A Half-Century Of Powwows

By Karen Kramer

WHEN THE Shinnecock nation holds its annual powwow on its reservation in Southampton this weekend, a milestone will be celebrated: the 50th anniversary of powwows on this same site.

Like American Indian powwows across the country, the Shinnecock powwow has always been a time for the tribe to get together and reaffirm its members' culture. It is a chance for different tribes to meet with each other, and also an opportunity for the public to see a small slice of American Indian life.

"A powwow was traditionally a gathering of the chieftains," said Lance Gumbs, chairman of the 1996 Shinnecock powwow committee and a tribal council member. "The people would converse about what had happened in the past year, the celebration of life, and the plans for the future. It was really a spiritual gathering, and to a certain extent it still is — even though now it's open to the public."

What the public will experience over the three-day Labor Day weekend event is performances of native song and dance, drumming and storytelling, craft exhibitions such as bone carving and beadwork, and a wide array of native foods. Dance and drum contests take place, and American Indian participants compete for prizes in such categories as the shawl dance, traditional dance and fancy dance. Women, men and children are in separate categories and compete against each other for up to $20,000 in prize money.

As soon as one yearly powwow ends, work begins for the next one — so the Shinnecock have been preparing since last September. And in recent days, men have been going out daily to cut saplings to make poles for the tepees, and people have been busy shucking corn and opening clams for the chowder and clam pies.

"The Shinnecock are a sea people," says Gumbs, "so we do a lot of sea dishes." Different nations attending the powwow will be bringing their native dishes, such as Navaho tacos, alligator or buffalo burgers. Hot dogs will be available, also.

The powwow is a way for members of the tribe who have left the land for schooling or employment to reunite, to see family and to reconnect with their culture.

Thom Little Bear, 63, who lived off the reservation for 25 years as a career army man, always tried to make it back home every year for the powwow. Born and reared on the reservation, he says, "No matter where I was in the Army — Europe or the Far East — it was not even debatable, I'd still come home for the powwow." Thom's grandchildren, who are scattered across the country, always make it home for the powwow as well. "We may leave Shinnecock land," he says, "but we all return. Most of us are born here, and most of us get buried in the cemetery on our land."

Besides the far-flung Shinnecock who will return to the reservation this weekend, the group will be host to Apache, Sioux and Seminole from Florida and the Crow from Canada as well as such local groups as the Narragansett and Pequot, who will be camping out on the reservation all weekend, many in tepees. It is customary for different tribes to visit each other's powwows, and American Indians crisscross the country all year long to attend many of the different tribal events. Many of the Shinnecock feel that this sharing of the various powwows is a further way of strengthening the Indian culture on a national level.

Harriet Gumbs, a small, sturdy woman, who at 75 is one of the tribe's historians, is proud of the way the Shinnecock have held onto their traditions despite tremendous obstacles. "It's been a hard task to maintain who you are," she says. "And right from birth an Indian child is taught this is your land, and this is your birth. We may have intermarried and become a tri-racial people, but it's always been the Indian assertion that the Indian culture came first. You fight to maintain that."

The Shinnecock have *always* been fighting to hold onto their traditions and what is theirs. When the English landed at Conscious Point in the North Sea in 1640, they were more than ready to accept the hospitality of the welcoming Shinnecock. For a total of 16 coats and 60 bushels of corn (planted on native soil), the English took all the land from the North Sea, south to the ocean where the Village of Southampton now stands. Afraid of

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How to Get There

The Shinnecock Indian Reservation is situated off Montauk Highway in Southampton, between Tuckahoe Road and Tuckahoe Lane. The powwow takes place 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Labor Day. Admission is $6, $4 for kids.

Newsday File Photo / John H. Cornell Jr.

Indians from Mexico perform a native dance at the 45th Shinnecock powwow.

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Indian revolt, the English forbade the Shinnecock to speak their native language or practice their native customs. They preached the idea that the Indians' own native religion of honoring the land, the sky and nature was pagan and something to be ashamed of, and the Indians were converted to Presbyterianism.

In 1859 the Shinnecock were given their current reservation by the British, making them the oldest self-governing tribe in the United States.

During the Civil War, the Shinnecock helped to hide slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad and allowed them to squat on the reservation. Later on, many of the Shinnecock began to intermarry with the newly freed slaves.

Harriet Gumbs remembers that as recently as a few decades ago it was difficult for native Shinnecock to get a white collar job, even if they were schooled. "If you wanted to advance, you had to leave the area," she says. "Things have changed now. If you attend this powwow, you see a resurgence of the Indian culture still very strong. The children are going to school to learn whatever they have to learn there, but here they learn and remember who they are, and it is expressed at the powwow."

Before the 1940s, the Shinnecock had always held yearly gatherings that were attended by other local tribes, but in 1946 Chief Thunderbird had the idea for the first public powwow, seeing it as a way to teach the neighboring community something about Shinnecock life, as well as to bring some revenue to the reservation.

The great hurricane of 1938 that had a disastrous effect on so much of Long Island had affected the Shinnecock reservation as well. With funds needed to rebuild the reservation's Presbyterian church, Chief Thunderbird suggested that the powwow be opened to the public. It was a huge success, and for the past 50 years the Shinnecock powwow has now been held on this site.

Thunderbird's daughter Chee-Chee Elizabeth Haile, who danced in the first powwow 50 years ago at the age of 16 and has been in every one since, is carrying on the traditional dance the way her father taught her as a child. Dressed in native regalia (it is never called "costume"), Chee-Chee performs a dance to the "Great Spirit whose tepee is the sky and whose hunting ground is the earth."

Says Haile, "I think our people have done a marvelous job of retaining and embellishing on what we know to be our practices. It's a miracle that we're still here. I've had people from tribes in South Dakota come to this land and say, 'I never thought people on the East Coast could survive as well as you have.' We're reaping from the past to collect every bit of our culture that we can. And we're still here." ■

Karen Kramer is a free-lance writer and documentary filmmaker.