





*We are
the
landscape*

AN INTERVIEW WITH LORÉN SPEARS

by **Hugh Markey**

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“WE’RE INTERRELATED WITH THE LANDSCAPE; the name ‘Nahiganseck’ (later corrupted to Narragansett by Europeans) means ‘the people of the small points,’ which is describing the topography that we’re on that is adjacent to the ocean,” says Lorén Spears, executive director of the Tomaquag Museum, as she sits at a table in the crowded office she shares with two other museum employees and reflects on her tribe’s relationship to the geology of what is now Rhode Island.

“According to our creation legends, we came up out of the marshy areas and were created from that soil. We are the landscape. We’re intrinsically connected to each other. Today we’re still here, and we’re still interconnected to the land.”

The natural world and the changing seasons have long been the hub of Narragansett life. “We have stories that revolve around the collection of sap, the buckeyes we would fish for, using the river systems for transportation. You can get pretty much anywhere in the state by using the rivers that are right outside this building.”

“In summer, we’d have our village near the salt water for fishing, shellfishing, hunting, and gathering, along with the crops that we would grow.” Spears refers to “lifeways,” which are “everything about who we are as a people and the influence of what we do in our lives. All those things that are part of living our life as an indigenous person. In that time period, the lifeways were composed of doing all the things that were needed to survive: making spear points, arrow points, nets, clothing. And you’d use all the resources. In the case of deer, for example, we would eat the venison, but we would also use the brain to tan the hide, the muscle sinews for sewing, the skin for blankets, and bones and teeth for adornment or tools. We would utilize the whole thing. We’d place the villages close to fresh water, but also nearby the salt water. We would harvest the edible mushrooms, wild berries and nuts, fiddlehead ferns. Each season had its foods to be harvested. That’s why we celebrate 13 Thanksgivings: they’re based on the landscape and the resources found on that landscape.”

In addition to Thanksgiving, Spears says that the famous New England clambake is another food-oriented celebration that was appropriated from the indigenous people by the Europeans. “Centuries ago, a native village may have had thousands of people in it, and the clambake evolved as a way of feeding all those people. We made it with clear broth, as opposed to one with milk in it, and the activities that were going on in creating it were part of the lifeways: you were making the tools, the baskets for gathering, the pottery for cooking, the weirs (a fence-like structure used to direct the fish to a confined area where they could be harvested) for fishing.” Spears also blames the

Europeans for misappropriating an item that is perhaps one of the best known local treasures—wampum.

“In the history books, wampum has been locked into this tiny Eurocentric window of maybe 50 years when it was used as a kind of money. It was used between Europeans and indigenous people as a monetary unit because they (Europeans) had the need to come up with a monetary system. That was not how we were using wampum. We were fine with bartering.

“Wampum was very sacred. It was used to honor people, in ceremonies, and to call people to council, to name just a few. You’d send a runner with a strand of wampum with a message that each leader was to meet at a certain place, at a location known as the council rock. Wampum was used to record history, to document major events. The way that they were woven created a picture that documented history. This tradition was going on for thousands and thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. Yes, we were trading and gifting wampum, but a gift was very much an honor and very much a part of our culture. It was a sign of respect. It was used as a form of congratulations on achieving something.

“My aunt tells the story of when she was up in the mesas of New Mexico. As an indigenous person, she was invited to come to a ceremony. While she was up there, some of the elders pulled her aside. They told her that they had been waiting for someone to come from our community. They had wampum that had been passed down for hundreds of years that had come from a native of the northeast coastal area. They were waiting for someone to return to this remote place, and that person happened to be my aunt. When we travel, we often carry wampum, whether as the shell or as a prepared, adorned piece. It’s an example of the idea that we traveled to distant places and still had this interconnectedness between tribal communities.”

Even as Narragansetts were forced into other areas as a result of King Philip’s War in 1675, they maintained their ties to the land. “Our people were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Caribbean. The story goes that our people escaped the sugar plantations down there and set up in an area known as St. David’s Island, the last island in the archipelago. They made their own community there over the years. The residents were originally from all these places along the East Coast, right up to New England. In the last 15 to 20 years, we’ve had a chance to reconnect with a tribe in Bermuda, and genetic testing ties them to tribes of the coastal Northeast. We made our connection and now we travel back and forth and stay with each other. Those are powerful things, and they also speak to our connection to the land, because even though they were all those miles away, for example, instead of making corn husk dolls, they made banana



leaf dolls. They are now a mix of the indigenous people of the Caribbean, the indigenous people of North America, and those of Africa."

Narragansetts were conservation minded as well. Spears tells the story of a local tribe member who was quahogging. He was using two buckets: in one he would put quahogs that were the right size, and in the other he would put those that were too small. Once he finished, he would walk to a separate area and dump the bucket of smaller shellfish. "So eventually, you would basically manipulate the ones that weren't big enough to an area that would, in a year or so, become your primary area for shellfishing."

"Changes that were made by the Native Americans were much more in harmony with the environment than those made by the Europeans. Even in the case of our middens (trash piles), the materials there were left behind, but they were materials that would eventually return to the earth. The reason why you can't find a 3,000-year-old basket from our people is because it was made from the earth, and eventually it returns to the earth. We burned the forest to produce gardens and to make traversing the area easier. It's not like Providence Place Mall, where you filled in the swamp and built a mall on top of burial grounds and on top of estuaries and completely manipulated that. Our ancestors worked with nature versus using excessive manipulation of nature"

Conflicts between native and non-native culture continue today: "When I was younger, my husband and I were crabbing on a salt pond in Charlestown. A guy

who had a house on the pond came over in a boat and started screaming at us about taking 'all the crab from the pond.' I said, 'Your water? Your crabs?' I gave him a few choice words of my opinion on that. He motor boated back to his house. Then later, he sent his son out to us with an offering of bluefish to make up for what had happened. That's an example of the mindset people have that if you own the house, you own all the water and all the resources around it."

Despite the inevitable encroachment of modern society on traditional ways, Spears says that the central notion of working with the land is a value still being practiced. "I think our interrelationship with the land helped us to survive, even right up into the 21st century. I often refer to us as having subsistence-supported diets. Yes, we go to the grocery store and buy lots of things, but I often tell children that if you were to come to my house and open my refrigerator you would see things like frozen cranberries (and not the ones from Ocean Spray!), you would see frozen mushrooms, fish, venison. We're using modern technology to freeze it, but we're still partaking in these local harvests.

"I don't feel that we were impacting the land so much as the land was impacting us. We were very respectful of the land and the ebb and flow of the seasons and ebb and flow of the landscape. Yes, we had places that were favored areas, but we were less likely to manipulate the landscape as we were more likely to be in tune with utilizing the land.

"You only took what you needed from the land."