

# Wampum is special to native people

OHSWEKEN — Wampum is an ancient Algonquin word for white and purple shell beads. It was never used by the Hodenushonnee for money. In a sharing society, money is of no use. European immigrants first used these beads as money in trade with Atlantic seaboard Indian nations.

Black and white stained wood was used to record deeds and events before shell wampum came into use. Onondagas used porcupine quills while Mohawks used eagle quills.

Indian nations also used the cylinder-shaped beads as jewelry and personal decoration. But eventually among the Hodenushonnee, wampum took a much higher station due to a sacred occurrence.

Before Hiawatha met the Peacemaker, he left his Onondaga village to mourn the death of his seven daughters. During the fifth day of his wandering, he came upon a group of little lakes. When the ducks raised the water to allow him to walk upon the bottom, he noticed empty, water snail shells. Some were white and others purple.

He gathered these shells and filled his deer-skin pouch with them. On the seventh day, he suspended three shell strings from a cross pole to mark his grief. He determined that if he ever saw anyone suffering as much as him, he would use the shells to console them. The strings would become words and lift away the darkness.

## Our Town

Richard G.  
Green



On the night of the 23rd day, the Peacemaker overheard Hiawatha's sorrowful words. He promised to remove the sorrow and asked for more shells to string into strands. Holding them in his hands, he spoke the words of the Requickening Address. To this day these words are used in the Hodenushonnee Condolence Ceremony.

With Hiawatha's mind cleared of grief, he and the Peacemaker received the words of the Great Law. These were given to the Hodenushonnee to abolish war forever. For each item, a string, or belt, of wampum had been provided so it could be passed on to future generations.

When a belt or string became worn, it was carefully repaired. Hodenushonnee prefer quahog, or conch shells, to make the white and purple tubular beads. Valued shells are one-half inch thick with a wide swirl of purple along the outside edge. Symbolic designs and patterns are created by using bark fibers and sinew to weave contrasting beads together in rows.

Symbols are used to commemorate constitutional concepts, treaty commitments, council records and personal or spiritual commitments. Wampum is considered a sacred medium — events depicted on the belts have a literal and spiritual meaning.

Wampum strings also serve as credentials or certificates of authority. A message is not considered official unless the runner has the proper wampum string or belt. All religious or civil councils rely on wampum to insure that decisions come from good minds.

Wampum guarantees a message or promise. Treaties meant nothing unless they were woven into wampum belts and exchanged between agreeing parties.

Law, treaty and ceremonial wampums were and are memorized by certain individuals trained for this purpose. At special councils, under certain conditions, these Keepers of the Wampum carefully hold up the belts to show the people. Its message is then recited to educate and inspire them.

In this way, laws and important events are always remembered.