

Abenaki hold week of Nawihla celebrations

by: Donna Laurent Caruso

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HVERHILL, N.H. - Abenaki of Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts held a weeklong celebration in early June that culminated in a pow wow on ancestral land; the planting of bebonki skamon, an old form of fast-growing, sweet northern corn; and seminal educational outreach.

The event was named Nawihla, which means "to go back home." Organizers felt this was the best name for the ceremonies because just last year, Abenaki were officially recognized by the state of Vermont.

The events were held at the Woodsville Community Field in an area known to be a center of Abenaki commerce dating back about 10,000 years. The meadows that straddle the Connecticut River at the present-day towns of Haverhill and Newbury, Vt., once held permanent villages and expansive gardens of Aln8bak ("Our People").

In the 1700s, Abenaki dispersed, perished or hid. Many, as Marge Bruchac, an Abenaki historian, has noted, "hid in plain sight" in order to survive the genocidal forces of Roger's Rangers and later, state-sponsored eugenics pogroms. Their homeland, N'dakinna, was never purchased by treaty or otherwise.

A population estimated to be 25,000 Aln8bak in New Hampshire| alone was reduced to 700 by 1760.

"It was an overwhelming feeling to go back home," Chief Nancy Millette said.

"It was absolutely the best. Fantastic. I am still in awe." Co-Chief Brian Chenevert agreed.

"Every Abenaki I know said they got an incredible feeling of being home. We had such a great reception from the town that many tensions were eased; the governor of New Hampshire, John Lynch, even proclaimed a Native American Cultural Awareness Weekend."

Michael Johnson, a Mashantucket Pequot who helps coordinate the tribe's Schemitzun pow wow, said, "Nawihla had such a strong meaning, everyone was drawn into it. When well-off tribes support emerging tribes, we are reminded of all the issues we have overcome ... and are still facing."

The Mashantucket Pequots helped sponsor Nawihla.

Millette noted that 1,500 people came through the gates. "What I think really set this apart from other events I've done was how many questions people asked, how much they wanted to be informed and learn."

The creation of an 18th century Aln8bak village by the Koasek band of Abenaki drew a constant stream of people.

Shortly after the state recognized the tribe, a strain of old corn was formally gifted back from descendants of European settlers. "It is noteworthy that the tradition of seed propagation was also preserved by non-Natives, and it is just so significant that this old corn variety was planted on the meadows during Nawihla," he said.

Johnson received an ear to bring to the Mashantucket Tribal Museum, where "we will remove the kernels and plant on our own homestead garden beds away from other corn."

According to Chenevert, the ceremony of planting the aboriginal corn was small and private in a family-size garden on a section of the meadows owned by a tribal council member. Chenevert and Mike Fenn made the mound, and Karen Mica and Millette handled the corn.

Fred Wiseman, professor of humanities at Vermont's Johnson State College, showed, "Against the Darkness," a DVD he produced that dramatizes Abenaki persistence through seven generations after the state of Vermont declared they did not exist.

Wiseman, as historian and ethnobotanist, also recorded the corn planting.

"The corn has some old characteristics and some beyond my knowledge. It is not an ornamental and not a degenerate of more modern corn. It is very like the traditional corn, with ears only three and one-half to 5 inches, and between eight and 12 rows with a lot of variability. It has a very short growing season. Even if it is a 30 to 40 percent European/American variety, it is still old and is as close to bebonki skamon as we'll ever see.

"Since the corn came, some people have discredited its importance and now I am learning the politics of corn. I thought everyone would simply be glad to know of it. If this is indeed ancient or indigenous, it is very important that it is under Indian control.

"There will be a lot of interesting work ahead of us," Wiseman said.

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