
EDUCATION NEWS

Kunoopeam, Welcome Readers!

This is the first in a monthly series of articles whose theme will focus on traditional moons and thanksgivings of which there are 13 according to the Indigenous calendar. Did you know that the 13 squares on a turtles back represent the 13 moons, and the 28 smaller squares around the edges are the days leading to the next moon! This is how some Indigenous peoples kept time.

Hello readers! I'm Chrystal Mars Baker (Narragansett/Niantic), the Education Manager here at the Tomaquag Museum and I'm wishing you a happy and blessed New Year!

As a child I was taught to be thankful for all life's blessings and to respect all of creation. This includes the four-leggeds, winged ones, swimmers, as well as all of heaven and earth - winds, rains, storms, plants, water, etc., as they are given by our Creator. These lessons were passed on to me by my parents (both Narragansett/Niantic) and grandparents who received these teachings from their parents and grandparents and so on. Nature was our teacher and we were taught to take notice of patterns, footprints, seasonal changes, etc. My mother told me while foraging that if there was a berry or plant that the animals or birds would not eat, it was generally not good for us to eat either. These teachings are a part of our oral history. Traditionally our knowledge was passed on orally, but we have learned to read and write English and have now become the recorders of our own history. Red Wing, who was born in the late 1890s, spoke of the moons and thanksgivings in a 1975 article found in Tomaquag's archives. She wrote, "The



A photograph of Red Wing care of the Tomaquag Museum Archives

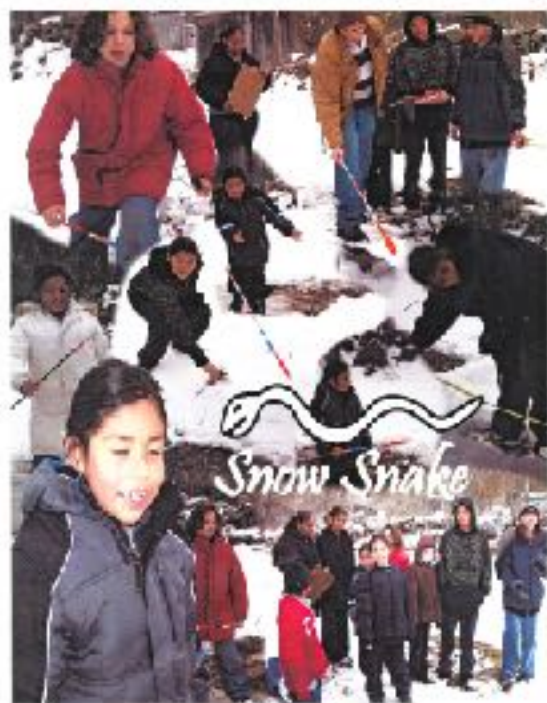
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natives of yester-year found a reason to thank the Great Spirit every moon for blessings or gifts. The Indians learned early, that it took just 28 sun ups (or days) to make a full moon and 13 full moons to make a Great Sun-up (a year).” For many Indigenous communities, the “new year” occurred not during this moon but in the spring when new life was blossoming as all of nature was reawakening from the long sleep of winter.

FROM TOMAQUAG’S EDUCATION DEPARTMENT...

It’s papone (winter) and if you are looking up into the night sky, you are seeing the wonder of the moon in all of its glorious stages. This is the “Moon of the great white silence,” or “moon of the first snow”. Well, there are many names for this moon depending upon which community you are from. This moon is known by many names that differ across Indigenous communities. For instance, the Cherokee name for this moon is “Cold Moon”. The Mohawk called it “the big cold” and among the Passamaquoddy it has been called the “whirling wind moon.” It is interesting to note that for centuries Indigenous communities have kept time, followed seasonal patterns, and lived according to the moon cycles and the gifts they bring. So with this moon, and in this region of the country, snowfall was a significant natural occurrence and gift from our Creator. Silvermoon LaRose, Assistant Director of Tomaquag Museum, stated “we celebrate as the Earth Mother goes to rest under a blanket of snow to replenish herself for another year.”

During this moon, snowsnake, a popular game of many Indigenous communities, is played. The game involves forming a track atop a very large amount of solid packed snow stretching many feet long. The long “snake”, a spear painted to resemble a snake, would be angled and thrown to glide along the track to see who could throw



Pictured here are Native children of the former Nuweetooun School ca. 2003-2010

it the farthest. A fun and competitive recreation, this game also serves as practice for spear throwing used in hunting and fishing.

My mother, Starr Spears Mars (Narragansett/Niantic) was born in the 1940s. I asked her to share childhood memories of snow. She is the 6th child in a family of 12. She told me of a game she and her siblings often played with many of their cousins. It



Starr Mars at her home ca. 2023

was called “fox and geese” and was a hunting game. She recalled the large amounts of snowfall blanketing a large field just near her family home in Charlestown RI. The children would trudge around to form a large circle. Within this circle they would make four pathways, each leading to the center which would become “home to the geese”. One child would be designated “the fox” and they would chase the others children “the geese” through the paths. The geese would have to be swift to make it to the safety of that center sanctuary. As they ran around, the snow beneath their feet would get more and more packed causing it to become slippery. The rules stated that one couldn’t step or fall out of bounds

(outside of the designated paths) or that child would automatically become the fox. If anyone tried to deny they had gone out of bounds, tracks in the snow beyond the path would quickly reveal their deception! My mother recalled how fun it was to play in the large amounts of snow but also how very cold it was. It was almost a relief when the game was over so they could return to the warmth of the wood stove’s hearth!

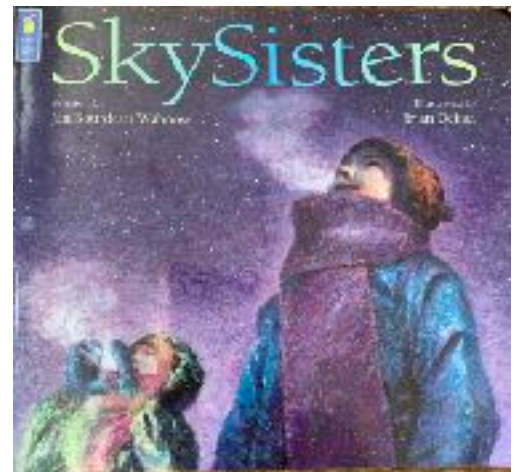
My mother had six brothers and they, along with my grandfather, hunted in the winter as a necessity to keep meat on the table for such a large family. My Uncle Forrest Spears Sr. shared his hunting memories with me. After a snowfall was the best time to hunt because of the tracks! The snow revealed the trail of the deer allowing for easier tracking. Blood droplets were highly visible on snow once they deer had been shot making it easier to recover if it ran. Also, the cold weather was the perfect time to allow the deer to hang in preparation for processing - a perfect, natural refrigeration!

There are so many stories that could be shared about snow and how Indigenous peoples, past and present, have benefited and enjoyed it. I can recall so many childhood stories of playing in snow. Though snow is not as regularly falling as in generations ago, my own children have always loved this gift from Creator.

Climate change is certainly making an impact to these winter traditions. Global warming is impacting this wonderful winter resource. Snow is essential to our environment and in Rhode Island, we sadly seem to see less and less of it each year. Yet even in mild years like this, during the season of papone (winter), we continue to celebrate Creator's gift of sóchepo (snow).

FOR THE CHILDREN:

Snow! The Narragansett word is **sóchepo**. Join us virtually the second Saturday of January 2023 at 9:30 a.m. for Storytime as we read the story "SkySisters" written by Jan Bourdeau Waboose which tells the tale of two Ojibway sisters who set off across the frozen north country to see the SkySpirits midnight dance. Register on our website [here](#). Check out the resources below to see where you can purchase your own copy!



RESOURCES:

At Tomaquag we are continuously doing the work of educating new generations of children as well as the general public about the lives, traditions and life changes of the Indigenous peoples of Rhode Island and neighboring communities. Follow us on our website at tomaquagmuseum.org, [Youtube](#) and [facebook](#). Check out these resources!

To watch SkySisters video visit this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBBIMwDYdL4>

To support Indigenous owned bookstores and authors and purchase your own copy of SkySisters visit this link: <https://birchbarkbooks.com/products/skysisters>

To create a paper snowflake visit this link: <https://onelittleproject.com/how-to-make-paper-snowflakes/>

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