
Gourds On The Go - A Historical Perspective

For the last 16 or 17 years, I've been actively involved with a Native American group, the purpose of which is to teach and preserve their arts, crafts and life style. This organization is now named NCGLNAC, meaning, National Center for Great Lakes Native American Culture. We meet for week-long Spring and Summer cultural arts classes with many and various Tradition Bearers, whose job it is to teach those interested in their own specific traditional craft. Some of these are: porcupine quill-work, several styles of beading, (some of those on birch bark or leather), flint-knapping, bone and stone caving, copper and silver work, leatherwork, elm bark and black ash baskets, cedar flute making, finger-weaving, scrimshaw, clay pottery, plant uses and dyes, gourd rattles, drums and dippers, and gourd storage containers. Many campfires, meals and foods are traditional. We've even been working on a dugout canoe and learned how to scrape and cure a buffalo hide.

We have students and teachers from several other states and they are of many cultures, tribes and interests, and we often discuss traditions while working and learning during classes.

Uses for gourds in the Native American world would have been almost anything imaginable, such as vessels of storage, with or without lids. They could be all sizes for different seeds and grains etc. They were probably cleaned out, using flint scrapers and also a sandpaper type reed, then lined with bees wax or bear grease for liquids or foods. They were used for plates, bowls, dippers, canteens and eating utensils. Depending on the area and the size and

shape of different gourds that were available, they probably invented drums, rattles and rhythm instruments for their dancing. The Kiowa and others, have a "Gourd Dance" celebration and ceremony. Perhaps they made a flute or horn from gourd necks, with only a few tone variations. And I can't imagine gourds not being used for masks, as the shape was already there and ready for design.

There are study classes and lectures by noted educators, which are held throughout the year, some at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, but most are held at Portland Indiana, where we have almost 30 acres including prairie lands, wetlands, a pond, trails and mature and immature woodlands. We learn of Native American origins and beliefs and honor in families and other tribal groups. There are often pow-wow singers, dancers and drums.

When I give a gourd class, it is done in connection with the possible uses and decoration of the gourd, and I try to cover everything from seed and growing to harvest, cleaning, drying and design, with some emphasis on preservation. The gourd drum has been a favorite through the years, although it is somewhat challenging. The class this session, made large lidded gourd containers and were told about the historic uses of gourds by Native peoples.

I'm already looking forward to the next gourding activity with this group, which is the Fall Friendship Fire in October.

by Carolyn Rushton

Gourds In Bygone Days!

It seems like we have had several articles on the history of gourds lately. Every one seems interested in their origin and how they came about and that they seem to have been a major part of every ancient society.

We are interested in anything that YOU may have in the way of history or gourds, either traditional

knowledge as in the article above, or if you know of books that may be appropriate we will list them in the Tendril.

If you have ideas on how to present this history to our members and the public we would also be interested in talking with you and discuss your ideas.

Jesse