

## Interviewing Tribal Elders and Native Women

*Isabelle Shay*

My research is centred around native women of the Wabanaki. The term *Wabanaki* is derived from the Algonkin word *Wedjgwabaniak*, which means "the coming of dawn." Those tribes that are located at the most eastern portion of North America are known as the Wabanaki, or people of the dawn. The five Wabanaki tribes are:

1. Abenaki of St. Francis, Ontario
2. Maliseets of New Brunswick
3. Micmacs of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland
4. Passamaquoddy of Sebyck, Maine, and
5. Penobscot of Indian Island, Maine.

The Wabanaki languages have their roots in the Algonkin mother tongue. Each tribe has developed its own dialect and accent, and sometimes even its own meanings for the same word. Basically the root words (about 10) are the same among all Algonkin tribes. Because of its location and the natural resources found there, the Wabanaki culture and life-style is known as the "eastern woodland culture."

### Oral Tradition

Imagine a society with no books. Words become the major method of communication among tribes of the same language, but then it becomes necessary to invent other forms of communication with those who do not understand the same dialect or language. This is where symbols and signs become extremely important. I would not presume to write about a tribe, the principles of whose language and culture I do not fully understand. However, because I am Micmac, I have focused my research on the women of the Wabanaki. The research method I am using for my book is almost completely oral, with no footnotes. The two groups who have contributed the most information so far are the elders of the tribe and the Native women themselves.

The greatest obstacle that I have had to overcome was the fact that culturally ours is an oral tradition. I found that the majority of the people even the educated, feel threatened when Wabanaki traditions are written down. The general feeling is that people will

no longer talk to their children, who will go to the books for their information. The argument that books reach more people does not matter because Native people are not interested in conversion, they're more interested in talking to each other.

Except in the area of Native spirituality, there are no restrictions about writing. Native spiritual rites and ceremonies have in the past been taken too lightly by the media, and people have come to regard them as performances. Therefore I am honouring the wishes of the people, which are not to allow their sacred ceremonies to be taped, photographed or documented.

### On Interviewing Tribal Elders

This area is most interesting and most rewarding. Elders are easy to get along with, are happy to have someone visit and talk, and are willing to share what they know. They have pictures and souvenirs which, if one is lucky, they will show you. Some elders do not wish to be remembered as they are but will prefer photographs showing them younger and still working. These early photographs are scarce, but it is sometimes possible to obtain one from a relative.

Also, most very old people feel threatened by tape recorders. Even if they agree to being taped, they will say a few words or sing a little song and then withdraw. This is a very effective method of getting rid of pesky interviewers.

My brother was 73 when he died of cancer last March. Although he was willing to talk, there were many days when the pain was simply too much for him to take. Then there were other days when he was most jovial and informative. I was present every day even though I knew I should be home writing. I felt that I would miss an important piece of information that would tie up a loose end in my paper or explain the cause and effect of a certain incident or tradition. I was well rewarded by the quality of the information that I received from him before he died. It is most important that no pressure be applied here for the elder to talk. The elder must be willing to talk for a good rapport.

## On Interviewing Native Women

My experience is that some native women lack self-confidence and esteem. They appear to value other people's work more than their own, especially if they are not getting paid for what they do. Consequently, they do not respond to questionnaires or return calls. Some will share information but want anonymity.

The Maliseet women are a strong political group and supported Sandra Lovelace on her trip to the United Nations. This interview has been promised for two years but has yet to materialize because of the group's policy that no decisions are made individually.

Then there are those Native women who are most helpful and are willing to share even the most painful and personal experiences.

## Interviewer's Role

A basic understanding of the culture and language is most helpful in knowing pertinent questions to ask elders and Native women. People will not stay on one subject when interviewed, and one must be able to sit through hours of talking and laughing about topics

other than the one she or he is interested in—weather predictions, gossip, ghost stories, jokes, and so on.

However, there is always something that the writer can use to describe characters, their speech. People act more natural at home than when they are off the reserve. In writing, I do not use poor grammar even if that is the way I received the information. But there are certain idiosyncrasies that are unique to all Native elders. They use the pronoun "he" when talking about females, and "she" when talking about males. This I feel should be left as it is when quoting them.

## Rewards

The individual rewards are great. I have a deeper respect for Native people and a pride which I could not have found in a book. Elders are deeply spiritual people. They are able to give a special insight about the past. Dates should always be checked out, but generally I found that elders are accurate about dates and most of them have clear minds up to the last day of their lives. Fatigue sets in in mid-afternoon, and it is important to find out from relatives when it is a good time to visit elders. Unplanned and unstructured time is known as Indian time.