

Unit Four: Sharing Chestnuts

As we have learned, the American chestnut tree is a very important tree to the plants, fungi, animals, and cultures that lived with it. The Iroquois people thought the chestnut so important that they made a story about it so that their children would also love and care for these beautiful trees.

Long, long ago there lived a boy called Hodadenon which means “the Last One Left.” He was called this because most of his family had disappeared, leaving just himself and his uncle. Uncle took very good care of the boy and always made sure he had enough to eat before bedtime.

“In fact,” said Hodadenon to himself one day, “My Uncle feeds me so well, I have never seen him eat a bite!” So he decided that night to spy on Uncle when he should be sleeping. He made a small hole in his deerskin blanket. When he had eaten and said goodnight to Uncle, Hodadenon crawled under his blankets and pretended to be fast asleep, but kept one eye open to peep through the hole in his deerskin.

Uncle very softly called “Hodadenon!” but the boy still pretended to sleep. Uncle called again, just a little louder and still Hodadenon did not respond.

“He is really asleep then,” muttered Uncle, and he began to quietly rummage under his sleeping cot until he produced a birch bark box. Inside of the box was a tiny cooking pot and a little brown nut. Uncle used his knife to shave just a little of the nut into the pot. He put the pot over the fire and began to sing to it, “Grow pot, grow in size. Grow pot, grow in size.”

To Hodadenon’s amazement the pot began to grow! And as it grew it began to boil! By the time it was a full sized pot the smell coming from it set the boy’s mouth to watering it was so delicious. Uncle stopped singing and ate up all the pot contained. He then sang to the pot to shrink and shrink it did! Uncle put the pot back in the birch bark box and put the box back under his sleeping cot.

Well, what would you have done? Would you want to know about the magical pot and little brown nut? Hodadenon did! So the next day when Uncle was out hunting the boy brought out the pot and the little brown nut, which was almost half gone.

“Uncle will be very hungry when he returns from hunting. How happy he will be to have this delicious food ready, but I might have to use the rest of the nut,” said Hodadenon to himself. So he put the rest of the little brown nut in the pot and sang “Grow pot, grow in size. Grow pot, grow in size.” And the pot grew! So delighted was Hodadenon that he sang again, and again...and again! Soon the pot filled the whole lodge and sweet smelling porridge was bubbling and frothing everywhere!

Just then, Uncle returned from his hunting. Horrified by what he saw, Uncle sang and sang until the pot was tiny once more. “Hodadenon, what have you done?” He wailed, “You have used up all of my food! I have been so careful to save that nut for many many years, and still I could have used it for many many more for it is a chestnut, a very magical food indeed. It was the only food I could eat and now I shall starve!”

“Uncle I did not know! I am sorry! I will fetch you another of these chestnuts!” said Hodadenon with tears in his eyes for his poor, hungry Uncle.

“Bah! You could not, what do you suppose happened to the rest of our family? No, the journey to the grove in the north is too dangerous. If you are not eaten by the beasts on the trail then you shall most certainly be seen by the Skin Woman than guards the grove and killed by the seven wicked sisters who claim the grove as their own! It would be better that I starve, Nephew.”

“I thank you for your advice Uncle, but I shall now be on my way. I will find this grove and retrieve a nut for you. I will return soon, do not let the fire go out! As I live, so shall it burn.” And with that Hodadenon dashed out of the lodge and up the northward trail.

Not long into his journey, the boy came upon two great rattlesnakes! They rattled and coiled up, ready to strike. Thinking quickly, Hodadenon caught two chipmunks and tossed them to the serpents.

“That is the food you should be eating, now go and leave this road in peace!” commanded Hodadenon. The fire back at the lodge flickered and spat, Hodadenon’s life was in danger! The snakes flicked their forked

tongues and slithered off into the shadowy underbrush. Hodadenon walked on.

Soon he came to a bend in the trail, and waiting ahead were two huge, snarling bears! “What shall I do?” thought Hodadenon. Just then he heard a buzzing and looked up into a nearby tree. There he found a hive of bees busily making their honey. Hodadenon climbed up and retrieved two combs, being sure to thank the bees for their help. He tossed one honeycomb to each bear.

“There,” he said, “isn’t that much nicer than eating travelers? Go now and leave this road in peace!” The fire back home flickered and spat again, worse than the time before. The bears considered the boy for a moment, then turned around and lumbered away through the forest.

Hodadenon breathed a sigh of relief and walked on. Soon he came to a crest of a hill. Waiting below he saw two pumas crouched and ready to pounce. Hodadenon knew what to do this time, and taking his bow and arrow he killed two deer. He tossed a deer to each puma, “This is what you should be hunting! Go now and leave this road in peace!”

Once more Uncle watched as the fire flickered and fizzled. The pumas glared at Hodadenon, a growl deep in their throats. Then they licked their chops and silently crept back into the trees. Hodadenon nearly wept with relief and walked on.

Soon he heard on the wind the faint sound of a woman singing. Hodadenon froze in his tracks and listened to the ominous song, “Gi-nu, ginu, I see all and I see you!”

The song was very faint, coming from high up in a nearby grove of giant trees. Hodadenon was sure that the Skin Woman had not seen him yet or the song would become much louder! He still had time to hatch a plan. He spied a basswood tree not far off and peeled off a strip of bark. Using the juice of some nearby berries Hodadenon painted the bark until it looked like a beautiful wampum belt. Then he tapped the ground four times.

“Hello, Hodadenon! How can I help you?” A mole had popped out of the ground where he had tapped.

“Grandmother, if I make myself very very small could you carry me beneath the earth and to Skin Woman? She must not see us or she will summon the seven wicked sisters!”

“Your plan sounds dangerous, Hodadenon. But I will help you!” said the mole. So down they went and they came up right underneath the tree of the Skin Woman.

“Skin Woman, I am Hodadenon and I have seen you first! I will give you this fine wampum belt if you tell no one I have been here!” called Hodadenon. The fire back in the lodge fizzled, flared, and almost went out.

“I did not see you! So I will accept your offer, Hodadenon,” said the Skin Woman. He threw the belt up to her and she fastened it onto herself. Suddenly the belt began to squeeze and squeeze her until she could not even speak! Hodadenon dashed to the chestnut trees and scooped several handfuls of chestnuts into his pouch. Then he hurried back to his mole friend and they disappeared into the earth once more.

Just then the seven wicked sisters were passing by and saw the Skin Woman all wrapped up in the wampum belt. “Someone has been here!” they shrieked. “Foolish Skin Woman, who has done this?”

“Gi-nu, Gi-nu, someone has bribed me, I can’t say who. Gi-nu, Gi-nu I’ve been given a belt shiny and new!” sang Skin Woman.

“Fool! That is only the bark from a tree painted with berries!” screamed the seven wicked sisters, “It must have been Hodadenon, whose Uncle stole from us all those years ago! If he returns he will be dealt with but first we will punish the Skin Woman!” and each of them took turns beating the Skin Woman with their clubs.

From his hiding place beneath the earth Hodadenon heard all of this and thought to himself, “These wicked sisters cannot go on like this! Poor Skin Woman! These sisters must not have their hearts, and I shall steal them!” The mole dove down once more and tunneled until she and Hodadenon came right up through the floor of the seven wicked sisters’ lodge. Now the fire watched by Hodadenon’s Uncle had died to mere embers and Uncle wept for he knew Hodadenon was in mortal danger.

Hodadenon saw hanging by the fire a rope with seven hearts on it. He grabbed the rope and ran out of the lodge. The seven wicked sisters saw him

and came screaming and waving their clubs. Hodadenon ran until he came to a pile of bones, the victims of the seven wicked sisters. He swiftly climbed and cut down the Skin Woman and laid her on the pile of bones. Then, just as the first sister had almost reached him, Hodadenon threw the hearts on top of the bone pile and sang “Awake, my relatives. Awake!”

As he sang the seven wicked sisters fell down in their tracks and the bone pile began to stir and shift. Then the bones began to assemble. Muscle, skin, and even clothing appeared on the bones and then standing before him Hodadenon saw his parents, brothers, cousins, and all his relations. Skin Woman herself was none other than the sister of Hodadenon!

Filled with joy, Hodadenon passed out chestnuts to each of his relations and told them to plant them everywhere and that all creation should share in the bounty of chestnuts and so break the curse of the seven wicked sisters. He refilled his own pouch and hurried home to his Uncle to tell him of the good things that he had done.

Now chestnuts may no longer be hoarded and claimed by one family alone, but are free to share and nourish all of creation.

Teacher’s Bio

Sonia Horowitz

Sonia is a homesteader, forager, and artist living in Mason, WI. She is passionate about inspiring families and individuals to safely and respectfully get out and explore the natural world. Along with online education, Sonia also enjoys live learning presentations from local walks and classes to conference lectures and workshops. This year she will be leading classes on ethnomycology at the Midwest Women's Herbal Conference Mycelium Mysteries event, the Georgia Mushroom Club, and the South Carolina Upstate Mycological Society.

Sonia's heart truly belongs to the forests of Lake Superior, but she is also heavily involved in leading women's empowerment groups and researching cultural history especially the history, mythology, and culture of her own ancestors, the Norse and Germanic peoples.

Sonia has a certification in the study of the Icelandic Sagas and is available to speak on topics of Norse culture and mythology as well as on the European witch crazes. It is Sonia's belief that the earth supports all people and by exploring our roots we can find good medicines for our own individual minds, bodies, and souls and learn more about how we can help support the earth in turn.

Her goals currently in progress are to transform her homestead (Amanita Acres) into a place of community and family learning. You can find Sonia at the Amanita Acres facebook page and at www.amanitaacres.com