



Games, Toys and Recreation of the Abenaki and other Northeast Tribes

Compiled by
Brian Chenevert
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Introduction

This booklet is meant to be a sample, not all inclusive, of the games, toys and recreation activities that Abenaki children and adults would have traditionally played.

Understanding and learning about these games and recreational activities will provide you with a view into the culture, beliefs and customs of the Abenaki and other tribes of the northeast.

In many native cultures it was considered rude and an insult to defeat your opponent by too great a margin. Many native runners were known to slow down towards the end of the race and let an opponent get within a respectable distance before finishing the race.

Many of these games and toys will seem familiar to you as they are still played today in one form or another.

Birch Bark Triangle and Ball Game



This traditional toy was used by Abenaki children and was made from a piece of Maskwa, birch bark, which was cut into a triangular shape about 6 inches wide. A small ball of buckskin which was stuffed with deer hair would be tied to one corner of the triangle using sinew or twine. A hole would be cut into the center of the triangle that was just slightly larger than the ball. The child would grab one corner of the bark triangle opposite the string and flip the ball into the air trying to get the ball to go through the hole in the bark.

Bowl and Dice Game (Gagwenigan)



The bowl and dice game was one of the most popular games among Abenaki men and was often time played for great stakes such as furs, knives, guns, wampum etc.

The game consists of 6 dice (Asweinal) which can be made from round bone or antler buttons or peach and plum pits which are decorated on one side and plain on the other. Additionally a wooden bowl called a wlôgan, 56 round counting sticks, 4 flat sticks and one carved stick all about 8 inches long. The object of the game is to acquire as many sticks as possible

The dice are placed in the bowl and then the bowl is then raised and struck on the floor or a blanket placed on the floor to cushion the blow. The combination of dice, colored vs. plain, determines the number of counting sticks awarded.

Players alternate turns banging the bowl in an attempt to earn counting sticks.

To start play all counting sticks are placed in a central pile. The sticks are earned as follows:

- When a player rolls a 5 alike he is awarded 3 round sticks and gets to roll again. If a second five alike is thrown the player receives 9 round sticks. If the player throws three consecutive 5 alike rolls then he is awarded a flat stick.
- When a player rolls a 6 alike then one flat stick is awarded and gets to roll again. If a second consecutive 6 alike is rolled he is awarded two flat sticks and gets to roll again. If a third consecutive 6 alike is rolled then he is awarded three flat sticks.
- Play continues until all of the round and plain flat sticks have been awarded. The last stick to be awarded is the "Carved stick" which is often times called the chief.

Once all of the sticks have been awarded then the players count their point. The round sticks are worth 1 point each, the flat sticks are worth 5 points each and the carved stick is worth 6 points.

Bundle and Pin – Adowiz



Adowiz is an old game that has been played by Abenaki children for many years. The bundles are 8 inches long and made from pine needles or white cedar twigs. One variation uses a deer or moose hide about 4 inches long which is punctured with holes, the center one being slightly larger than the others. The piece of hide is connected to a bundle which is tightly wound round with the cord and attached to a 9 inch long sharp pointed stick, tied near the center and held between the thumb and forefinger like a pen.

The object of the game give it an upward toss and try to pierce the bundle or one of the holes in the hide with the pointed end of the stick.

The number of points necessary for winning is set at the beginning of the game. Each player continues his/her turn until he misses and then passes the adowiz on to the next player.

The Story of Adowiz

Our legends say that the first adowiz were made from the fungus known as swamp woman's dishes, which is a shelf like fungus that protrudes from the bark of trees.

One night during a high stakes game of adowiz both players fell asleep before a winner could be made. The one who fell asleep still holding the adowiz was taken by an mdawinno (medicine man) deep into the nearby swamp still in his dream state. He was taken into the lodge of Mskagwedemoos (Swamp Woman) where he saw her eating off of a sheet of the fungus and there by her side was an adowiz but this adowiz was made out of pine needles. Upon seeing this he awoke back at his wigwam and he began telling everyone of what he saw. Since that day the adowiz has been made with pine needles and to this very day children will not play with the fungus known as "swamp woman's dishes" for fear that it is just Mskagwedemoos attempting to lure them in and take them away!

Buzzer Toy



The buzzer is a toy that is familiar to most people. The buzzer is made of a flat round piece of wood, pottery, gourd or bone and is 2 to 4 inches in diameter with two holes in the center. The buzzer is connected to two sticks that are 5 inches long with a twined sinew strand twenty inches long doubled over. With a little practice and skill the buzzers make a sound similar to the sound of the wind.

Cat's Cradle

Cat's Cradle is another game that will be familiar to most people. Versions of this game have been found among indigenous cultures around the world.

This simple game requires only a string made from sinew or twine approximately 20 inches long tied into a loop and two or more players. The object of the game is for one player to loop the string on their fingers of both hands and create a string figure.

The next player manipulates that figure and removes the string from the hands of the previous player and then creates another figure. The game ends when a player cannot turn the string into anything else

Corn Husk Dolls

Corn husk dolls were a favorite toy and making them a favorite past time for generations of Abenaki girls. The dolls are made from corn husks that have been soaked to make them pliable and the hair is made from corn silk. The dolls are usually about 6 inches tall but can range from 4 to 10 inches. Many children make clothing for their dolls using additional husks, cloth or leather.

Just like with animals very little was not used from the corn plant. As described above husks were used to make dolls and the cobs were used to make smoking pipes and both cobs and stalks were used as kindling to burn in the fires.

Instructions:

1. Start with fresh green husks. If you do not have fresh green husks then you will need to soak the husks in water for 10 – 20 minutes prior to using them or they will be too brittle.
2. Lay 4 or 6 husks out in a stack.
3. Using thin twine or sting, tie husks together, about 1 inch from top.
4. Separate husks into equal sections and fold down over the string.
5. Using thin twine, tie husks about 1 inch down, this will form the head.
6. For arms you can either roll a single husk and tie at ends or take three strips of husks and braid together and tie at ends.
7. Position arms below knot at neck, between equal sections of husks.
8. Tie another string below the arms to form the waist.
9. For a girl doll, trim husks at bottom to an even length to form the bottom of the dress. For a boy doll, separate the husks into equal portions to form legs, tie at knees and ankles.
10. To add hair use corn silk, place on dolls head and use string to tie around head and keep in place.

Foot-ball

The game of Foot-ball was played by most tribes throughout the Northeastern United States and Canada. It was very similar to today's game of Soccer.

The ball was typically made from two buckskin pieces about four inches in diameter. The origin of the game is unknown, however William Wood, in 1634, documented the game among the Indians of Massachusetts and in 1643 Roger Williams reported that the Narraganset in Rhode Island have great meetings during the summer in which whole villages play.

The field could be up to a mile long with two stakes driven into the ground to mark the goal. A point would be scored for every time a player could kick the ball between the stakes. Up to 500 players may be playing at one time and the game could last for a few hours and sometimes could go into the next day. After the game a large feast would be held to celebrate and both teams would participate.

Another game similar to Foot-ball was played at night and called Fire Ball. In this game the ball would be wrapped in multiple layers of cloth and tied together with twine. The ball would be set on fire at the middle of the field and the game would begin.

The ball would burn for about 20 minutes and whoever was in the lead at the time was the winner.

Hoop Game

The hoop is made from a branch into a circle and tying the ends with rawhide. The hoop has a web of string woven onto it which divides the hoop into different sections. These sections are given different points which are used to determine the score when the dart goes in them.

The dart is simply a pointed stick that was about 3 to 4 feet long. The dart can be decorated as the player sees fit. Some are painted and some have feather attached to the end.

The game ends when a player reaches a certain number of points which has been decided before play begins .

Lacrosse – Babaskwahomwôgan

Lacrosse is one of the oldest sports in America and was most popular among the tribes of the northeast.

Entire villages were known to play, with up to 500 people competing, on fields measuring from a couple hundred yards to a mile long.

Among many tribes lacrosse is known as the Little Brother of War due to the physicality of play or the Medicine Game and the Spirit Game due to its origin as a gift from the Creator or the spirit world.

The equipment needed consist of an ash or hickory stick bent about 3 feet long at one end and finely netted with rawhide in the crook.

Lacrosse sticks are a very personal item are carved or burned with designs that have particular meaning to the owner. Among some tribes warriors are buried with their lacrosse sticks so that they may take them into the spirit world where the game continues to be played.

When the Jesuit priest first witnessed the game being played by Native Americans the thought the stick resembled the bishop's crosier and gave it the name La crosse.

In addition to the stick a ball was needed. This ball is made from a nine inch round piece of deer hide and filled with moose hair and then covered with a five inch piece of deer hide and tied closed.

A goal is made at both ends of the playing field. The goal can be a shallow hole in the ground, a marked ring on the ground or a post stood upright.

The players use the netted stick to carry and pass the ball between teammates and score points by throwing the ball into the goal. The ball cannot be touched with your hand.

The players determined the number of points needed to win before the start of the game. Once play was set to begin all of the players met at the middle of the field, in some instances an individual simply threw the ball into the air and the contest insured. At other times an individual who was chosen ahead of times took a wooden chip or a flat round stone and spit on one side and flipped it into the air and the side it landed on determined who got the ball first.

Among some tribes the ball was mostly just carried by the player as passing the ball was consider a trick play and dodging or evading a defender was considered a coward move.

Among the Abenaki the game was played by both men and women but very rarely together.

Traditionally, unlike how the game is played today, there were no rules, no fouls and no safety equipment. As such, a great many injuries occurred during the game.

As lacrosse is considered a gift from the spirit world and a game they will continue to play once they move on to the spirit world it is held as very sacred by the Abenaki.

**For more information on the origin of Lacrosse see the book "Spirit Game of the Dawnland" by Brian Chenevert which will be available in 2018.

Little Pine – Tutuwas

Little Pines was a girl's game in which a tuft of white pine needles was cut squarely across the end. By trimming a layer of needles about halfway up, a skirt, arms and perhaps a shawl could be suggested. A bit of wood was left at the top of the sprig of needles creating the doll's head. About 6 to 10 of these dolls are placed on a board and shaken gently. This motion makes the dolls jump and skip, sometimes moving back and forth together, making the dolls appear to dance. The player sings to the dolls while onlookers call out encouragement. The player continues until her last dancer falls and then the board is passed to the next player to give it a try.

This game is believed to have been derived from the women's dance Tuttuwas. This dance is a contest of skill and endurance in which the women must dance to the beat and speed of the drum which fluctuates in pace.

Shinny

Shinny is a winter game that was played by the majority of tribes in New England and the Canadian Maritimes.

Shinny was played on the lakes and rivers after they had frozen over for winter. A stick or club with a curved end was used by the players to hit a ball or a block of wood along the ice.

Shinny was played by both men and women but rarely together. Two teams of 10 – 50 players would attempt to hit the ball into the goal of the other team. The ball could be kicked but never touched with the hands.

Snow Snake – Psôn Skoks

A winter game played by the Abenaki was called the snow snake. Most Abenaki snow snakes were hand carved pieces of wood, usually hickory or ash, that were approximately 18-24 inches, although some Wabanaki tribes made snow snakes that were up to 6-7 feet long. Among the numerous shapes are two main varieties, the spoon mouth – Amkuôn which is about 2 feet long and flat at top and bottom with one end concave like the bowl of a spoon and the snake head – Skoks Mdeb which is long slender and round with one end resembling a snakes head and the other pointed. There is also the Skegaweis which is flat underneath, round on top and about 2 feet in length and the P'tgukwholok which is the largest of all and is from 5 to 7 feet long and nearly round with both ends raised slightly and pointed.

The Preparation:



If someone wanted to start a game of snow snake he would run through the village calling out that a game would be played. Soon all those who were interested in playing would join him each bringing their own snow snakes. Then one or more of the players would take a log approximately 3 inches in diameter and drag it through the snow to form a path for the snakes to go down. Often time the game was played at a place with a hard flat crust of snow so that the snow snakes would glide easily on top.

The Contest:



Each Player lines up to take his throw. The snow snake was thrown in a motion similar to that of skipping a stone on a lake. Once your snow snake stopped it would be upended to show how far it had gone. The snow snake that had gone the furthest was the winner. Sometimes the winner would win all the other snow snakes, he would then gather up all the snow snakes, yell out and toss them all into the air. Then the other players would rush to get their snow snake, or the one they thought was the best. Today the teams play for fun although the Haudenosaunee in NY compete for prizes.

Making Snowsnakes:



The designs presented here are adapted from published Maine examples. These projects can be made using dimensional lumber and require little carving expertise.

Instructions:

Materials needed:

1. Hardwood lumber 1" X 1/2" X 40".
2. Carving tools (Pocketknife and hand plane)
3. sandpaper
4. stain
5. varnish

Instructions

1. With a pocketknife or any other carving tools, whittle the snowsnake head.
2. With a hand plane carefully plane the rest of the snowsnake to a triangular cross section.
3. Taper the end and sand the snowsnake.
4. If you wish add designs you can carve in the head design and body designs with a small gouge or wood burner.
5. Final sand, stain and varnish the snowsnake. The varnish helps to keep out moisture as well as give the snake a smooth glassy finish so it will glide faster. Ski wax may also be used.

Straws – Beznagaosa

This Abenaki game was first documented by Father Sebastian Rasle in the mid-17th century. Father Rasle provided the translation for the Abenaki word of Pissinnegash as ‘the straws with which we play’.

There does not appear to be a lot of information on this game but from what can be gathered is that it was a very high stakes gambling game in which the players would lay down and pick up the straws which were assigned varying values.

The game consisted of a bundle of straws/reeds about 10 inches in length and they were unequally divided in small bunches among the players. They were then passed among the players back and forth in their hands. The object was to guess the number, odd or even.

Another game similar game was called Little Sticks. In this game a bunch of sticks made of cedar were dropped in a tangled heap in the center of a board. Each player used a piece of bent ash basket splint to try and pull sticks from the pile without disturbing the others.

Tossed ball

Tossed ball is one of the few games in which you are able to touch the ball with your hands. This is a group game in which the players hit the ball in the air with their hands and attempt to keep it from not falling to the ground.

Historically the ball was made from the inflated bladder of a deer or moose.

Miscellaneous

Bow/arrows and blow guns – Children were given small bows and arrows with blunt tips. “Playing” with these taught them how to use a tool that would be extremely important to them once they were grown. It also helped the child work on their dexterity. Once the child was older the bow and blunted arrows could be used to hunt small game such as squirrels and rabbits. Young children also made blow guns out of hollowed out reeds and used berries as ammunition.

Whistles and game calls – simple whistles and game calls were carved from wood and bone. A good example is a Turkey call that is made from the wing bone of a Turkey which mimics the cluck of a hen when used.

Storytelling - was done year round but the majority of stories were reserved for winter time when limited activities could be done outside. Many stories were told to teach children appropriate behavior, some explained the world in which we live and how it was created and was intended to be used and others were just for entertainment. Some of the children’s favorite stories involve Azban – the trickster raccoon, Gluskabe – the culture hero and Odzihozo – the transformer.

Bark Biting – was a winter pastime of women and children. Done most often during the winter while sitting by the fire, women and children would bite into folded pieces of birch bark using their eyeteeth. This would leave indentations in the bark that would leave symmetrical designs once the bark was unfolded.

Canoe Tiltling – was a game played by men in which two canoes (wigwaol), containing two men each, come next to each other and the

man in the front of the canoe uses a padded pole to push the man from the other canoe into the water.

Running – Running is a favorite past time of most children which displays their speed and agility.

Tag – was played by both boys and girls and often the tagger plays the part of the monsters from one of the many Abenaki legends such as Mskagwedemos – Swamp Woman, Kiwakw – giant sorcerors⁹⁹ or Chibaiwôgan – a ghost.

Tops – were carved from wood, bone or antler and a small buckskin whip was used to keep the top spinning.

Conclusion

This booklet gives you a window into the world and activities of an Abenaki child. Abenaki people have constantly adapted to our environment and surrounding. We have used our imagination to take items from our surroundings and create games and toys meant not only to entertain but to help build strength, speed, agility, dexterity and the critical thinking skills which were necessary to survive for thousands of years.

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