

## SHAWNEE INDIAN FESTIVAL: THE BREAD DANCE

*By Velma Nieberding*

## FOREWORD

The Loyal Shawnee tribal members living in and near Whiteoak, Oklahoma, are those persons of Shawnee Indian blood who by Agreement dated June 7, 1869, became incorporated with the Cherokee Nation in the present Oklahoma, and the lineal descendants of such persons. They are a part of the main body of the Shawnee Tribe of Indians. They are unorganized in terms of the Oklahoma Welfare Act and have no Constitution and by-laws.

In order that they might have authority to act and speak on certain tribal matters, they have been organized into a "general council." This council can speak and act in behalf of the tribe in connection with necessary legislation before judgment monies can be paid to tribal members, and for defining those who will share in the distribution of any judgment funds.

The Shawnees have recently had a claim allowed. A final judgment was entered by the U. S. Indian Claims Commission on July 27, 1959 in favor of the Shawnee Nation as it existed in 1854, which was for lands set apart for the Shawnee Indians by the United States pursuant to the Treaty of November 7, 1825, and the Treaty of August 8, 1831, and ceded to the United States by a United Shawnee Tribe under the Treaty of May 10, 1854.

The Shawnee Tribal Business Committee (Loyal Shawnees) was established on December 4, 1960, at a meeting held at Whiteoak, with Area Director, Paul L. Fickinger of the Muskogee Area Office presiding. The Business Committee officers consist of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, a Secretary-Treasurer and four members, who shall be elected by secret ballot and who shall serve a term of two years.

There also is a "Grievance Committee" which can investigate complaints of misconduct, or other acts of the members of the Shawnee Tribal Business Committee and can request the Chairman of the Council to act upon such complaints.

The present elected Business Committee officers are

Jerome Shawnee, Chairman; Fred Halfmoon, Vice-Chairman; Mrs. Elaine Chibitty, Secretary-Treasurer. Councilmen are, Lorenzo Carpenter, Sam Perry, Victoria Nolen and Bill Shawnee. The members of the Grievance Committee are Mrs. Emmaline Carpenter, Bert Ellis and Ruby White Diebold.

The "Loyal Shawnees" are historically known as those Shawnee tribal members who remained loyal to the United States during the Civil War. They were living in Kansas at that time, and because Union soldiers appropriated certain properties belonging to them, the Loyal Shawnees entered into a treaty with the Government which was ratified by Congress, October 14, 1868. The Government agreed to reimburse them for the livestock and other properties which had been appropriated for the use of the Army. Legislation was passed in 1929 to pay the Loyal Shawnees and payments were made through the Muskogee Area office about 1931 and 1932. At that time this group of Loyal Shawnees numbered 145.

Although they are enrolled on the Cherokee Tribal rolls, the Muskogee Area Office maintains a list of those Shawnees who were incorporated among the Cherokee in 1869, by purchase of the right of settlement within the Cherokee Nation.

There also is in Oklahoma, the Mixed Band of Seneca and Shawnee Indians, now called "The Eastern Shawnee," under the jurisdiction of the Miami Agency office; and the Absentee Shawnee, under the jurisdiction of the Anadarko Area Office.\*

A small booklet, outlining the ceremonies of the Loyal Shawnees, was given to the writer by Mrs. George Valliere, of Pawnee. The Booklet was privately printed for the use of tribal members. Mrs. Valliere, a member of the Loyal Shawnee tribe, is the former Miss Anita Squirrel. She is of the opinion that the book was compiled by her grandmother, Mrs. Daisy Walker and three other elderly women of the tribe, who supervise the annual tribal ceremonies. These are Mrs. Anna Dick, Mrs. Rosa Secondine, and Mrs.

---

\* From information furnished the writer by Mrs. Marie Wadley, Tribal Affairs Officer, Muskogee Area Office. For brief notes on the history of the Shawnees in Oklahoma see Mariel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), pp. 240, 241, 242, 243-44; also see Frank H. Harris, "Seneca Sub-Agency, 1832-1838," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLII, No. 2 (Summer, 1964), pp. 75-94.

Julia Dick. The account begins with the Origin of the Shawnees:<sup>1</sup>

The belief of this tribe of Indians of man's creation, is as follows:

There were no human beings on this earth; there were spirits, or angels in the air, or above the earth, existing as alive and were alive, and they saw the earth was so beautiful and no one to attend the soil. And they said, "This earth is so beautiful and it is not right; there is no one inhabiting this place." And there was a cedar tree nearby and as they talked, a voice came from the cedar tree and said to them:

You have been given the power and why do you not just say the word and create a man and a woman". And then they said the word, "We shall create man and woman."

And they tilled the soil and multiplied greatly.

The Booklet continues:<sup>2</sup>

#### *The Ceremonial Bread Dance*

In the Spring, about the month of April or May, and some time about or after the new moon, and about the time when the Dogwood begins to bud, it is time then for the council to call a general meeting.

First, the women will call a meeting to talk about the Bread Dance and this must be done in the morning and before the date is set for encampment. The men pray for the women.

This is the prayer: "Now we have met here this day at one of our homes to think about what our God Grandmother has given us. Now when I look at you I see your head bowed and then I went and raised your head up and cleaned your mouth and then I used this white cloth and cleaned your eyes and when I got through cleaning your eyes you can now see everything clear. And then I cleaned your heart and now your thoughts can reach God's kingdom and now you can think about everything that God has given you, to worship Him and think good; and this is the advice we have given you men from us mothers and elderly women".

<sup>1</sup> The Shawnees arrogated to themselves a superiority not only over whites but over other tribes of Indians. According to Rev. James B. Finley, in "Life Among the Indians" (New York, Eaton & Mains) at a convention held at Fort Wayne in 1803 one of their principal men boasted "The Master of Life, who was himself an Indian, made the Shawnees before any other of the human race; and they sprang from His brain. He gave them all the knowledge he himself possessed and placed them upon the great island, and all the other red people are descended from the Shawnees."

<sup>2</sup> Special permission was given the writer (V. N.) by the Elders of the Shawnee in Ottawa County to use here the excerpts from the Booklet outlining the ceremonies of the "Loyal Shawnees."

At the same time the prayer is repeated to the women from a leading man. The same prayer is used. After this the men follow and shake hands with all the women standing in a row and the women repeat the same ceremony in their turn.

Now at this time the elder men leave to attend the sacred promise and in this prayer a blessing is asked God for all human beings and everything; to bless this mother earth, to be bountiful and the springs and the rivers to flow forever.<sup>3</sup>

When the men return from this duty then the women will set the time for the camping. The men will agree with them. This is for this part until they camp.

Now on the day set they camp and about the second or third day after they camp they pick out the women to make the bread, which is made of white Indian flour corn, and skinned in ashes lye, and pounded into flour in a mortar with a large rounded pole, smoothly made to pound the corn.<sup>4</sup>

They select the men to dance and whoever is chosen among the elder men, they have two men as ushers and they help in doing the work. It is the ushers who go and get the whiteoak wood and it is about three inches through; and they cut the bottom to the center and upper part and then upward; and they split while it is standing up. They make a hoop two feet across in size and it is called a blessing to whoever it is in season to wear it.<sup>4</sup>

In the Spring it is the woman's place to place it on a man's shoulders, who is to take the lead in the ceremonial

<sup>3</sup>In most tribal religions the earth is held to be sacred and venerated in the role of "mother." Tecumseh, at the great Council of Vincennes in 1811, exclaimed "My father is the sun and the earth is my mother. I will recline upon her bosom."

The "sacred promise" may be similar to one related by Mrs. Nancy Chouteau to Rev. Josh Spencer, Missionary to the Shawnee Indians in Kansas, 1858-1860 (Kansas Historical Collections, Vol. X, 1907-08) "Another religious practice among the Shawnees when they were in Kansas was observed once a year. The women carried wood and made a big fire. At midnight the chief brought out a mysterious bundle and took from it some great long feathers. The men dressed themselves in these (putting them into their hair was the usual custom) and sang. If while they were singing they could hear 'The Mother Spirit' sing, that was a sign the world was not coming to an end that year."

<sup>4</sup>To be chosen to prepare the corn and make the ceremonial bread is a high, tribal honor.

<sup>4</sup>A Bread Dance is held also in Autumn.

dance. In the fall dance it is the man's time to place it on the women (leader's) shoulders.

Who places this hoop? The last elder woman on the seat and whoever follows hereafter and for the men it has been the rule that the speaker or the one who says the prayer, places the hoop on the woman's shoulders for a blessing. The man or woman receiving this is supposed to say "thank you."

And now the making of the blessing of the hoop. Different seeds are tied on the hoop. The hoop is made this way, as we said before. It should be two feet in diameter around. The women start the hoop in the Spring and the men in the Fall. Now on the left side of the hoop from the woman who starts it, there will be four grains of Indian corn (white) and four bundles tied with a white cloth four inches square, tied on the left side of the hoop. There will be four bundles of beans; Kentucky Wonders, I suppose, could be used. It used to be the beans called "King Beans"; and on the same side there will be four pumpkin seeds tied in the same way, four bundles; and four cucumber seeds tied in a bundle, four bundles with four seeds in each bundle and four bundles of red hominy corn with four grains in each bundle, tied on as the rest, in rotation.

Now the men will tie on, leaving about a four inch space, a piece of deer tail with a buckskin string and next a little piece of wild turkey feather and a little piece of coon tail and a little piece of skunk tail. Now, joining up from this the women tie the corn again in the same way as the first time and everthing as mentioned in the first starting, and then the men tie the deer, wild turkey feather, coon tail and skunk tail as before. Now it is finished.

Now the women start sewing the football.\* A buckskin is used and is stuffed with hair which they manage to keep at all times. The size of the ball is a woman's hand spread out in a circle and in two pieces, and sewed with a long buckskin string, the size less than a quarter of an inch.

\* Because the football is used ceremonially it is taken down each season and preserved by the elders of the tribe. The ball is more round than oblong. Mrs. Chouteau (Kan. Hist. Coll. op. cit.) described the game as played by the Shawnees as "rather a combination of football and basketball. The men on one side, the women on the other. The women were allowed to run with the ball and throw it, but the men had to kick it." Wagers were made on the game but it was always stopped before sundown, the Shawnees believing that if they played after that someone would be crippled. Also, the game is not played after the corn is knee-high in the Spring.

The women have also women ushers who help the elder women in any way needed. Now, in picking out the dancers: The women are supposed to prepare the bread (as said before) and it used to be that one dozen women and men were chosen, and the men were to be the dancers. But now the Indians are getting so scattered out they have to make out with as many as we can get. The first four women chosen were to make forty little breads and one large bread; the next four women were to make thirty small breads and one large bread; the next four women made twenty small breads and one large bread.<sup>6</sup>

The first two women skinned and pounded their corn and baked their bread first in a dutch oven. The leader bakes her bread on the east side of the fire; the second one to the leader bakes her bread on the west side. Before they start to bake the bread, it is the usher's place to cook the beans and pumpkin in a brass kettle ready to put in the cornmeal bread. The leader uses beans, the second one uses pumpkin and everyone uses beans and pumpkin. Last the elder women bake their bread the same as the dancers.

The day of the ceremonial starts. The beef is purchased and the women cook it in large brass kettles.<sup>7</sup> The dancing leader is supposed to cut the meat first, she and her helper, and it goes on until they all take part. In the broth where the meat has been cooked, dry corn of some kind is cooked until tender, after the meat is taken out.

Now, at this time, the stomp ground is prepared. It is cleaned and swept by using buck bushes placed on a solid, new-cut stick of any kind. The leader, known as the Queen, marks the ground four ways. She takes the northeast corner and the second one [woman] sweeps the northwest corner; the third one, sweeps the southeast corner and the fourth one sweeps the southwest corner.

<sup>6</sup> If a woman is in the menstrual period, she may not help in the preparation of the bread, play in the football game or even enter the dance grounds during the ceremony.

<sup>7</sup> The kettles are suspended over the fire by ceremonially-cut poles strengthened by wild grape vines. The writer was not permitted to photograph the campfire where the beef is cooked. In the olden days the meat was obtained by specially-chosen hunters. Stated Nancy Chouteau in the account by Rev. Spencer (Kansas Historical Collections *op. cit.*) "In the Fall of each year a certain number of men, five I believe, are sent out on a hunt. They stay three days. On the third day, when they are returning, and are near enough to be heard, they fire their guns and the men and women in camp go out to meet them. The hunters are taken off their horses and sent to their wigwams to rest. The game is cooked and put in a pile on the ground, leaves having been spread on the ground first. They have also a pile of bread which has been made of white corn pounded in a mortar for the occasion."

The men ushers call out for the women to bring in the bread. The Queen, the woman head dancer, goes and spreads a tablecloth on the center of the stomp ground where the bread will be placed. The small breads are spilled in the center; the large breads are placed by the ushers on the northeast corner. The women dancers march in from the south side. The Queen places her bread by that of the dancing leader and then on down with the other women, where they make a U turn and go to their seats.

The women and the ushers help the elders in every way, as told by the elders. Now the men ushers bring the meat that has been cooked and place it near the west side of the bread. Now everyone is seated. The public also is invited to be seated.

The drum is painted crisscross and all around with Indian paint and the speaker rises and tells the dancers to kindly tell the singers to sing for them when it is their turn to dance. Now they start dancing. The women dance three times alone, and the men dance three times. The women dance in opposite lines when the men dance, and the last dance is called the "pumpkin dance." Men and women dance side by side, another man and woman are chosen to lead this last dance.

Now the dance ceremonies are over and the speaker says the ritual prayer. He says;

Now we are through with these ceremonial dances. Our elder mother women are glad they are able to carry this through as God and Grandmother would have it to be. They are glad to see us this way, looking so well and strong and we ask God and Grandmother to bless this world and everything that grows on this earth; to bless the springs and rivers that will flow forever; to bless the sun and moon that they shall give us light forever; and to bless the corn that we will plant, for it to grow and bear plentiful; and we ask that the beans we plant, for them to grow and be plentiful.

And there is the pumpkin to be blessed to grow and bear plentiful and spread out the vines beautifully, and there is the cucumber for it to grow and spread out its vines and bear plentiful, and there is the muskmelon for it to grow and spread out its vines and bear plentiful.

To bless the animals, they should grow strong and beautiful and bear plentiful. And now we ask the Thunder Gods to give us rain every so often to moisten the ground. We ask the trees to be blessed and to grow strong and large. And now we ask East, West, South and North, and just somewhere here we ask that these words be taken before God and Grandmother. When they looked over these words they gave us their blessings and said, "That is the way it shall be, as my children have asked."

Now after the speaker sits down he rises again and says "After we have our suppers we will dance for joy to-night". The food is then passed around.

And from the beginning a thought has been arranged (concerning the feast) for buying the beef and who may be able to furnish the corn. I believe this part was left out. Also, after the ball game they come back and dance a set or two.

Another part that was left out above: The next morning after the dancers are elected, the men gather at the stomping ground at daylight and start a fire with a flint rock and dotty out of old wood.

A speaker should speak in the night dance after about the fourth set and say we are so glad that all of you are here to help us in this dance and we ask you to speak a few words for the good of the order that each of you be careful, for we are not here for any foolishness and we don't want to see anyone get in trouble in any way but to enjoy yourselves while you are here. Try and keep an even mind and do not lose your self-control; for we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey.

Now for the Greencorn Dance. It is held just when most everyone that plants the Indian corn is ready, that is, the corn is in roasting ears, in July or August. Women and men, just a few, get together and have a council and set the date to camp and the day to dance, and to talk about the vegetables as to who can bring different vegetables such as roasting ear corn, beans, cucumbers, etc. Anyone that wishes to donate these may do so. (Watermelons are acceptable also.)<sup>8</sup>

The ground is prepared the same as for the Bread Dance and collections are asked with which to buy beef. Four men and four women are selected to dance, and [from] any clan. Three or four dances are sung for each. At the pumpkin dance food is placed in the center on a tablecloth and then the dance is called to order and the prayer is said, thanking God for everything that has been raised to eat, that has been mentioned in the Bread Dance. Only meat and vegetables are used in this dance.

Now for the Fall Bread Dance. It should be held on the first day of October. To camp a week before to pick the dancers is necessary. It is the same as the Spring Bread Dance except the men take the lead when to council and

<sup>8</sup> Corn Dance: no one was allowed to use any corn even from his own field, until the proper authority was given. When the corn was sufficiently advanced for use the date of the feast and dance was fixed. This was probably the most highly esteemed peace festival of the Shawnee. Very properly it might be called the feast of the first fruits.—Kansas Historical Collections, *op cit.*



everything else. They tie the hoop first and the women follow. It is honorable to be ushers and to help the elders in many ways.

In the Fall they do not play football but they play the Indian Seed game. Women play against the men.