

Adventures in our town

Toms River



"The Three Sisters"

The legend and the reality. Corn, squash and beans were native to New Jersey. Shown here in both rough form and processed. Note that the jawbone of a deer was used to remove kernels from the corn for grinding and cooking. Turtle shell for the beans and earthenware pots for cooking and serving.



Drumbeat of the Lenape

An Afternoon with Mary Ellen Flynn

To-Ki-Pah-Ki-Nao

“He”.

“Kulamalsi hech?”

“Nulamalsi.”

“Ni nulelintam knewel ki.”

“Ahikta, Ni kepe hech.”

“Ksi nkaski alenixsi English?”

By L. Skip Johnson

Photographs by L. Skip Johnson ©2002

Line Drawings by Clarence Ellsworth from “*Dickon Among the Lenapes*” by M. R. Harrington (*Jiskogo*)

There are so few people in New Jersey who possess such a keen sense of history and a personal passion so deep that they will so dedicate themselves in the fashion that former teacher Mary Ellen Flynn has done regarding the Lenape Indians of this state. As one researches the activities of the Lenape in and around Toms River her name was repeatedly mentioned along with those of the Krafts, Paul Boyd or James Reeveys. Since Ms. Flynn resides closest to Toms River, in Willingboro, we sought her out to help us enlighten our fair readers as to what it takes to become an expert on the Lenape Indians.

Yes, it is important to understand that there are many Native Americans who are still quite upset over the path that history has taken. This is also the same spectrum that one will find in every culture where radical changes were fostered by another incoming culture. Some folks just want to get along today and hold no grudges over the past. Some folks desire their own repatriation and a re-creation more as how things were – a not so different thinking than a ‘Yankee go home’ philosophy. But let us return to

our story as genealogy is not the current issue.

Back in the 1930’s President Roosevelt also started the CCC, Civilian Conservation Corp, along with his more familiar anti-depression moves. Up in Sussex County the CCC constructed a camp at Lake Wapalanne. Usage of this camp continued long after our economic recovery. As a student at Montclair State Teachers College, oh, back about 1955, Ms. Flynn interned in Outdoor Biology with the New Jersey State School of Conservation. There she became involved with their Indian ceremony work because, “It was just so much fun.”

As a scientist she did notice that some of the war bonnets used were from western tribes. Though still not serious about it all; and, only casually acknowledging her Lenape extraction back on her father’s side, she was given the old book “*Dickon Among the Lenapes*” by M.R. Harrington. A fictional tale based upon a shipwreck in 1612, it was the result of Mr. Harrington’s extended close association with Lenape peoples in the 1930s. Here she found sketches and renderings accurate enough for her to create

extremely authentic replicas of Lenape attire. This became an important issue as the following year most of the clothing at Camp Wapalanne was stolen.

Ms. Flynn then did embark on making complete outfits for enough people to participate in tribal ceremonies. Again, being of the scientific bent, she became aware that the ceremony was actually Iroquois and proceeded to delve much more deeply into her studies of the Lenape. From 1956 to 1959 she became one of the most knowledgeable self-taught experts on the native peoples of New Jersey. One could say her interest was now extremely serious and would become a lifelong avocation.

When the State of New Jersey celebrated its Tercentenary it was mandated that such celebration include a fairly detailed history of the Lenapes. As Ms. Flynn was recognized throughout the state as an expert they called upon her to instruct this important topic. Her volunteer position for this teaching event soon became a paid position as local jurisdictions called upon her again and again. When a full faculty position became available over in Buck's County she left to teach Geology and Aerospace Technology for Bristol Township High School. Within a few years though she had to return to her love and took many speaking engagements teaching school children about the early history of New Jersey and the Lenape Tribes.



Mary Ellen retired from full time teaching in 1993 and elected not to rest but to return with more dedication to bringing Lenape history and tradition to grammar schools throughout the state of New Jersey. She created a mini-museum of sorts combining genuine artifacts and historically accurate replicas of period attire, tools and weapons. Combining this with her unique interactive teaching methods she took her show on the road. What the students received was not only a very descriptive teaching session with Ms. Flynn dressed in buckskin, beads and jewelry; but, they were also able to pick up, touch, feel, handle and use native tools. As she says, "Even though they are boys, they can pound the corn pounder."

Working with each individual teacher she would confirm where the students were in the unit and would structure her



the purposes of keeping the Lenape language alive. As we prepared to part Mary Ellen, as is always her teaching way, chose to mention that the Lenape language does not contain the letter "R".



Mary Ellen Flynn dressed in authentic buckskin with ceremonial drum and beater. Necklaces are wampum, clan totem and knife, all traditional.

presentation accordingly. The teachers liked it because it brought the experience out of the books and into life. She did prefer to gear her talks to fourth graders as "their language hasn't coarsened yet". There were no museum labels on the exhibits so they learn the Lenape names. "Everything is very interactive, very authentic," as she described it.

Time does march on and Mary Ellen has restricted her availability for such presentations and we do sadly note a visible hole in what teaching could be. She still consults on New Jersey history and is part of a small group of folks meeting for

Sir Samuel Argall, captain of the Discovery, is credited with the naming, in 1610, as he sailed into De la Warr Bay which was named after Sir Thomas West, third Lord of De La Warr and Governor of Virginia. De La Warr's River, De La Warr's Indians, the Delawares. Once it hit the media the name was propagated across the great pond - wrong though it be.

"Kichi hoch ne le?"

"Ahikta."

"Wanishi."

