

1976

Green Corn Dance

Teresa Sappier

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Song: "Green Corn Dance"

Singer: Teresa Sappier

Town: Indian Island, ME

NA 1055 CD 832 Track 1

Collector: Linda Gilbert Davenport

Date: 1976

The "**Green Corn Dance**" (or simply "Corn Dance") is a Penobscot song and dance tradition based on the legend of the first mother that tells of the origin of important horticultural plants. Briefly, the legend tells how the first mother was sad because there was no food for her children. She instructed her husband to kill her and drag her body over a large open field until all the flesh was worn off her bones, which were to be buried in the middle of the field. After seven moons passed, he was to return, gather what he found, and eat all but enough to plant for next year. He could burn her bones, but was forbidden to eat them. He reluctantly followed the first mother's orders, and when returned to the field it was filled with corn, and tobacco grew where her bones lay.

Musically, the green corn ceremony consists of two parts. The first is short and unaccompanied in which an old woman comes out to represent the first mother while the first part of the song is sung. This part, which is short, is repeated three times. In the second part, all the other dancers join and the song is repeated as many times as necessary (which is more than is sung here). Singing is usually accompanied by a drum and/or shot horn, which is a hollow cow horn filled with buckshot and closed on the end. The transcription below is copied directly from Linda Davenport's thesis on Penobscot music. Though the dance and ceremony have great meaning to the Penobscot, the lyrics are vocables. Vocables are sounds made in voice that do not have inherent meaning. In other words, they do not provide instructions for how to dance or tell a story. Instead, instructions for dancing are heard in the pitch of the singer's voice or the tempo of the drum and shot horn, and the dance itself tells a story.

The dance, which requires great precision, starts with the dancers facing each other in lines. They dance forward and back several times, and then go down the center aisle and pass through to form a circle. Near the end, the first mother returns, but this time in silence to pass out corn. The dance concludes with all of the dancers dancing hard and fast until the end. According to Ms. Sappier, the "Corn Dance" was somewhat unique among Penobscot songs as women traditionally had a role in it. In most other cases, women did not originally perform the songs or dances, but became increasingly involved in the performances as male participation in pageants decreased over time. This song and dance was a staple in Penobscot pageants since the first, which took place in 1932, and it remained a remarkably stable song over the years.

1.

Yaw ni go weh

Yaw ni go weh

Yaw- ni- go weh

(Repeat 3x)

2.

Lo la da gair kwe ya hy ya weh hu

Lo la da gair kwe ya hy ya weh hu
Lo la da gair kwe ya hy ya weh hu
Lo la da gair kwe ya hy ya weh hu
(Repeat as necessary)

Source: Davenport, Linda Gilbert. *Music Among the Contemporary Penobscot Indians*. Master of Music Thesis. Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1977.

Maine Folklife Center