



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OUR TREASURE OF ORAL TRADITION

By Tobias J. Vanderhoop

We are most grateful to Tobias Vanderhoop for contributing this monograph on Wampanoag life and oral traditions. It is of particular importance this year to note the history and civilization of the Wampanoag as we observe the quadricentennial of Bartholomew Gosnold's exploration of the waters around Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands. These

are the people he encountered during this 1602 voyage, a voyage which along with those of many others created a profound impact on an already established culture and way of life.

Ethel Twichell, President

Our knowledge of Wampanoag history and culture, prior to European settlement of North America, comes from various sources. The knowledge we hold as an Indian community has been enhanced by the research of historians and anthropologists, both native and nonnative, yet our most cherished and highly regarded knowledge comes from our own oral tradition.

As our ancestors had no formal writing system, they devised a way to preserve our history through ceremony, songs, stories, carvings, paintings and, of course, in belts made of wampum. These vehicles, created hundreds, even thousands of years ago, have enabled us to remember who we are and where we come from. In learning about the history and rich culture of my people, I have taken to the stories that we continue to tell and I

have thought deeply about them and the meaning contained within them. I wish to share a few thoughts of the importance, vitality and validity of this honored piece of our culture.

The Legends of Moshup tell the story of a giant Wampanoag man who traveled throughout our territory in southern New England and used his unnatural power and abilities to care for our people. Along the way, whether on purpose or by accident, he created many distinct landmarks throughout the region.

In one tale of his travels, Moshup is described as being responsible for the creation of Martha's Vineyard. Moshup's activities, explained within the story, could be regarded as a mere fairy tale. For example, Moshup wades into the ocean and takes whales with his bare hands while barely wetting his knees, or becomes

fatigued and drags his feet, thus ultimately creating the island. If our stories were to be taken only at face value, one might say that it is impossible for them to carry any truth, but a broader and deeper look at them leads me to a different belief. Take the creation story of Noepe (Martha's Vineyard) as an example. Not only does this story describe the whale hunting habits of our people, but it also discusses the arrival of our people in our homeland of Aquinnah. As this story is told, the listener learns that Moshup came to Aquinnah in order to hunt whales, which he used to feed his family. After a period of time, he led our people on a walk to Aquinnah, before it was separated from the mainland.

The historical fact is that our ancestors were once able to walk between our island home and the mainland, as scientists have determined this land has only been an island for at least five thousand years. Although one might question whether the Wampanoag inhabited this land prior to its separation from the mainland, modern science once again supports our oral tradition with carbon data that comes from a site in our aboriginal lands, estimated by scientists to be nearly 12,000 years old.

The evidence of our whaling habits continues to be uncovered throughout our territory, as construction work uncovers the tools used in these whaling excursions and scientists examine and date these tools. It is also factual that our ancestors burned huge dug out boats, called

mishoon, from old growth trees, the likes of which can no longer be found. Some mishoon were large enough to carry 40 men (two rows of twenty men sitting two abreast), and our people used these boats to go whaling close to shore.

These are only a few examples of the oral tradition of our people and why this tradition continues to be one of our most honored treasures.



Tobias J. Vanderhoop, Tribal Council Member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). He will be part of the Quadricentennial lecture series and will speak at Cuttyhunk on July 11.

