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# The People

The Iroquois call themselves *Haudenosaunee*, which means “people who live in the extended longhouse.” Their Algonquin enemies gave them the name *Iroqu*. In Algonquin, this word means “rattlesnakes.” European settlers used the word *Iroquois* to refer to this Aboriginal group.

Hundreds of years ago, five North American Aboriginal nations came together to create one of the world’s first democracies. This was known as the Iroquois Confederacy. This confederacy was formed by the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations around 1570. The Tuscarora joined the confederacy in 1722.

Each nation in the Iroquois Confederacy had its own culture, land, and traditions.



The confederacy maintained peace among its members. It also offered each nation help and protection from both warring European settlers and attacks from other Aboriginal groups. The Iroquois thought of the confederacy as an imaginary longhouse that reached from the Mohawk lands in the East to the Seneca lands in the West.



The Iroquois Confederacy has managed to keep many of its traditions alive today, including its dances.

The Mohawk originally lived in the state of New York, but many have also settled in the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario. The Mohawk were the first nation of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Oneida live in central New York, Wisconsin, and southern Ontario. The Oneida Nation was the smallest group in the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Onondaga originated near Syracuse, New York. Eventually, communities formed in southern Ontario as well.

Traditionally, the Cayuga lived along Cayuga Lake in New York. Over time, they spread out, with some moving north to Ontario.

The Seneca lived south of Lake Ontario, between Lake Erie and Seneca Lake, but some now live north, in Ontario. The Seneca Nation was the largest group in the Iroquois Confederacy.

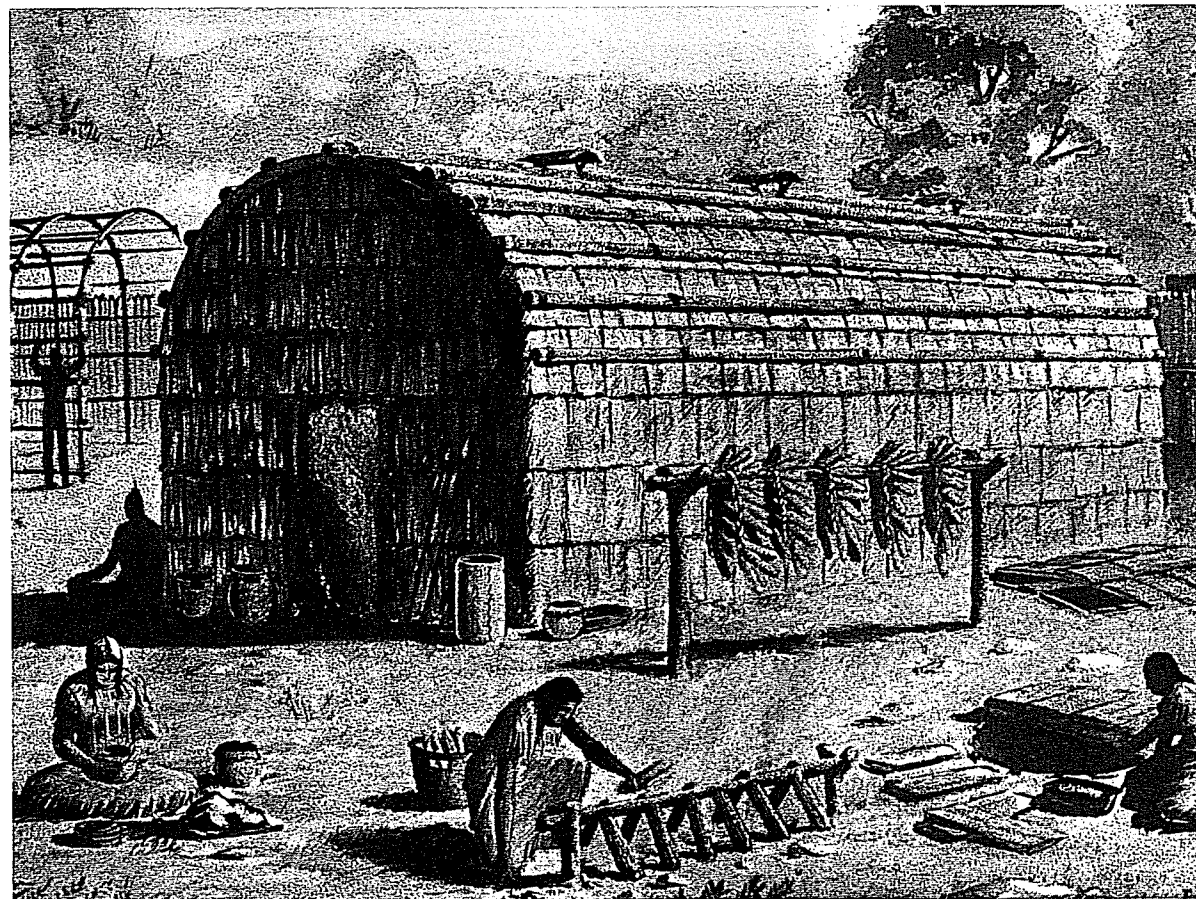
In the early 1700s, the Tuscarora migrated from North Carolina to New York. The Tuscarora joined the confederacy in 1722. While some remained in New York, other Tuscarora moved farther north into southern Ontario.

# Iroquois Homes

The longhouse was the center of Iroquois life. Longhouses were long, narrow buildings with arched roofs. Low porches covered the doorways, which were located at both ends of the longhouse.

To build a longhouse, men tied long wooden poles together to form arches. Then, they placed the poles lengthwise to connect and support the arches. Large shingles made of elm bark covered the entire structure.

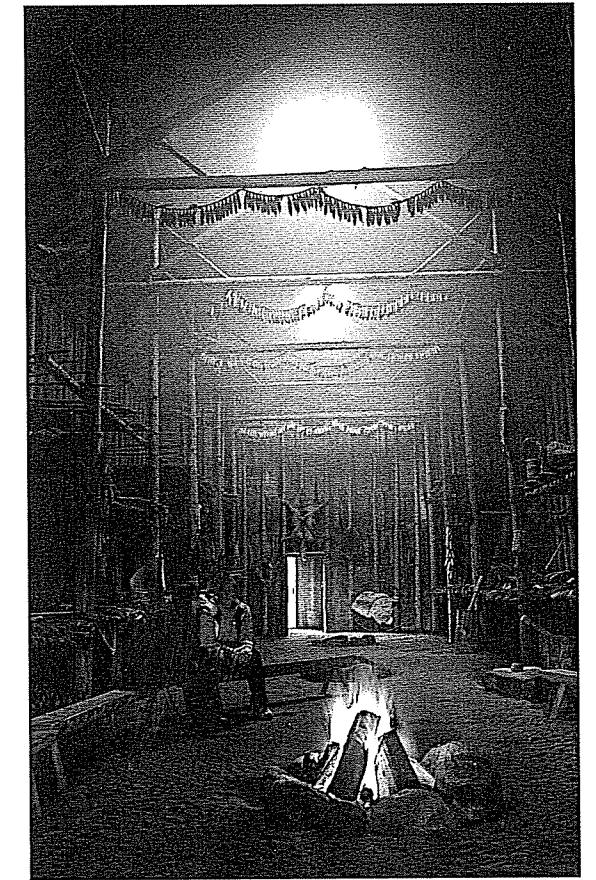
By the 1740s, many Iroquois lived in longhouses made from logs rather than bark.



A long aisle, about 3 metres wide, ran through the centre of the longhouse. Inside, the longhouse was divided into apartments. Each apartment was 6.1 metres long and housed two families. About 20 families lived in one longhouse. These families shared fires that were built in the centre of the aisle.

Longhouse dwellers used their space well. For example, families kept their belongings in storage closets. They neatly hung items, such as snowshoes, on walls. They hung corn and other foods from the ceiling to dry. The Iroquois built platforms along the interior walls of the longhouse. They used these platforms for sitting and sleeping. Mats and furs lined the longhouse walls, providing insulation from the cold. The Iroquois also covered themselves with mats and furs to keep warm.

Today, many Iroquois live in framed houses on reserve land. Some Iroquois farm the land, but most land remains in its natural state. Some Iroquois communities have built stores, schools, and banks.



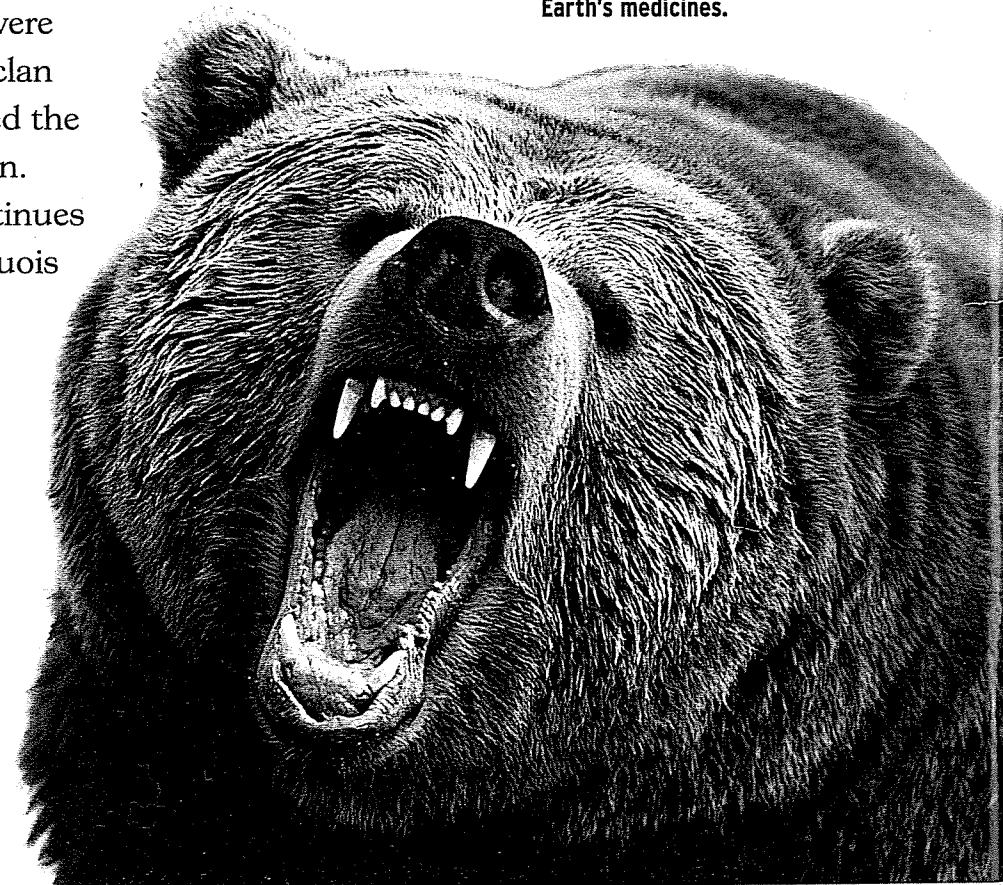
Longhouses were usually between 18 and 67 metres long. Some were as long as 122 metres. Most longhouses were 6.1 metres wide and 6.1 metres high.

# Iroquois Communities

Iroquois villages were organized under a **clan** system. These clans were **matrilineal**. An Iroquois village had a minimum of three clans, which were named after an animal or a bird. Each Iroquois nation had a Turtle, Wolf, and Bear clan.

Every clan had its own longhouse. Families of the same clan lived together in these longhouses. Clan members worked together and shared resources. The oldest woman in a clan was the clan mother. She selected the chief of the clan. The chief represented the clan at village and tribal **councils**. Chiefs were always men. The clan mother also named the children of the clan. This practice continues among many Iroquois families today.

Members of the Bear clan are known as the "Medicine People." They are the caretakers of the Earth's medicines.



Men and women had important jobs in the community. Men built longhouses. They made tools from stone, bone, and wood. They hunted animals, such as bear and deer. The men also fought wars and defended their villages from attackers. Women grew and preserved food. They cooked meals, made clothes, and cared for young children. Both men and women helped make decisions that affected their community.

Children were an important part of Iroquois life. Men and women taught children the skills they needed to survive as adults. Grandmothers and grandfathers told stories that taught Iroquois children values and history.



Senior members of the community teach Iroquois children to respect the land. Children learn how their actions will affect future generations.

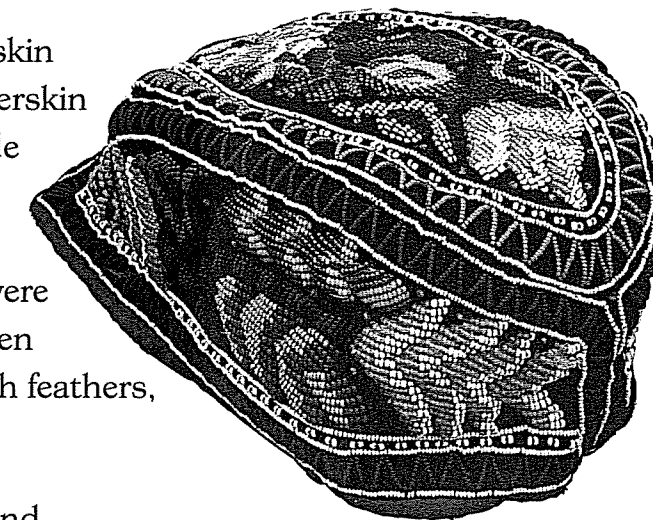
## Iroquois Clothing

Traditional Iroquois clothing was both useful and beautiful. Iroquois women made clothes from deerskin. They sewed the clothes with bone needles, using **sinew** as thread. They decorated the clothes with porcupine quills and beads made from shells. Popular beadwork designs included flowers, leaves, and clan symbols. Strawberries were a common design because they were the first fruit to bloom in the new year and they represented a new beginning.



Many Iroquois continue to wear traditional clothing that is decorated with porcupine quills or beadwork.

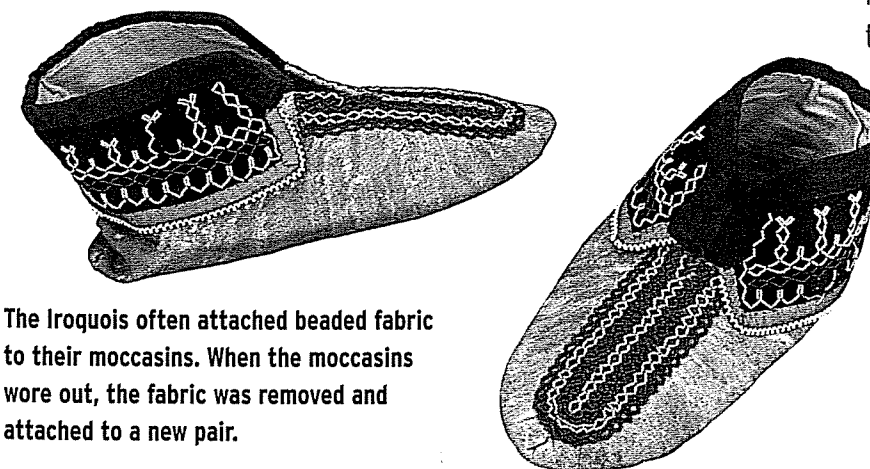
Iroquois men usually wore fringed deerskin shirts, but in hot weather, they wore deerskin **sashes** instead of shirts. They also made sashes by weaving plant fibres together. Men wore leggings and breechcloths to cover their lower bodies. These items were made of deerskin with fringed edges. Men often wore hats that were decorated with feathers, beads, and porcupine quills.



Floral designs are a common theme in Iroquois beadwork.

Women wore deerskin dresses, skirts, and leggings. Sometimes, they wore belts or sashes around their waists. Women also wore beaded headbands.

Both men and women wore deerskin **moccasins**. Iroquois moccasins were cuffed at the ankle. The cuff and the top of the moccasin were decorated with porcupine quills or shell beads. The Iroquois were also known to make shoes from braided cornhusks.



The Iroquois often attached beaded fabric to their moccasins. When the moccasins wore out, the fabric was removed and attached to a new pair.

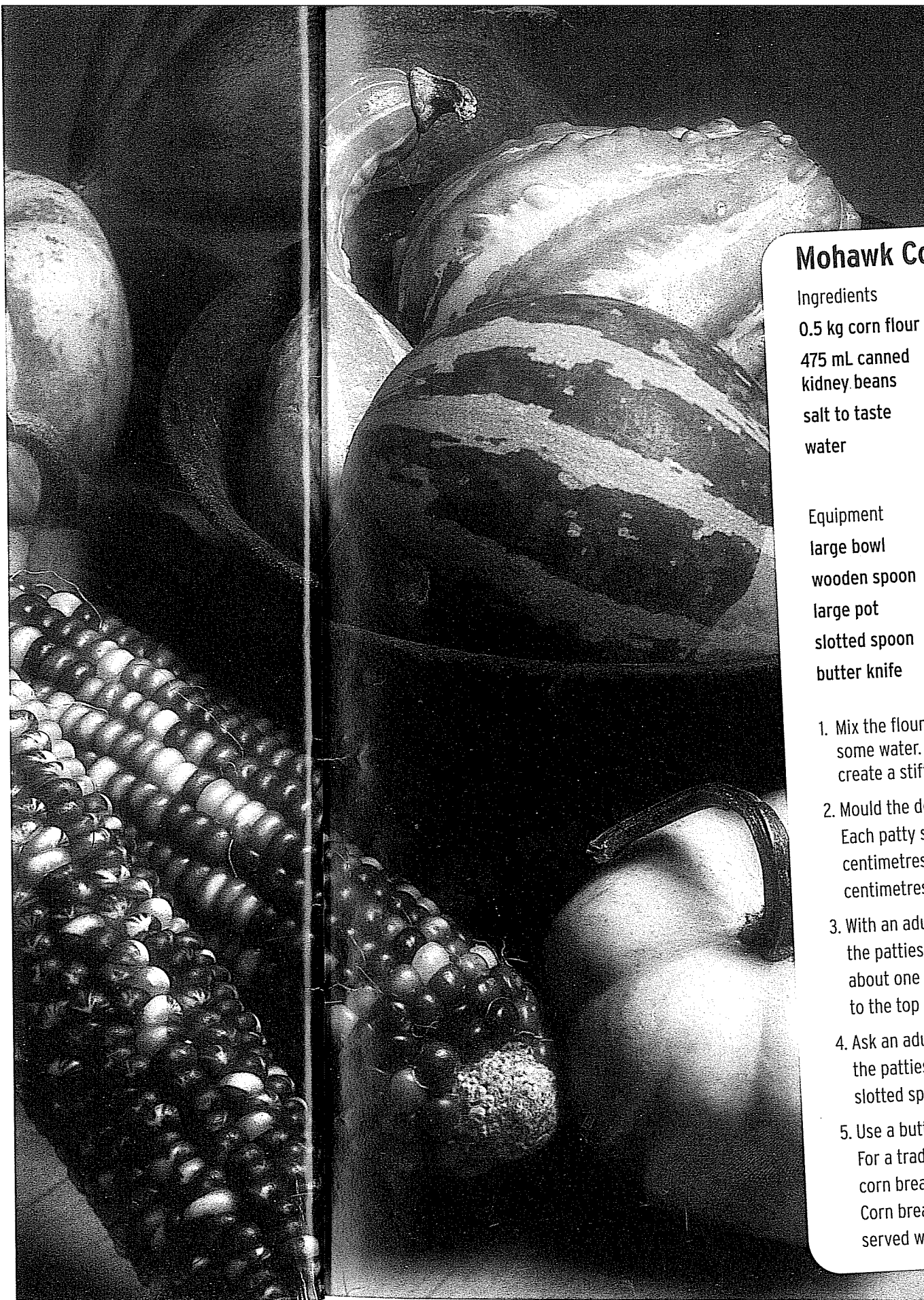
As the Iroquois began to trade with Europeans, they acquired materials such as cloth, glass beads, and ribbon. They incorporated these items into traditional clothing. Today, Iroquois people wear store-bought clothes. However, they still use **calico** to make traditional clothing, such as shirts, dresses, skirts, and sashes. They decorate these items with beads and silver **broaches**.

## Iroquois Food

The Iroquois diet consisted mainly of corn, beans, and squash. These foods were known as the Three Sisters. They were planted and eaten together. The women grew all of their crops in one field to promote plant growth. For example, tall cornstalks acted as poles to support bean vines. The bean plants nourished the soil. Low-lying squash plants kept the ground moist and prevented weeds from growing.

Women and girls preserved food for winter. They roasted and dried ears of corn, and ground some of this corn into cornmeal. They also smoked and dried meat and fish. In summer, the women stored fresh food in underground pits. The cool temperature in these pits kept food from rotting.

The Iroquois usually ate one meal a day. That meal was often soup made from meat and vegetables. **Venison** was one of the main meats the Iroquois ate. Iroquois men hunted bear, beaver, and moose, too. They caught fish using spears, hooks, and traps. Boys hunted small game, such as rabbits and birds.



## RECIPE

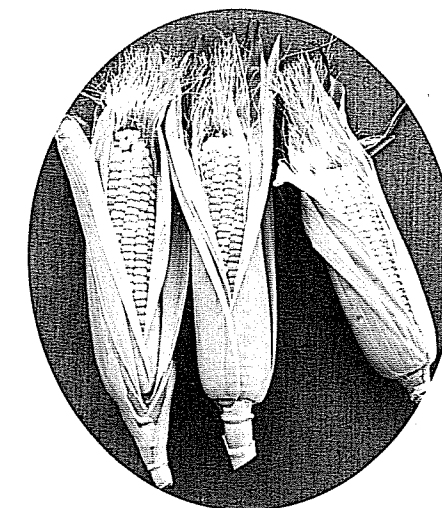
### Mohawk Corn Bread

#### Ingredients

0.5 kg corn flour  
475 mL canned kidney beans  
salt to taste  
water

#### Equipment

large bowl  
wooden spoon  
large pot  
slotted spoon  
butter knife



1. Mix the flour, beans, and salt with some water. Add enough water to create a stiff dough.
2. Mould the dough into round patties. Each patty should be about 15 centimetres wide and 5 centimetres thick.
3. With an adult's help, carefully place the patties in boiling water. After about one hour, the patties will rise to the top of the water.
4. Ask an adult to help you remove the patties from the water using a slotted spoon. Let the patties cool.
5. Use a butter knife to butter a patty. For a traditional meal, serve the corn bread patties with squash. Corn bread patties can also be served with maple syrup.

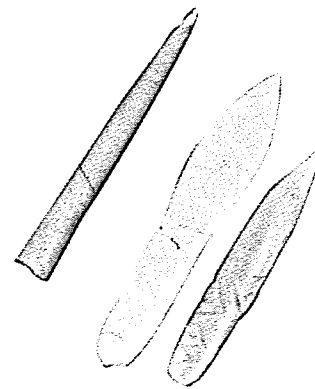
## Tools, Weapons, and Defence

The Iroquois used tools to hunt and fish. They also used tools to build longhouses and canoes, prepare food, and make clothing.

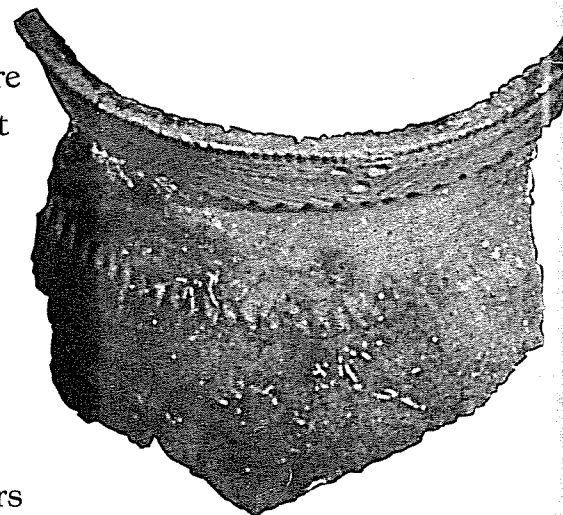
Iroquois building tools included axes, adzes, and chisels. Axe heads were made of stone, which was ground and polished against other stones to make it sharp. The axe head fit inside a wooden handle. An adze was a tool they used to chop down trees and shape wood. Like axes, adzes had stone heads and wooden handles. The Iroquois used stone or antler chisels to peel bark from logs.

Iroquois women used tools to grow and prepare food. They used pointed digging sticks to plant crops. They ground corn using a mortar and pestle. The mortar was made from a length of tree trunk that had a shallow dish carved in the top. The pestle was a heavy, blunt piece of wood.

Iroquois women needed many tools to make clothing. Women used stone and bone scrapers to remove flesh from animal hides. Bone tools called awls were used to punch holes for sewing. Bone needles drew sinew through the holes.



The Iroquois attached arrow points to straight sticks to make a sharp arrow.



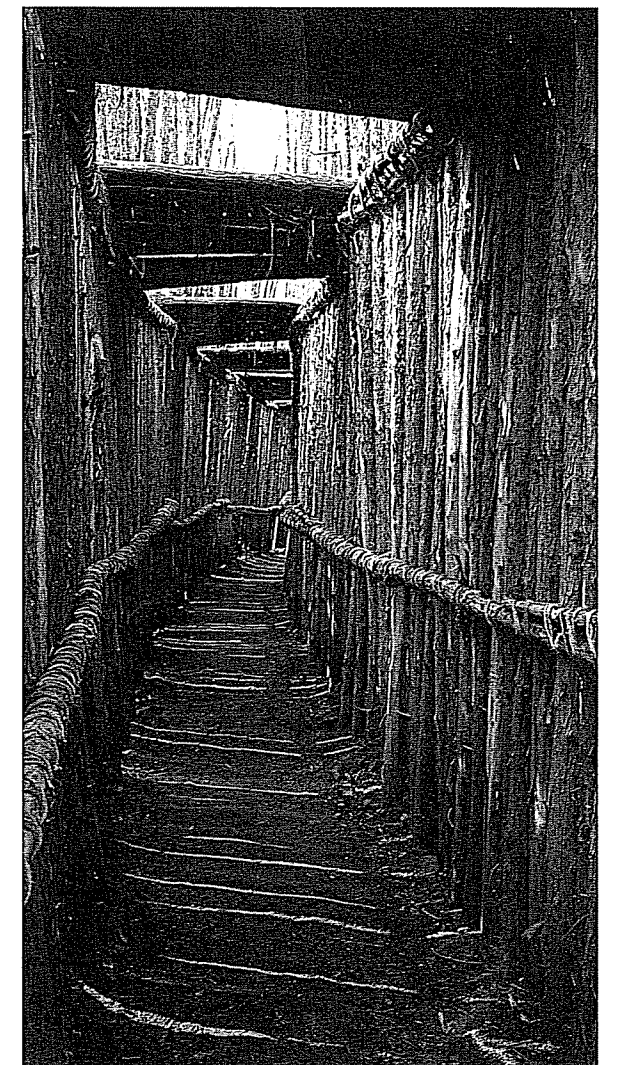
The remains of Iroquois cooking tools, such as pottery, help people learn about Iroquois life in the past.

Iroquois men hunted large and small game with bows and arrows. Arrowheads were made of flint. Flint is a stone that can be chipped to form a sharp point. The Iroquois also used a variety of traps made of wood, rawhide, and sinew to catch animals, birds, and fish.

The Iroquois used bows and arrows to fight wars. They also used war clubs, which were heavy wooden sticks with a round, knobby ball at one end. High fences made of pointed poles were another wartime tool that prevented attackers from reaching Iroquois villages. They called these fences palisades.

In the 1600s, the Iroquois began using guns for hunting and fighting. They acquired guns from European traders. The Europeans introduced other metal goods, such as knives and kettles, to the Iroquois, too.

While palisades kept enemies out of Iroquois villages, they also kept out wild animals and protected the village from wind and blowing snow.



# Iroquois Religion

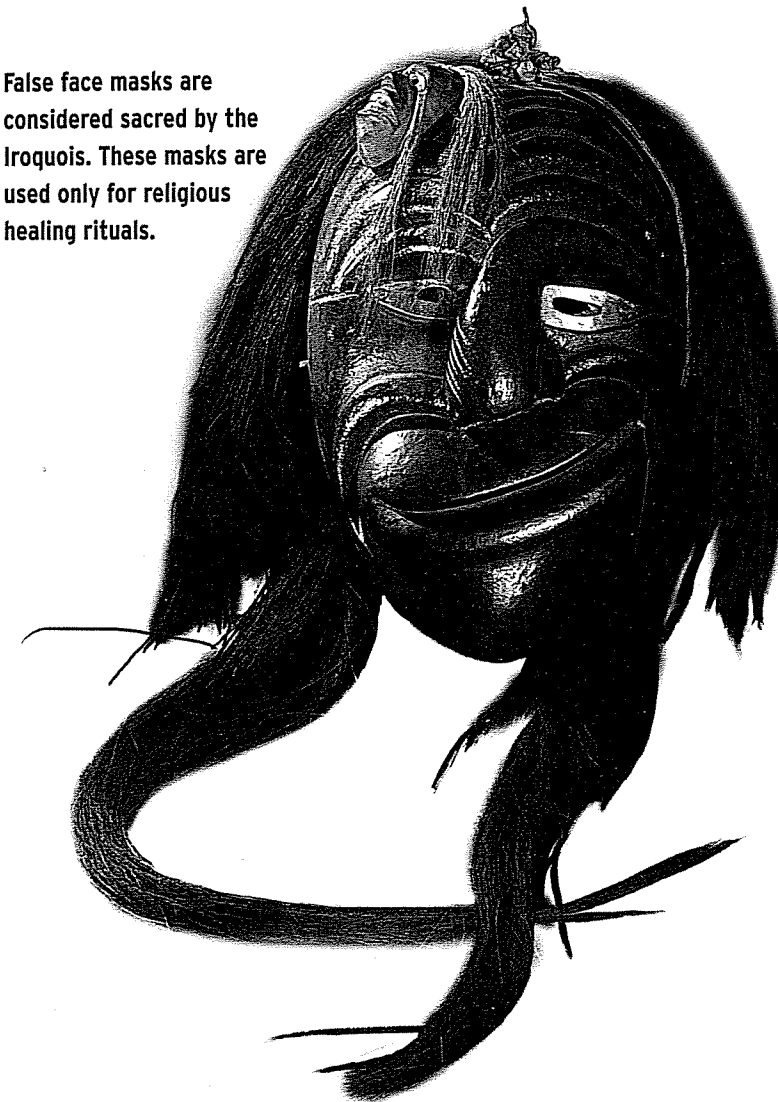
**R**eligion was an important part of traditional Iroquois life. Religious beliefs varied from nation to nation. The Iroquois believed that everything around them had a spirit. These spirits controlled the weather, crops, and animals. Most Iroquois believed in a powerful creator named the Great Spirit. The Iroquois performed several rituals and ceremonies to give thanks to the Great Spirit. The Iroquois believed the Great Spirit had an evil twin brother who caused mischief and suffering.

Music and dance was an important part of Iroquois religion. The Iroquois performed sacred dances to give thanks to the Great Spirit.



Medicine and religion were closely tied. Medicine societies were groups of people who performed special rituals to heal the sick and bring well-being to the nation. Medicine rituals often involved singing and dancing. During some rituals, the participants wore masks made of wood or cornhusks. The Iroquois believed these masks had great spiritual power.

False face masks are considered sacred by the Iroquois. These masks are used only for religious healing rituals.



Before the world was created, Sky Woman and Sky Man lived on an island in the sky. One day, Sky Man uprooted a tree, leaving a hole in the island. Sky Woman fell through the hole. She fell toward Earth, which was covered with water. As she fell, the animals on Earth tried to save her. To ease her fall, two birds caught Sky Woman on their backs. A muskrat dove to the bottom of the water to get mud to soften her landing. He placed the mud on a turtle's back. Soon, there was so much mud on the turtle's back that the continent of North America formed. For this reason, the Iroquois call North America Turtle Island.

One day, Sky Woman gave birth to twin boys. One twin was good, and the other was evil. The good twin was worshiped as the Great Spirit. He created all that is good on Earth. The evil twin created all that is bad.

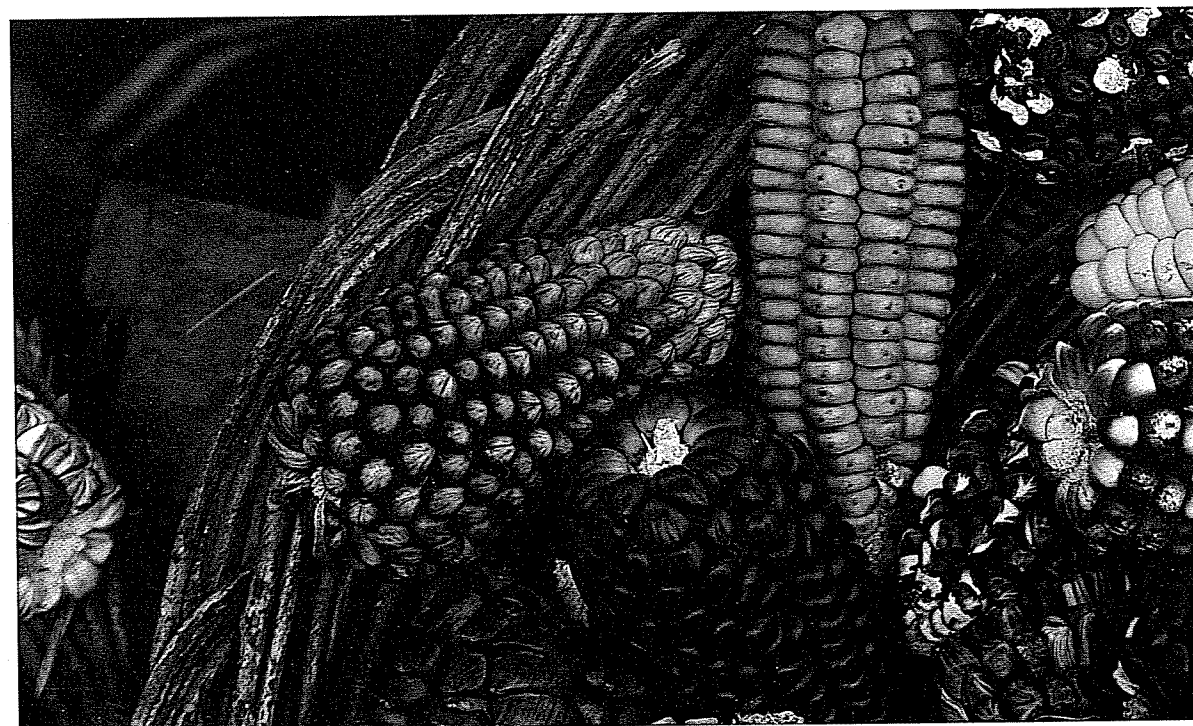


## Ceremonies and Celebrations

The Iroquois often gathered to celebrate and give thanks for the gifts of the Great Spirit. Ceremonies honoured different harvests and events throughout the year.

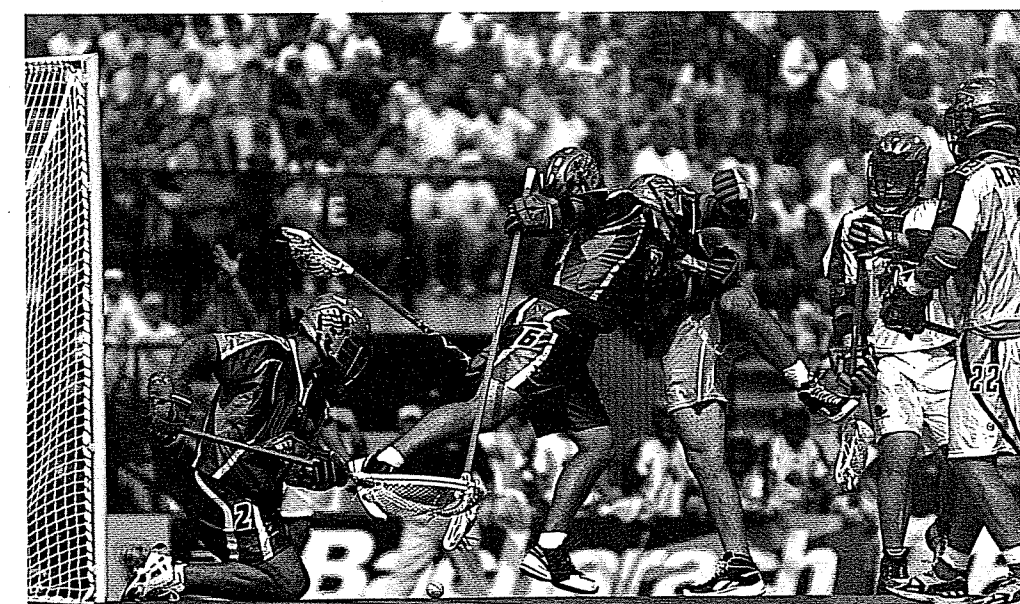
One of the many Iroquois celebrations was the Green Corn Festival. This festival was celebrated every year at the beginning of the corn harvest in August. The Green Corn Festival lasted several days. There were speeches of thanks and offerings of tobacco to the Great Spirit. There were also dances, feasts, and games. The Iroquois celebrated the end of the corn harvest with the Harvest Festival.

The Iroquois would only eat some of the corn at the Green Corn Festival. The rest of the crop would be harvested and dried for the winter.



The largest Iroquois celebration was the Midwinter Festival. The six-day festival was celebrated at the beginning of the new year to give thanks to the Great Spirit. People prepared for the festival by cleaning their longhouses. They also talked about their dreams and how those dreams had guided them through the past year. When the festival began, people visited each other's longhouses to stir the fire ashes inside. Stirring the ashes was symbolic of renewal. They scattered the fire of the old year before the new fires were lit. This festival featured feasts, dances, and games.

Other celebrations included the Maple Festival, the Planting Ceremony, the Thunder Ceremony, and the Strawberry Festival.



Lacrosse is one of the fastest growing team sports in the United States and Europe.

When they were not working or celebrating, the Iroquois enjoyed playing games. They played the Bowl Game using a bowl filled with six peach stones. The stones were painted black on one side. Players bet whether the dark or light sides of the stones would face upward when the bowl was banged on the ground. The Iroquois also enjoyed sports such as lacrosse and stickball. Another popular sport was Snow Snake. In this game, players competed to see who could slide a long stick farthest across the snow.

# Language and Storytelling

The languages of all six Iroquois nations belong to the Iroquoian language family. These languages are similar, but they are not the same. The Iroquois had no written language. They used images to record history. They wove these images onto beaded wampum belts.

Iroquoian languages were very expressive. Gifted speakers gained respect for their wit and ability to persuade others. Clan mothers selected chiefs based on their speaking skills. In the Iroquois Confederacy, chiefs of the six nations had to agree unanimously on all decisions. Chiefs would make speeches to convince other chiefs to support their decisions.

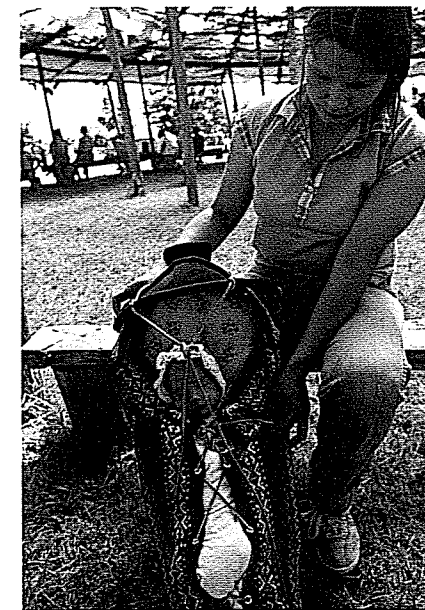


Wampum was used to record many important events. The founding of the Iroquois Confederacy was even recorded with wampum.

Storytelling was an important activity in Iroquois culture. When families gathered around longhouse fires, elders told stories. Some stories explained the history of the Iroquois Confederacy. Other stories were about the creation of the natural world. Some stories demonstrated the difference between good and bad behaviour.

Today, many Iroquois are trying to preserve their languages. Beginning in the 1800s, the Canadian government sent Aboriginal children to residential schools. Students learned to speak English at these schools. They were not allowed to speak their own languages. As a result, several generations of Iroquois children did not learn to speak their own language. Today, Iroquois children are no longer sent to residential schools to learn English. Many Iroquois are now learning the Iroquoian languages to preserve this part of their culture.

Iroquois children encounter the stories and traditions of their people from an early age.



## MONTHS

In the Mohawk language, the names of months are descriptive. They reflect the weather and the agricultural cycle.

**January Tsiiothohrko:wa**  
Very Cold Moon

**February Enniska**  
Mid-winter Moon

**March Ennisko:wa**  
Sugar Moon

**April Onerahtokha**  
Fishing Moon

**May Onerahtohko:wa**  
Planting Moon

**June Ohiaraha**  
Strawberry Moon

**July Ohiarihko:wa**  
Blueberry (Green Bean) Moon

**August Seskeha**  
Green Corn Moon

**September Seskehko:wa**  
Freshness Moon

**October Kentenaha**  
Harvest Moon

**November Kentenko:wa**  
Hunting Moon

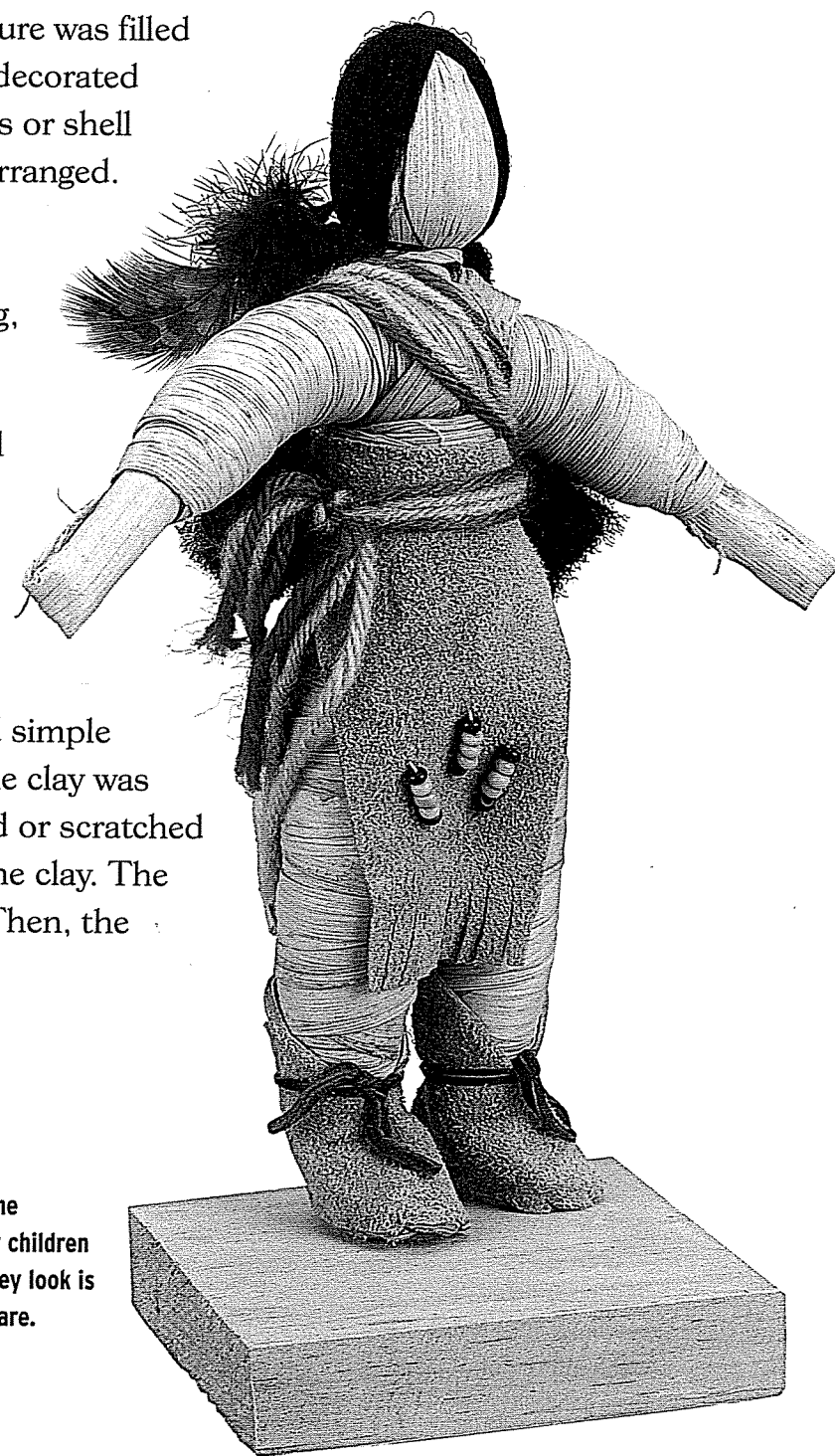
**December Tsiiothohrha**  
Cold Moon

## Iroquois Art

**T**raditional Iroquois culture was filled with art. The Iroquois decorated clothing with porcupine quills or shell beads that were beautifully arranged. Geometric patterns were woven into baskets. They used fine clay pots for storing, cooking, and serving food.

Iroquois women used special techniques to make pots. First, the potter ensured the clay was clean. Then, she added crushed rocks to harden the clay. Iroquois women used their hands and simple tools to shape pots. While the clay was still damp, the potter pressed or scratched designs onto the surface of the clay. The pots were dried in the Sun. Then, the pots were baked in a fire.

Iroquois mothers would give the faceless cornhusk doll to their children to teach them that the way they look is not as important as who they are.



Art also had a spiritual role in Iroquois life. Men carved elaborate masks for the False Face Society. The False Face Society used masks as part of a ritual to cure illnesses. The masks were carved on living trees. Once complete, the masks were cut from the tree. These masks were sacred objects.



Today, some Iroquois create art to preserve their culture. Some also earn their income by selling their art. Iroquois beadwork has always been admired. Beadworkers have adapted their work over time. Since the 1800s, Iroquois women have beaded souvenir items to sell to tourists. Today, Iroquois beadwork is displayed in galleries and private collections. Iroquois women sell their art at powwows, souvenir shops, and on the Internet.

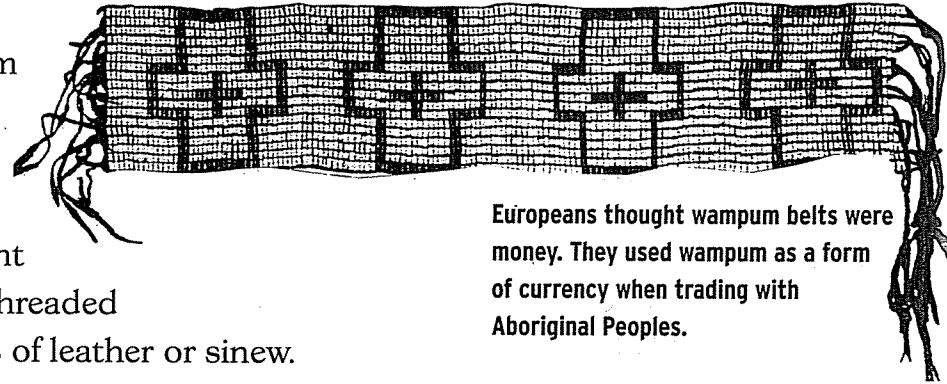
New members of the False Face Society would walk through the woods until they were spoken to by the spirit of a tree. The new member would then build a fire, sprinkle tobacco, and strip a section of the bark from the tree before carving the mask.

# Wampum

The wampum belt has spiritual meaning for the Iroquois. Wampum belts are made by weaving strings of white and purple shell beads into a long strip. The white beads represent peace and harmony. The purple beads symbolize hostility and destruction. The Iroquois used shell beads to create simple shapes. These shapes told stories. Long ago, the Iroquois used wampum belts to record important events or send messages.

Women wove wampum belts by hand and on small looms. They strung the beads onto thread made from plant fibre. They wove the threaded beads onto long strips of leather or sinew.

Wampum belts had many uses. They were used to invite chiefs to councils. Wampum belts were also traded and given as gifts. A man's family would give a wampum belt to the family of the woman he wanted to marry. If the woman's family accepted the belt, the couple was engaged.



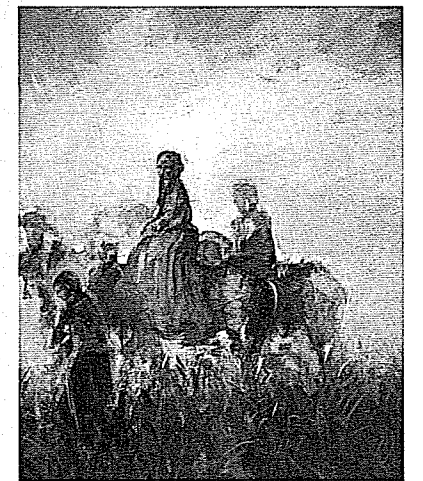
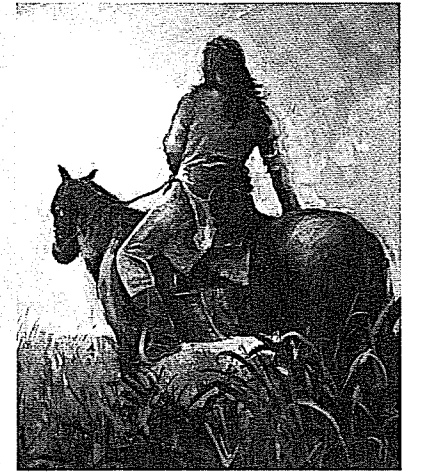
Europeans thought wampum belts were money. They used wampum as a form of currency when trading with Aboriginal Peoples.

# MODERN ARTIST

## Tom Hill

Tom Hill is a multi-talented Iroquois artist. Over the course of his life, he has worked as a creative artist, curator, art historian, filmmaker, potter, and actor. Tom was raised on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. At age 21, he began studying at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. Three years later, he was commissioned to create a ceramic mural for the outside of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo '67, in Montreal. The mural was called "Tree of Peace." Following Expo '67, Tom decided to continue learning about art, especially its administrative side. He became the first Aboriginal intern at the National Gallery of Canada, where he trained to become a curator and exhibition designer. At the end of his internship, he became the director of cultural affairs with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. He held this position for 10 years, during which time he worked to develop and improve the visibility of Canada's Aboriginal artists.

Tom continued to work as an artist as well. His work during this time included the *Methical Indian Series*. These ink drawings explored the oral traditions of the Iroquois and the principles communicated through them. Through works such as *Allegory to MGM*, Tom raised questions about the **stereotypes** associated with Aboriginal Peoples. In 1982, Tom became the director of Brantford's Woodland Cultural Centre. Here, he continued to promote Aboriginal art while also working on art of his own. He has also collaborated with other artists to create art that explores the relationships humans have with animals and nature. In 2004, Tom Hill was awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.



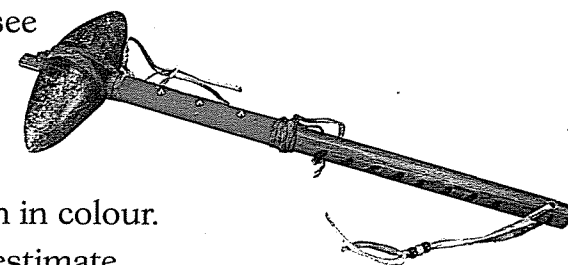
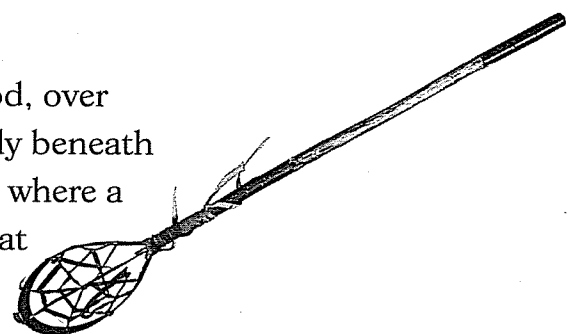
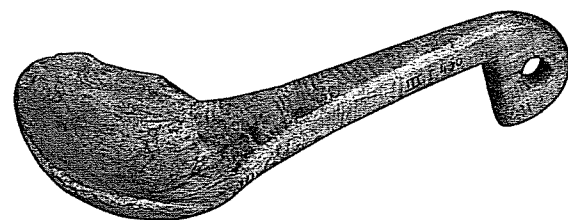
Tom's *Allegory to MGM* explores how the movie industry has portrayed Aboriginal Peoples.

# Studying the Past

**A**rchaeologists must search carefully to find traces of Iroquois villages. In doing so, they have found remains of 600-year-old Iroquois villages. Iroquois artifacts are some of the hardest to find. Unlike other Aboriginal Peoples, the Iroquois often used materials from plants and animals, which decay over time.

Since Iroquois longhouses were made of wood, over time, they would rot away. By looking carefully beneath the surface of the soil, archaeologists can see where a longhouse once stood. The wooden posts that supported the longhouse left round stains in the dirt. These stains are called post moulds. By examining post moulds, archaeologists can tell the size of the longhouse. They can also see where apartments and storage areas were located. Archaeologists can see where fires were built inside the longhouse. The soil where the hearth was located appears reddish in colour. By counting the hearths, archaeologists can estimate how many people lived in the longhouse.

Archaeologists read the writings of Europeans who visited longhouses. Some explorers kept detailed notes about Iroquois life.



Artifacts, such as ladles, lacrosse sticks, and clubs, help archaeologists determine how the Iroquois lived, played, and worked in the past.

# TIMELINE

## Late Woodland Period 1500 BC–AD 1300

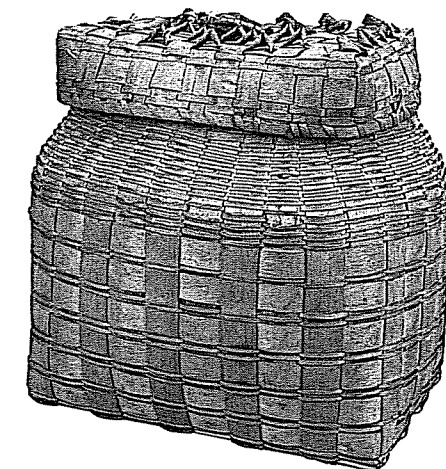
Aboriginal Peoples in the Upper Great Lakes region begin making pottery. Iroquois culture begins to develop. Iroquois begin growing corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers.

## Contact Period 1500–1600

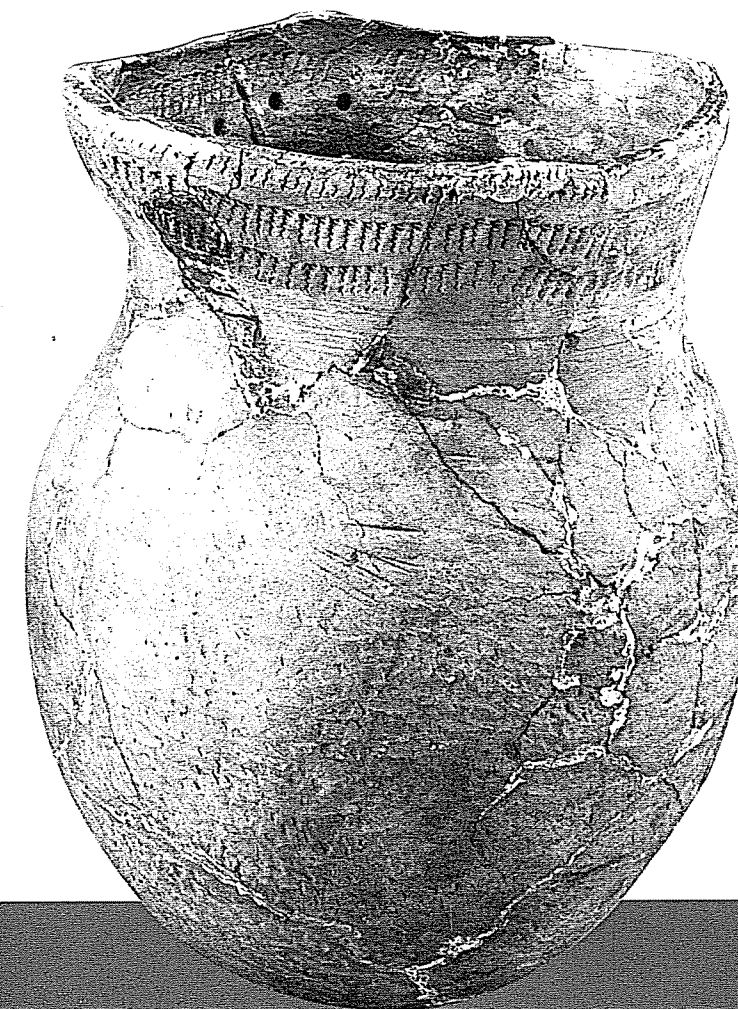
The founding of the Iroquois Confederacy occurs.

## Modern Period 1600–present

The traditional way of life declines. Many Iroquois settle in urban areas, such as Montreal and Toronto.



The Iroquois used baskets for storage and food preparation.



Iroquois potters often used dark clay to make traditional shapes.

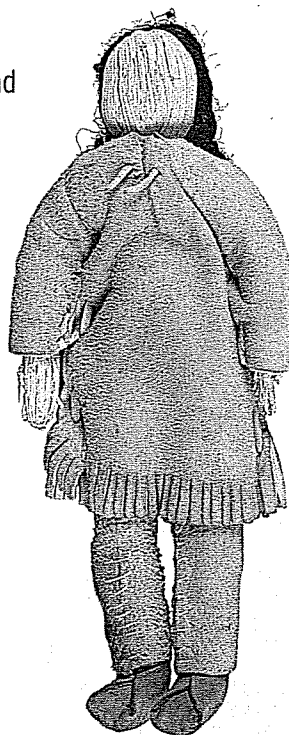
## Make a Cornhusk Doll

Iroquois mothers made cornhusk dolls for their children. They dressed these dolls in traditional clothing. Corn silk was used to make soft hair for the dolls. When European settlers arrived in the Canada, Aboriginal Peoples taught them how to make cornhusk dolls.

### Materials

12 cornhusks	Scissors
Water	String

1. Soak the cornhusks in water until they are soft.
2. Arrange four cornhusks in layers. Place one cornhusk on the bottom. Place two cornhusks side-by-side in the centre. Place one cornhusk the top. The pointy end of the cornhusk should be facing down.
3. Tie the four cornhusks together about 5 centimetres from the top.
4. Use scissors to round the straight edges at the top of the cornhusks.
5. Turn the cornhusk bundle upside down. Pull the long husks over the trimmed edges.
6. Tie the end with string to form a ball. This is the doll's head.
7. Roll a cornhusk to form a narrow tube. This is the doll's arms. Tie the ends to form hands.
8. Place the arms between the cornhusks under the doll's head.
9. Tie the hanging cornhusks to make the doll's waist.
10. Make shoulders by draping a cornhusk behind the neck and crisscrossing the ends over the waist.
11. Arrange six cornhusks, flat side up, around the doll's waist to form a skirt. Tie the skirt and shoulders with string. You can also divide the skirt in two and tie string at the knees and ankles to make legs.



## Further Reading

*The Iroquois* by Linda Bjornlund (Lucent Books, Inc., 2001) is part of the Indigenous Peoples of North America series. This book describes the traditional culture, religion, and history of the Iroquois.

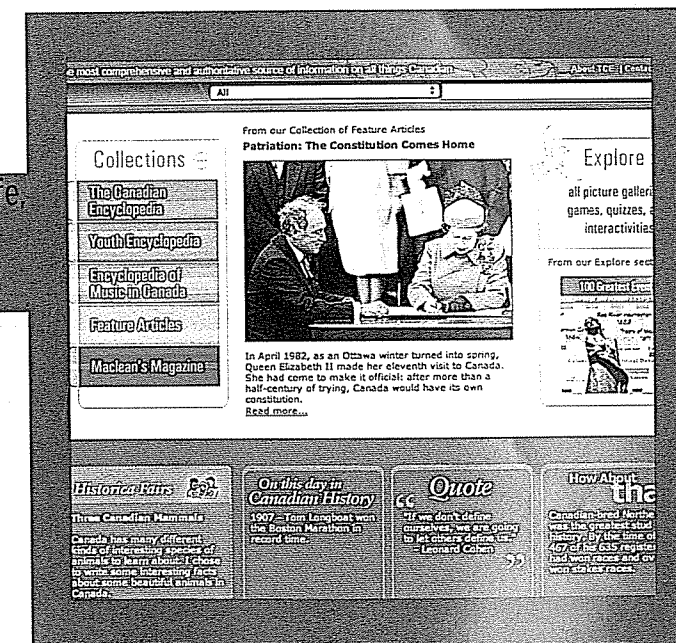
*People of the Dancing Sky: The Iroquois Way* by Myron Zabol and Lorre Jensen (Stoddart, 2000) is a book of photographs. It shows Iroquois culture.

## Websites

To learn more about the Iroquois way of life, navigate to the Canadian Encyclopedia at [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com)

Listen to traditional Iroquois songs at [www.ohwejagehka.com/songs.htm](http://www.ohwejagehka.com/songs.htm).

To read the Constitution of the Iroquois Nations, visit [www.constitution.org/cons/iroquois.htm](http://www.constitution.org/cons/iroquois.htm).



# GLOSSARY

# INDEX

**Algonquin:** having to do with the Algonquin peoples, traditional enemies of the Iroquois

**archaeologists:** scientists who study objects from the past to learn about people who lived long ago

**broaches:** large, decorative pins

**calico:** a heavy, brightly coloured cloth

**clan:** a group of families related to each other

**confederacy:** a union or alliance of different groups

**councils:** meetings where people advise on, discuss, or organize something

**democracies:** governments in which decisions are made by the people or their chosen representatives

**lacrosse:** a sport played by throwing and catching a ball in a hand-held net

**longhouse:** a long, narrow house made of wood and bark

**looms:** tools used to make thread or yarn into cloth by weaving strands together

**matrilineal:** kinship that is traced through the mother's lines

**moccasins:** soft leather footwear that resembles slippers

**reserve:** land set aside for First Nations groups by the Canadian government

**residential schools:** schools where Aboriginal children were sent to live and learn

**sashes:** strips of cloth or hide worn over one shoulder and fastened at the waist

**sinew:** tough fibre that joins muscle to bone

**stereotypes:** oversimplified mental pictures of groups of people

**venison:** deer meat

**wampum:** beads made from polished shells that had spiritual significance with many First Nations groups

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