

Tsyunhekw^

Corn is the main field crop in both Iowa and Wisconsin, and in the U.S. as a whole. Most of this corn is used to feed livestock or converted to ethanol. Much of it is traded as a commodity. Very little is eaten directly by people, and most of that is in the form of sweetener. However, not all the corn grown in the region follows the industrial model. To many Native Americans, corn is much more than a commodity. It is an important food source, but more than that, it is a living being that is intertwined with their culture and history.

The Oneida Nation in Wisconsin is working to preserve the open pollinated white flint corn that is traditional in their culture. They raise the corn both as a row crop in the field and together with beans and squash in a “Three Sisters Garden.” Both in the garden and in the field they have chosen to rely on organic growing methods. In the field they use tractors and mechanized equipment to plant and cultivate the crop, but they rely on hand labor to harvest and store the corn. The harvest is an opportunity for people in the community to work together and celebrate their connection to the land. The work of harvesting, sorting, and braiding the corn is mixed with conversation and traditional food. All ages participate, and people from outside the tribe are welcome to join.

Below is the statement from tsyunhekw^.

Mission Statement: Playing a pivotal role in the reintroduction of high quality, organically grown foods that will ensure a healthier and more fulfilling life for the On^yote?aka, and being the facilitators of positive dietary and nutritional change.

My name is Jeff Metoxen, and my position is manager for tsyunhekw^ (joon hey qwa), which is a culturally and community based agricultural program for the Oneida Nation. I would like to tell you a little about our program, tsyunhekw^ and what our responsibilities are toward our White Corn. The title of our program, tsyunhekw^, is from the Oneida language, and stands for Life Sustenance. For you to understand the role and responsibilities we have with our traditional Iroquoian White Corn we have to explain a portion of our Creation Story.

The beginning of our Mother Earth occurred when Sky Woman fell from a hole near the Tree of Life. When she was falling from her world, she grabbed at the sides of the ground near the tree and took with her seeds of various plant life. A number of birds saw her fall from the sky and came together to help her descend safely and placed her on the back of a large turtle. Life at that time was mostly birds and water animals, with no land in sight. They understood she needed more to survive in their world, so some of the animals dove deep into the water to bring clay up from the bottom. The clay was placed on the back of the turtle, which began to expand to form Turtle Island, and become part of Mother Earth. The seeds that Sky Women had brought with her began

to grow into the plants and herbal life needed for survival. Plants grown from those first seeds included Corn, Beans, and Squash, and became the Three Sisters for our people. They are the main providers for our sustenance. It is our tradition and responsibility to honor our sustainers.



It is our On[^]yote?aka (Oneida) Cultural Belief that when the humans were created, shukwaya?tisu (Creator) instructed them that all that was needed for a good life was readily available to them. They would want for nothing; there was water, food, medicines—everything needed to sustain them. All that was asked of the humans was to gather what was provided and give thanks.

Over time, we failed to provide this recognition and ignored our responsibilities. In time a Seneca prophet of the people named Handsome Lake, who shared his visions that were granted him by the creator, shared his discussions with the Three Sisters. He was preparing to leave this world and was asked by the Three Sisters to take them with him.

He wanted them to stay because the people would not survive without them. Handsome Lake knew the children would go hungry, and that everyone would have no food to live and strengthen their bodies. The Three Sisters wanted to leave this world because we were not recognizing them in our ceremonies and giving thanks for all that they provide. Handsome Lake knew this was true, but said he could not make that decision for them on leaving because it was the Creator who would decide. Handsome Lake asked them not to leave until he would talk to the people, and the Three Sisters agreed to wait and see what the people would do.

Handsome Lake explained to the people that they had forgotten their responsibilities, and that the Three Sisters were going to leave this world if the people continued in this way. The people recognized they had failed and began again to honor the Three Sisters in their ceremonies. During our ceremonies we open with our Thanksgiving address. At that time all of creation is listening to make sure that we mention them, and provide them proper recognition. The people included the Corn, Beans, and Squash, and they have continued to stay with us. We continue today in honoring all of creation, and we recognize the Three Sisters in our ceremonies.

As we care for the Three Sisters, we continue to learn how to accomplish this, and share that knowledge. Caring for the White Corn goes hand in hand with caring for and respecting our natural environment and all that it provides in return. It is our job to respect all that the Creator has offered, and we look at food as the natural medicines and health provided for us by the Creator.

As with every year, we began this season with a Tobacco Burning for the seed that we planted. The tobacco burning is a traditional way to honor and recognize our White Corn, including those Community members that are planting their corn, their gardens and the responsibility that we all have in caring for our sustainers.

The White Corn variety we use came from the Oneida Nation in New York in 1992. Each year we plant between 3 - 6 acres. The life cycle of our White Corn runs from May till October. We plant and cultivate the White Corn with modern equipment (Tractor/Seeder), and in accordance with our traditional ceremonies and the lunar cycle. We celebrate the Green Corn stage in August, with our Green Corn Ceremony, and we set the date for our Community Harvest and Husking Bee based on this Stage. During the Green Corn stage it is sweeter, milkier, and yellowish in color. It is the Corn that determines the dates for harvest and seed selection. We hold another Tobacco Burning for the seed selection, and all personnel at tsyunhekw[^] take part. We look for traits that will provide the strongest seed for the coming years, such as stalk strength, average height, one ear per stalk, and eight kernel rows. After husking, we make more than two hundred braids, each with sixty-five ears, and hang them to dry in the traditional manner. The rest is placed in storage racks in our greenhouse for the Winter season. Harvest and husking is a hands-on operation, and could not be accomplished without the help from our Community.

We will be holding our 13th Annual Community Harvest and Husking Bee in the Fall of 2006. It is our custom to harvest our sustenance by bringing the Community together to complete all of our responsibilities. During the Harvest and Husking Bee we share the knowledge of snapping, husking and braiding our White Corn. With community support the corn is hand harvested and braided to dry in the Oneida tradition. The entire program is involved during this time. We coordinate all efforts in harvesting the fields, and keeping everyone in a good mind and place. It has always been natural for us to share stories and laugh when we come together. It is usually at each other's expense, but it is all in humor. We provide meals during the harvest, and everyone is welcome.

Products from our White Corn include Raw Corn, Dehydrated Corn, Corn Soup, Corn Bread, and Flour. These products are processed at our Cannery, and are available at our Retail Store. Nutritional analysis completed on our Corn has shown a higher value of protein compared with other varieties of conventional corn. The Three Sisters is traditionally one of our primary sustainers, and the health benefits from all three provide many of our nutritional needs.

We face many challenges each year to grow these sustaining crops in a way that fulfills our cultural and spiritual responsibilities. We have to address many issues, such as cultivating, weed and pest control, harvesting, drying, storage, processing, and availability.

We are continually working on controlling the thistle that grows with our Corn, and in our other crop fields and pastures. We rely on research and try different techniques to deal with this issue. We plant our crop fields on a rotational basis. We are able to rotate for 3 to 4 years before we plant the White Corn in the same field. Cover crops of clover, legumes, and grasses are applied to the rest of the fields until the White Corn is scheduled to be planted again. They not only help to provide nutrients back to the soil, but provide hay for our cattle. Our organic certification requires annual testing, and the soil samples provide the basis for our Nutrient Management plan. Both our organic certification and our values place limits on what products and practices we can use to manage weeds and soil fertility. We continue to research traditional ways to care for the crops, land, and the animals by talking with our elders, and reviewing historical records.

Storing our White Corn is another ongoing challenge. We braid and hang the Corn in the traditional way for drying and storage, but we also use racks in our greenhouse to dry and store the additional corn. Mold is always an issue we face, and we are working to find solutions. Our White Corn has a high moisture content. Shelling does not begin until the corn has dried to a moisture content of 12 percent. Careful observation is required. Currently we hang the braided corn in an on-site Pole Building. In years past, our harvest was depleted by the Spring or Summer time. In 2003 we planted and harvested about 6 acres, which has provided us the best yield in recent history. Storage for this yield was another issue. We had to make sure we had enough space for drying

and conduct it in the proper way. We only provided a brief description of our White Corn responsibilities and would like to provide a little information on our overall program.



Tsyunhehkw[^] is an agricultural community and culturally based program of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Our agricultural component is located at 139 Riverdale Drive, on a certified organic 83-acre site. Our program is founded on self sustainability, and service for the Oneida Nation and the Community. Our entire operation and services are open to the public. We have three main components, Agriculture, Cannery and Retail. Our primary focus is on self-sustainability and food security. Our staff of 13 people works to meet our Community's needs and our goals. However, we could not accomplish this without the support and help of the Oneida Nation, our community and friends.

The Agriculture component is responsible for the heirloom White Corn, field crops and animal care, rotovating services, coordinating and facilitating educational hands-on workshops, and other outreach aspects. We also have a solar greenhouse and herb and berry garden areas. We maintain up to 35 grass-fed cattle, which includes our cow/calf operation and 25 acres of pastures. We have about 20 acres of crops planted on a rotational basis. We received organic certification in 2001/2002 from the Organic Crop Improvement Association for our White Corn, hay, pasture, pumpkin, and fruits and vegetables, (Our herb garden was certified in 2003). Our growing year starts in February, when we plant our vegetable and herb seedlings in the greenhouse. Every year we raise and process free range poultry and farm fresh eggs. We share our knowledge with the community through workshops on diverse topics, such as Three Sisters Garden, Productive Vegetable Gardening, Herb and Berry Workshops, and Holistic Health.

The Cannery operation is located at the Norbert Hill Center N7210 Seminary Road. They handle the processing of our White Corn for Corn Soup, Corn Bread, Corn Meal, Flour, and Dehydrated Corn. They also preserve apple products, and process jams/jellies, salsa, pickles, and other garden fresh fruits and vegetables. They work with the Horticulture personnel to make sure that the produce from our Organic Gardens becomes part of our products available to the Community. The Cannery also provides workshops on the process of preserving and uses of the Cannery Facility, with the goal that we all learn this process for our own benefit. A key area is to preserve and pass on the knowledge of how to prepare your own Corn Bread and Corn Soup. Another issue is finding new equipment for our facility. The majority of our equipment is from the late 70's and early 80's. We are also looking at a new location, a place where we can expand our services and availability to the community, and handle our increased storage and work space needs.

The Retail Store is located at Ridgeview Plaza, 3759 West Mason Drive. They assist customers with product selection and provide information on traditional uses of herbs and essential oils, research healthcare topics, and initiate our product development. Though our store is small, we maintain more than 1,500 different products for natural and holistic health care, naturally clean homes, pet care, and vitamin and mineral supplements and offer a selection of reading and reference materials on the above-mentioned products and services. We held our 4th annual open house in 2006, with great success. It provides us the opportunity to share our products and services with the Community, and showcase our location.

Our studies have shown that retail sales continue to increase since moving to this new site in 2003. Other services offered are a Brown Bag series, workshops held during the noon hour so that the public and employees can hear about natural and healthy approaches to our overall health in mind, body, and spirit. Samples of organic, fair-trade coffee and teas are available at the store. T-shirts and Sweatshirts are in stock in many colors and sizes, along with several pre-made Gift Baskets. The Store also offers the products the Community and our customer/clients need to address their overall health issues. With the strong demand for natural healthcare products, herbs, and essential oils, our current location provides us higher visibility, and ability to offer a variety to our customers/clients.

The Cannery was the foundation of our program. It was established through a grant in the 1970's to establish a food preservation program to benefit Tribal members and the surrounding community by teaching techniques for processing and preserving traditional foods. The growth of the Cannery's services and products led to the establishment of tsyunhekw[^]. The Self-Sustenance and Self-Sustainability program remains in practice today. We offer on-site tours and do presentations throughout the Oneida Nation, surrounding communities and outside the state. All personnel participate in these educational endeavors. All our employees must obtain and maintain a Temporary Food Handlers License through the Environmental Safety Department.

We cannot do justice to all the areas of tsyunhehkw[^] and its people, but I hope this description provides a brief picture of the relationships that we build through working together. We are constantly learning and do not take the approach that we have the answer. Our goal is self sufficiency and providing for our Nation and Community. Communication and cooperation are a vital part of this program and what we believe in and strive for. We work with the elders in the area, and other programs in the Oneida Nation. The Cultural Heritage Department, Oneida Museum, Conservation Department, Environmental Department and many others work with us toward completing and maintaining our responsibilities. We maintain a very good working relationship with our neighbors and Community. Recently one neighbor, a non-tribal land owner, decided not to have her field planted in order to reduce the risk of cross-pollinating our White Corn with modern corn hybrids. Many natural and organic growers in our area stay in touch with one another, and we all help where we can. I apologize to those people and entities I am forgetting to mention. I personally believe that none of us can complete our responsibilities without the help of one another.

Our program will continue to provide sustenance in a traditional manner. From the beginning of time, the Creation Story tells us that the medicines are placed here for our sustenance. It is our responsibility to honor and acknowledge these spirits, which encourages them to continue with their appointed responsibilities. We continue to include these medicines in our lives. Any questions we can help with please let us know. We look forward to hearing from you.

Jeff Metoxen, Manager

LOCATIONS:

Farm

139 Riverdale Drive
Oneida WI 54155
(920) 869 - 2718

Cannery

N7210 Seminary Road
Oneida, WI 54155
(920) 869 - 4379

Retail Store

Ridgeview Plaza Suite 8,
3759 West Mason
Oneida, WI 54155
(920) 497 - 5821