leather moccasins. Both sexes liked to decorate their clothes with beads, porcupine quills, and painted designs, and to wear jangling copper body ornaments. In summer the children went naked.

In the early 17th century the Menominees numbered approximately 1,900. They lived for most of the year in domed wigwams made of bent saplings covered with mats of reeds and cattails. In summer, however, the wigwams were too hot, and the tribe moved into peaked-roofed, rectangular houses whose higher ceilings and greater space afforded some relief from the heat.

These wigwams and houses were grouped into a number of year-round villages, with one main settlement near the mouth of the Menominee River, where it flows into Green Bay on Wisconsin's Lake Michigan shore. From the lake itself, and from nearby streams, the Menominees took various kinds of fish, although they particularly prized the large, sweet-fleshed sturgeon that abounded in the lake. These Indians employed just about every conceivable tactic for taking fish, using hooks, spears, large traps, and skillfully woven nets of bark fiber, for the women of the tribe were weavers of great renown. Throughout the western

A wood effigy bowl *in the shape of a beaver is among the finest specimens of Kaskaskia craftsmanship. The Kaskaskia, once the leading tribe of the Illinois confederacy—which ranged from the Great Lakes south into present Iowa and Missouri—were noted for the quality of their wood carvings, many of which were used in medicine bundles. Their expertise with wood was excelled only by Indians of the Northwest Coast.*



Woodlands they were famous for their supple bags of dyed vegetal fiber and buffalo hair spun into beautiful geometric designs. These bags, as well as other woven goods, were valuable items of trade, much sought after by the other Great Lakes tribes.

Next to wild rice itself, the Menominees probably prized maple sugar above all other foods. For them, as for their neighbors, maple sugar was both a food in itself and a seasoning. Children were often given medicine mixed with maple sugar to make the dose palatable, and the sweet was used with all manner of dishes, much as we might use salt.

The tapping of the maples came in early spring, just after the families returned from winter hunting. Whole villages of the Menominees made camp deep in the woods, and each family had its own stand of trees to tap. A gash was made in the trunk of each tree a few feet above the ground, and a cedar spout was hammered into the trunk. From this spout a trickle of sap would run into a birchbark pail set on the ground. After the trees had been drained, the sap was poured into larger birchbark containers, and hot rocks dropped in to bring the sap to a boil. The heat first reduced it to a syrup and then to a sugar. Only when each family had a year's supply of maple sugar did the band break camp and return to its permanent village where a portion of the harvest was consumed in honor of Manitou at a ceremonial feast. Another small amount of the sugar was taken to the grave sites of ancestors to "feed" the spirits of the dead.

Along the shores of Lake Michigan the Menominees came into close and constant contact with their neighbors, the Siouan-speaking Winnebagos, who lived in the deep-forested Door Peninsula that thrusts northward into the lake to form the eastern arm of Green Bay. Despite language differences, the two tribes had long been friends and allies, perhaps in part because they had a common interest in keeping the Sauk and Fox Indians to the south and west at bay. But also there was a mutually profitable trade relationship between the two tribes that lasted over many centuries. Although the Winnebagos prized wild rice, they harvest-

Fishing by torchlight—*shown here in a painting by the 19th-century artist Paul Kane—was a common practice among the Menominee and other Great Lakes tribes. As fish are attracted to the surface by the light, tribesmen stand ready to spear them. Fish were an important food for the Great Lakes tribes, and they used nets and weirs, as well as spears, to make their catch.*