

The Fire Keeper's Apprentice, part 2

By Rick Runningbear



The Fire Keeper's apprentice sat at the feet of the Fire Keeper. Yesterday he had followed his teacher's instructions and had gathered several types of natural plant fibers to use as tinder in starting the sacred fire. He also already had the simple tools necessary to cast sparks upon this tinder and cause them to ignite. He had already practiced this and found some degree of success. But to sustain a fire, the tinder needed small pieces of special wood, even the sacred kinds of wood that pertained to the 7 clans of the Tsalagi people.

The Fire Keeper spoke: "Our people consist of 7 different clans, each of which has a special purpose for the good of all the people. The largest of these is the Wolf Clan. From this clan comes our best war chiefs and mightiest warriors. For this reason the color of this clan is red. Also there is a tree in the forest that is sacred to the Wolf Clan, it is one of the strongest and tallest of trees. It is the Hickory. You will recognize it by its shaggy bark and you will see on the ground under these trees the remains of hickory nuts and their hulls. You must go into the forest and find a young Hickory tree and cut it down after offering tobacco to it and explaining to its spirit the use you will put to its wood. Then you must cut the Hickory tree into slender sticks of wood of a certain length. Put a bundle of this wood into a container to keep it separated from other sacred woods you will gather."

The Fire Keeper was sitting by a common fire burning just outside his lodge. He took a stick and stirred the fire a bit, then he continued talking: "You must do this same procedure to all the Sacred Trees that pertain to the Real People. I will tell you how to identify each one. Some of them you already know. The wood you get from the trees must be good healthy wood. There must be no rot or disease in them. Also, you must keep them separate from each other in a safe and dry place for several moons before you try to use them in a Sacred Fire. The wood must be seasoned and dry. No green wood is to be used in making this Fire."

The apprentice spoke up: "Teacher, I know that the Cedar tree is sacred to our people. I have heard many times during the story telling time of the cold moons how the Cedar tree came to be sacred to our people". The Fire Keeper replied: "Yes, you are right. The Cedar tree is sacred to all our people of all the clans. We use it in most all of our ceremonies. I want you to gather some of that along with the other 7 sacred trees. It is useful in making the Sacred Fire. You should use only small amounts of Cedar in the Sacred Fire, but it will add power to it."

The apprentice then asked: "What are the sacred trees that pertain to the other clans?" The Teacher replied, "Oak trees, that makes the acorns that we convert into food, pertains to the Deer Clan. The Maple tree is sacred to the Bird Clan. The Beech tree that holds onto its leaves through the Cold Moons pertains to the Long Hair Clan. The Birch tree is sacred to the Wild Potato Clan. The Locust belongs to the Paint Clan, and the Ash tree pertains to the Blue Clan. You will soon be able to know these trees and the "medicine" each one has that makes it sacred to one clan or the other."

At length the Apprentice left the presence of the Fire Keeper and walked into the forest. The terrain was hilly and steep in places. The Fire Keeper had told him how to recognize the 8 different kinds of trees. Strapped to his hip was a small hand ax. Up hill and down valley he walked and worked until late in the day. Luck smiled on him and he had been able to accumulate small bundles of the 8 different kinds of wood. They were cut to fairly short lengths and split into narrow widths. Each bundle was strapped with rawhide to enable him to carry them and to keep each type of wood separate from the rest. He made his way back to his lodge and in another outside storage structure he carefully placed the 8 kinds of wood in such a way that they could cure and stay dry over the next several moons.

Now that he had the special wood needed and the proper tinder and a way to cast sparks to start a fire, he could not wait until the time he would assist the Fire Keeper make a sacred fire for the benefit of the people at the next major ceremony. It was now nightfall and as he lay upon his bed-roll he thought about the "big ceremonies" where all the people came together to celebrate. In Spring was the First New Moon Of Spring Ceremony. In early summer came the Green Corn festival and in late summer came the Ripe Corn festival. In early Autumn came the Great New Moon ceremony. In mid Autumn came the Atahoona Ceremony and in late Autumn came the Bounding Bush Ceremony. Then, the people retired into their Winter Hot Houses and this was the time of story telling, hand crafts, and just staying warm and surviving the harsh winter. And every 7th year there was the BIG CEREMONY: The Uka Dance, in which the Uku (peace chief) was honored and re-instated. All of these great ceremonies had a sacred fire. One day he would be the honored one to provide this fire for the people, with the help of his assistants. The apprentice's eyes grew heavy and he drifted off to sleep. Soon he was dreaming of Sacred Fire...the symbol of the Great One. The fire danced and the sacred wood popped and cracked. The apprentice slept well until awakened in the morning by the light of the "fire in the sky" which appeared over the eastern horizon. (to be continued)

