



Children’s Day Camp at Piikani Sundance, Okaan, 2023

With Mary Ellen Little Mustache

Mary Ellen begins camp with an introduction of herself with the inclusion of her Blackfoot name, **Oki nitanikko Nawasaaki**. Hello, my name is Mary Ellen.

The children’s camp is along side the preparation of a Piikani Sundance ceremony, **Okaan (Ogon)**. The site has a large open space and is close to the river. Some have already set up tipis for camping.



There are some rules of the camp. One is to not walk through the camp, but rather walk around it. It is also considered bad luck to step

over tree poles that are lying on the ground. Planted trees mark the sites for tipis to be set up, usually by members of the Horn Society.



In our tipi Mary Ellen begins class with introductions of classmates and the Piikani Flag that represents the Peigan people.



The Piikani **Aapátóhsipikáni** Flag is a representation of the Piikani Nation, a tribe that is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy.



The color red is representation of the Piikani people. The shield is representation of the Protector. The center buffalo is a representation of our Chief. The 12 feathers signify the 12 council members. The three hooves signify the three governments: The Piikani Nation Government, The Federal Government, and The Provincial Government.

The buffalo are sacred to us. When buffalo were sacrificed for us, we got food, we made hides to make our covering for tipis, our shelter, we made our moccasins and clothing, we used the sinew along the backbone to bind and sew with, and we used bones for tools and to eat with. Our lives were completely dependent on the buffalo.

The buffalos are really smart. When they are under attack the herd keeps the baby right in the middle. The elders and mothers surround the baby. On the outside of the elders and mothers are the bulls.

Many Blackfoot ceremonies are placed upon the actions of the buffalo, which was the staff of life for the people. When the buffalo migrated, the people would follow; thus, the buffalo are regarded as a holy animal that belonged to the sun, **Naató'si**.

I teach about games. I teach about building your physical body; you can run, you can scream, you can make your body work really hard. We are going to move and stretch before we begin class. Mary Ellen sings a song of the Moon, **Ko'komiki'somm**, as everybody follows her steps and sings.

Mary Ellen introduces indigenous games with a story. "We would all have games that we played. We would meet our neighbors who would also have games. We would all come together and play these games that you will be learning. If you look at this snow snake, it is made of modern materials, but you need to remember we had to make everything from trees. You had to find the right tree, cut the tree down and cut off the bark then shape it and paint it the way you choose.



Introduction of the games, such as ring the stick includes how to play, but also some Blackfoot language and songs.

"**Sapiik'iisoohtsatsit**, means ring it." We also learned the Body Song in Blackfoot (see www.buildingbrains.together.ca).

After lunch, everyone walks around the camp while Mary Ellen teaches about the different kinds of wood used for various purposes, cottonwood, different types of willow, pine and birch.



Stronger wood will be used to build tipis and the lodge frame; another size of wood is used for tipi pegs.



Cottonwood is good for smoking meat, and willow for covering the lodge, making games, and making frames for offerings for the **Okaan** ceremony. The tipi pegs that

secure Blackfoot tipis typically have two bars around the top after peeling the bark off of the stick. At this ceremony, the Brave Dog Society are harvesting cottonwood. Cottonwood is usually chosen as the sacred tree to build the lodge structure [1].



We continued to walk around the camp noting wildflowers and sage along the way. Sage has natural antibacterial, antifungal, and antiviral properties. There are over 50 different types of sage. We use sage everyday for smudging and cleansing. As we move along we see more tipis setting up camp.



Every family will have their own design on their tipi. The bottom of the tipi will represent the earth and are usually pictorials of hills or mountains. The middle pictorial usually represents our livelihood and is often the buffalo, **iinii**, or of hunting buffalo. The top of the tipi represents the sky, **sspóóhtsi**, or stars, **kakatoosiiks**.



This tipi has seven stars that represent the Seven Brothers, **lihkitsiikamiiksi**, or the Big Dipper in the sky, from the story of the Lost Children (see buildingbrains.together.ca). If you see a star on the back of a tipi, you know it came from dreams. Some have a butterfly or a moth. It is called **apánii**.



One of these tipis has many stars on one side and sunshine on the other. They represent night and day.

The next day, the children learned a Blackfoot story of how **Naapi** roped Thunder revealing a beautiful rainbow. They learned the colors of the rainbow in Blackfoot with the song of Naapi O'topim (see buildingbrains.together.ca).



When the children began learning how to make traditional games they started by trimming willow branches to make sticks of varying sizes.



The thinner branches are good for making rings that are held together with sinew or string.

This is how a buffalo sinew looks when it is dry. The person who made the strings of sinew, took this large piece apart and cleaned every strand. When I am ready to use this I just pull off a strand.



This is the best string to use to sew your moccasin sole. We also use it for wrapping rings of wood to make the ring and attaching the ring to the stick.

We will use these red and blue sticks for making our arrows for the Hoop and Arrow game. The red sticks represent the Piikani people, and the blue represent the Kainai people.



It is important to keep in mind that our clans are not separate. We may live away from each other, but we are all family. When we go to Browning Montana, we have family and when we go to Siksika we have family. With these sticks we will make our arrows and later the hoops for the game.

After art class Mary Ellen encouraged the children to move by playing some games after having been introduced to them.



Out of the tipi the children begin with Run and Scream. Then Make the Stick Jump, Over Head Ball Throw, Kickball, Hoop and Arrow, and ball juggling with lacrosse sticks. (see buildingbrains.together.ca for games)





Meanwhile, preparations for the **Okaan** ceremony are underway. The Brave Dog Society have harvested the trees for the Sundance lodge.

The larger trees are used for the frame of the lodge, whereas the smaller branches will be used for the Sweat Lodge and the sides of the Sundance Lodge.



The prepared trees are lifted off the ground to prevent back luck.



As the days progressed, the children learned about **Okaan** from one of the grandmothers attending camp. “**Okaan** is a spiritual ceremony. It is not a Powow where there is dancing, socializing and celebrating. **Okaan** involves a Holy Woman who is at the camp here right now. She will be at her tipi, which will have wood all the way around it. The Holy Woman will have four or seven helpers that will be helping her with her duties [2].”

“As children, we are going to make an offering and pray and smudge while we make them. Our offerings will eventually be tied onto the center pole of the Lodge.

When they bring up the lodge everybody brings a tipi pole or branches to line the outside of the lodge. An elder is going to show us.”



From: Ojibwa

“When we make our offering we will bring them to the head of the Brave Dog Society.”

“Next to us we have a tipi of the Brave Dog Society. Mary Ellen here is also a member of the Brave Dog Society. They are the police. If they see you misbehaving they will come to you to inform you of it. They are probably all fasting as is the Holy Woman while they pray. So, when you walk around the camp, you can’t race or run, you have to follow whoever is leading [2].”

The center pole has been brought up and branches are being placed on the sides. Traditionally, the Holy Woman would begin her fast when the foliage started to be placed around the Lodge [3].



The children were taught how to make the offerings to the sun, **Naató’si**, that would be later attached to the center pole for the ceremony.



A cross is made of sticks with material covering and sage is added to the cross.



The Offerings are attached to the Brave Dog’s tipi until it is time to add them to the lodge.

Those who pray for the sun, **Naató’si**, give offerings in the form of crosses and this is wrapped around the center pole. After the ceremony, the cross is left as an offering. It is thought that bad luck will come to anyone who tries to steal it [3].

Once the Lodge is ready the ceremony begins. The Holy Woman walks out of her tent with her support around her. Traditionally, when fasting, the holy woman could not wash with water, or this would cause rain and a fire must always burn hot in her lodge no matter how hot the weather. Only the men enter the sweat lodge while the women sit facing the west entrance. There are rocks placed inside the sweat lodge. When the rocks are hot, cold water is placed upon the rocks forming a purifying steam. A pipe is passed inside for the men to smoke and pray. Boiled buffalo tongue is brought by the women which was provided for offerings to the sun [3]. At our ceremony, the women gathered sticks and have placed green boughs on their heads. Women wear the leaves throughout the ceremony as a symbol of growth and new light [3].



At our camp, some women wore scarves around their heads and all wrapped themselves in a blanket for the ceremony.

After the ceremony, The Brave Dog Society shot their guns into the sky.



We all enjoyed dried buffalo tongue dusted with mint. With our gift of meat we prayed to the sun, Naató'si.



After our prayers, everyone buried a small piece of meat into the ground.



The children and those with offerings for the priest of the ceremony entered a tent with their offerings and had their faces painted.



In camp, the children were completing their hoops and attaching horsehair to their arrows for the Hoop and Arrow game (see buildingbrainstogether.ca for games).



The last game to learn and play was the mini Hand Game, or Rock in the Fist. After the game all of the children take part in the gift give-away.

Awards are often given by the winner who carries a blanket full of gifts around to players. An award is often given to the toughest competitor and continuing until all players receive a gift. Each person receiving a gift graciously congratulates the winner of the game. The last item in the blanket is for the winner. This give-away is and has been practiced as rules for Rock in the Fist. Social values were also developed by awarding those who tried the hardest in games [4]. At our camp, the blanket was given to the one who participated the most in all the days at camp.





As the children learned more about the games and played the games, they became more interested in making the games. Each child took home a game bag with the games they made and they were able to participate in OKAAN 2023.

OKAAN 2023 was a very special spiritual ceremony.



Okaan members come around the center pole for a final prayer. It is left as an offering and will remain. It has become a holy gift to the sun, **Naató'si** [3]. The ceremony of **Okaan** is considered to be the oldest among the Blackfoot, Cheyenne and Gros Ventre people [1].

Building Brains Together has learned and acknowledges the importance of the Okaan ceremony and the cultural practices that are part of this ceremony. It was truly a wonderful spiritual ceremony that made this summer camp extraordinary for Building Brains who wholeheartedly thanks Mary Ellen Little Mustache for the invitation and the opportunity to learn and enjoy more Blackfoot culture.

More information about Okaan and its cultural roots and practices will follow at www.buildingbrains.ca.

References

1. <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/9/1/1973776/-Indians-101-A-very-short-overview-of-the-Northern-Plains-Sun-Dance>.
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3. Siksika (1960). Okaan. Retrieved online August, 2023 from OKAAN - Blackfoot Digital Library - University of Lethbridge Digitized Collections.
4. International Games Society; Indian Education Division (2013). Retrieved online 2020 [Traditional Games Unit \(nisnresourcehub.org\)](http://Traditional Games Unit (nisnresourcehub.org)).