

*371.975
8516
V.31
C.1

OREGON STATE LIBRARY

APR 24 1930

CHEMAWA AMERICAN

OREGON
COLLECTION

Printed at Chemawa, Oregon, and Devoted to the Interests of Indian Education

Vol. XXXI

Wednesday, Apr. 23, 1930

No. 32

A STRING OF WAMPUM

It is a common failing with the vast majority to accept without question names, dates, things and statements in general, and often we go for years with a very hazy mental picture of a very common thing that we see every day. For instance, "Wampum" is a very common word with many of us, but how many could give even a "half-way" definition of the word? Some time ago Emily Southwell Thayer, writing in *Kit-Kat*, gave a most interesting article on this subject, as follows:

The use of wampum reaches back to a remote period on this continent. It was an original Indian notion which prevailed among the Iroquois, consisting of a fresh water spiral shell called in the Seneca dialect, *Otekoa*, the name which has been bestowed upon the modern wampum. A full string is usually three feet long and contains twelve strands; the beads when sold are reckoned at one-half cent a bead and have been used among the Indians east of the Rocky mountains since the whites first had dealings with them. Wampum was first found to be made of the white and purple parts of clam shells, threaded either on vegetable fibre or deer sinews, and long strings were some times made of the bark of the slippery elm tree.

Having a fixed value, wampum was recognized as a regular aboriginal currency among Eastern tribes, as well as early colonists who, by various governmental enactments gave them legal value in comparison with English and Dutch coins then in circulation. The white wampum is the Iroquois emblem of purity and of faith and peace. When a chief mourned the death of a chief he wore strings of black wampum.

No technical statement of the exact method employed by the natives in the manufacture of wampum is available. It was wrought largely by the women from the thick blue portion of the shell and the process, though simple, required a skill obtained only by long practice. The bits of shell were cylindrical in form, one-eighth to three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter and one-eighth to seven-sixteenths of an inch in length.

Perhaps the most important use of wampum was in the symbolic record belt and strings which were the stamps of authority in every intertribal transaction. The famous belt used in the treaty between William Penn and the Indians is now in the rooms of the Penn Historical Society. It was given to its first white

owner as a solemn token that they would keep their pledge. Such belts had the beads arranged in symbolic figures more or less suggestive of the transaction thus ratified. The Penn belt shows in the center two figures clasping hands; one wears a hat the other does not. This shows one was a white man, the other an Indian. Others of interest are the Cherokee belt attesting peace made with the Iroquois, before the Revolutionary war, and the Iroquois belts which are preserved in the archives of New York State at Albany.

Smaller belts for chiefs were woven with diamond-shaped figures in the center worked in white beads. These were called peace belts. The women also made themselves bracelets and neck chains. The old myths of years ago are repeated in Indian homes, and many of the stories, like those told in the poem of *Hiawatha*, are familiar to little children in Western tepees. *Hiawatha the Wise* we know was an Iroquois hero and the legend of his travels and how he was the first to make wampum is charming. We find *Hiawatha* starting on his journey to the arrow-maker—

"From the lodge went *Hiawatha*
Dressed for travel, armed for hunting,
Dressed in deerskin shirt and leggins
Richly wrought with quills and wampum."

It was probably due to the genius of *Hiawatha* that we have the invention of the wampum belt as his name implies. *Hay-un-watha*, maker of belts.

The Aztecs or Mexican Indians had a serpent god. The Luni Lannape or Delaware Indians had stick records to tell that the country of the Great Serpent was conquered little by little. Mounds are themselves the unsolved record of a great people. No Indian legends or histories have ever explained the meaning of those heaps of earth, but the wampum belt tells its story by the pictures upon it. There is a string of wampum, hand wrought of pure white beads, which is treasured and possesses an additional interest because it was given as a pledge of love and fidelity and once belonged to the famous Chief Logan. About 20 years ago, a little English maiden wandered away from camp and was lost on the shores of Lake Champlain. An Indian boy was sent in search of her and, when he found her, he threw a string of wampum on her and said:

"Like my great Chief Logan, whose descendant I am, I capture you with my *Ote-Ko-a*."