

StoryCorps interview at Tomaquag Museum

"Over the years, we had somewhat of a battle as to who made the better johnnycakes..."

Brothers Lonnie and Robert Shumate of the Narragansett tribe recall attending the annual August Meeting powwows and family gatherings as kids growing up in Rhode Island. They also share memories of their family and their family's love of Johnnycakes. We hear first from Robert.

Robert Shumate: During the summers, the Narragansett Indian Tribe would have their August Meeting. We would camp out at the field, and the fire was always going. We both had types of regalia that we wore, which we used when we performed during the dancing ceremonies. We were small—we were only maybe six, or seven, eight, nine, ten years old. It was always a fantastic get-together, and everybody would go to those get-togethers.

Lonnie Shumate: I remember our naming ceremony.

RS: Your Indian name was Red Feather.

LS: Yes.

RS: Mine was Little Bear.

LS: Yes. And whenever we got together, there was always plenty of food, and so well done. Mom taught me how to make johnnycakes, and over the years, we had somewhat of a battle as to who made the better johnnycakes.

RS: I wasn't sure whether it was our mom or Aunt Eleanor. But I do recall one time when Uncle Ferris had gout, and the back of his left hand was swollen—oh, it looked like the hand was twice the size—and he was a huge man. And Aunt Eleanor made him a plate of johnnycakes, must've been a dozen johnnycakes on this plate. And right next to him, she had put a stick of butter. And he'd cut off some butter, put it on johnnycakes—he finished that whole plate of johnnycakes, the whole stick of butter. Then he sat down and had his gout pill!

LS: (laughs)

RS: They were the type of people that were going to enjoy life, and that wasn't going to stop him from enjoying his johnnycakes.

LS: And our grandfather, Rod, he loved them too.

RS: Yep. He had two brothers, and they were direct descendants of Chief Ninigret. Some of the things we would do with him, we would shoot bows and arrows—he made us both bows.

LS: He'd paint them and use string and whip designs around the wood.

RS: Oh sure, yeah. Our grandfather used a lot of watercolors, pastels—

LS: Oils, pen and ink—

RS: He was very gifted. And to this day, a lot of his artwork and things that he made are here at Tomaquag. Some things have been left to the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society in Kingston. So he was quite a gentleman—a lot of respect for things he had done.

LS: Now you still have quite a few of his pen and ink drawings?

RS: Yes, I do.

LS: Those were beautiful.

RS: Yeah. Very good, fond memories of growing up. The past years, I haven't been involved in much of what's going on because I'm running a business of my own. I guess I haven't been to an August meeting in thirty-some years or so now. But to this day, I find you run into cousins and you might not see them for five, ten, fifteen years, and it's like you saw them yesterday.

LS: Oh yeah. Those were happy times.

RS: They certainly were, brother, yeah.