

#5 – A Remarkable Life

Gladys Tantaquidgeon, 106, Mohegan medicine woman By Susan Haigh, Associated Press
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UNCASVILLE, Conn. -- Gladys Tantaquidgeon, the Mohegan Indian Tribe's venerable medicine woman and a nationally known specialist on ancient Indian practices, died yesterday in her home. She was 106.

The tribe's oldest living member, Miss Tantaquidgeon was born in 1899, a direct descendant of Uncas, the famed Mohegan chief who broke away from the Pequot tribe in the 1600s with other Mohegan members and sought to work with the first English settlers in the region.

During her lifetime, Miss Tantaquidgeon watched her tribe grow from a handful of Mohegan families in Uncasville who struggled to keep their tribal heritage alive to a federally recognized tribe that owns and operates one of the most successful casinos in the world.

Much of that success, tribal and state officials say, is due to Miss Tantaquidgeon.

For years, she collected a large number of documents, including tribal correspondence, birth, death, and marriage records, many of which she stored under her bed. That information helped to document the continuity of the tribe, a key factor in the US government's decision in 1994 to grant it status as a recognized tribe and to allow it to build Mohegan Sun.

"A lot of the generations before us knew if they hung on long enough, a lot of things would turn around one day," said Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel, her grandniece. "Her dream was that the culture would be preserved for the Mohegan Tribe. The fact that the tribe survived was all she ever really cared about."

A life-size statue of Miss Tantaquidgeon that greets visitors entering the Mohegan Sun casino was draped in black yesterday. There is a wall mural depicting a timeline of her life nearby.

Zobel said the approximately 1,700-member tribe is trying to see her death as something to celebrate.

"We truly feel her contribution and longevity require us to consider that her life isn't simply one to be mourned," she said. "Her life is really something to celebrate at this time."

Miss Tantaquidgeon wrote several books on Indian medicine practices and folklore. Her best-known work, "A Study of Delaware Indian Medicine Practices and Folk Beliefs," was published in 1942 and later reprinted in 1972 and 1995 as "Folk Medicine of the Delaware and Related Algonkian Indians."

She drew her knowledge from many sources. From her grandmothers, she became versed in the ways of the tribe's spirituality and the use of herbs. From the University of Pennsylvania, she learned anthropology.

In 1931, she helped found the Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum in Uncasville, along with her late brother Harold, the tribe's former chief. Tribal officials say the stone building is one of the oldest Indian-owned and -operated museums in the country and emphasizes the siblings' philosophy that "you can't hate someone that you know a lot about."

"My family has the responsibility to care for and protect the legacy of the Mohegans, to inform all who come here about our people, about the rich Mohegan culture and traditions," Miss Tantaquidgeon told the Los Angeles Times in 1991. "Most people who come here are amazed that Mohegans are still alive. All their lives they've heard the old saying about the last of the Mohegans."

She spent most of her life changing that perception from James Fenimore Cooper's novel, "The Last of the Mohicans." (Mohican was the name given the tribe by Dutch settlers; Mohegan means wolf people)

Her work became known nationwide and she was called on by several western tribes to assist in the restoration of their ancient practices.

In 1934, she served as a community worker on the Yankton Sioux reservation in South Dakota and also worked to promote Indian art for the Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board in the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming.

In 1940, she served as the librarian at the state women's prison in Niantic, where she drew upon her previous work helping struggling women on reservations.

Miss Tantaquidgeon, who never married, continued to work full time at the museum in Uncasville until 1998.

"She instilled her beliefs, values, principles, and oral history through her immediate family and extended tribal members. Miss Tantaquidgeon firmly believed that the best cure for prejudice was education," said Kenneth M. Reels, vice chairman of the neighboring Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation.

Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell added, "Tantaquidgeon shared 106 years with Connecticut and its people, and all of us are richer for it."

The Mohegan Tribal offices will be closed today to mark an official day of mourning. A funeral service is tentatively scheduled for Sunday at Shantok Village of Uncas in Uncasville.

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