

Nora Thompson Dean

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Nora Thompson Dean (1907–1984), also known as **Weenjipahkihelexkwe**, which translates as "Touching Leaves Woman" in Unami, was a member of the Delaware Tribe of Indians. As a Lenape traditionalist and one of the last fluent speakers of the southern Unami dialect of the Lenape language, she was an influential mentor to younger tribal members and is widely cited in scholarship on Lenape culture.

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Nora Thompson Dean in buckskin dress, on a visit to Pennsylvania, ca. 1973

Early life

Nora Thompson was born ten miles east of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, USA, at Glen Oak, on July 3, 1907, to James H. and Sarah (Wilson) Thompson, both full-blood Delawares. She received her education in the Oklahoma Public Schools. She graduated from Midway School in 1921, as salutatorian, and from Dewey High School in 1925. Nora Thompson also had some nursing training and several university credits. In 1941 she married Charley Dean, who was also born and raised in northeastern Oklahoma.^[1] She died on November 29, 1984.

Her name "Touching Leaves Woman," has some complexity, which requires some explanation, as follows: Nora Thompson Dean, Lenape /luh-NAH-pay/, 1907-1984, Dewey, Oklahoma. Normally indigenous blessing names are kept quiet, but Nora was such a wonderful woman that it should be shown why she additionally had such an appealing demeanor. It would be sad to let it pass from memory by silence. The Unami (= /w'NAH-mee/ 'downriver [person]') name of Nora Thompson Dean and the genealogy of her ancestors is now readily accessible on the Internet after someone in 2008 adapted the spelling *Wenjipahkeehlehkwe*, intending it to be limited to one cultural event, but it spread widely on the Internet; instead it is properly, as on the Talk-Lenape website, *Weenchipahkihëlèxkwe*, 'Touching Leaves Woman', or, as Nora herself had proposed, 'Leaves-that-touch-each-other-from-time-to-time woman', phonetically *Weenčipahkihəlexkwe*, /way-en-jee-paH-kee-hull-EKH-kway/, morphologically segmented (*We:ent-ipahk-ihəle:-)xkwe*, 'on.both.sides/on.either.side/together-leaves-moving-woman'. The initial stem shows a rare reciprocal reduplication (in Unami, as if **we:we:-* for *wë-*), 'the leaves (of the trees)

on either side (of the path) come together (overhead rustling)’. This is the kind of blessing name that is derived from a vision recitation. Her name was bestowed on her by her mother, Sarah Wilson Thompson. The woman with whom Sarah Wilson was riding on a horse was not her biological mother but her aunt, *Way-lay-luh-mah* (‘the esteemed one’), as supplied by Weslager, and it was not *Kweiti*, Sarah’s biological mother, but *Way-lay-luh-mah* who raised her and whom she called her mother, and so Nora called *Way-lay-luh-mah* her grandmother. This naming pattern is in line with Lenape kinship ideas. The vision occurred after Sarah was riding horseback one day holding onto *Way-lay-luh-mah*’s waist when *Way-lay-luh-mah* had fainted from a probable heart attack. Sarah tried to hold her, but her grip slipped, and both had fallen off the horse. Sarah was very frightened, but some of the trees turned into people who told her not to be afraid and wanted to help her. Sarah stood listening, and the tree leaves by rustling started to sing a song to her, one that she sang in the Big House. [Paraphrased by Carl Masthay per NTD’s interview by Katherine Red Corn, April 1968: <http://digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/duke/transcripts/T-296.pdf>, and compiled with help from Ives Goddard, Raymond Whritenour, and James Rementer.]

Cultural revitalization efforts

Dean was raised in the traditional ways of her people, and she dedicated herself to keeping these alive. Throughout her adult life, she taught about the Lenape religious ceremonies, social functions, dances, craftwork, herbal medicines, and language. She was consulted by tribal members and numerous academic specialists, including anthropologists, linguists, historians, botanists, and ethnomusicologists.

In 1967 Dean founded a mail-order business, Touching Leaves Indian Crafts, through which she sold the traditional clothing of the Lenape and other items. Dean received awards for her craftwork, and in recognition of her work to promote the traditional ways of her Lenape people. These included commendations from the Oklahoma House of Representatives and the Governors of Oklahoma, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, and a Fellowship Award from the Archaeological Society of New Jersey.^[2]

In 1972, Dean participated in the Delaware Indian Symposium, which brought together scholars and tribal members from Oklahoma and Canada. She also presented at another Delaware cultural gathering in 1981.^[3]

In the later part of her life, Dean divided her time between artwork, working with students who came to her home to study, lecturing at universities, working at museums demonstrating Lenape artwork, working at different universities as a resource person, and preparing educational material for sale through her business.

Oklahoma governor George Nigh declared Dean an Oklahoma Ambassador of Good Will.^[4]

Unami language

Nora Thompson Dean created material included four *Lenape Language Lessons*; these sound recordings, as well as others made with Dean and other Lenape elders during the twentieth-century, have been digitized to provide the voices of the Lenape Talking Dictionary, a project funded by the National Science Foundation.^[5] Dean's brother Edward Leonard Thompson (1904–2002) was the last living native speaker of Unami in the United States.^[3]

Death

Dean died on November 29 of 1984^[3] and is buried in the Delaware Indian Cemetery in Dewey, Oklahoma.^[6]

Notes

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External links

- Interview with Nora Thompson Dean by Katherine Red Corn (Osage Nation) (https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:oqLkF_37zewJ:digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/duke/transcripts/T-296.pdf+&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESirseaRnfhCPsW2S8k3KbdN4YJq_w9TSW76uuuwHWtp2YXaeYyC7wsMS4BkNbcukbzAd4gd3PCi6cEqp0tb3e-Bb-vNsHTVlwOvzkZH7HC4JFgqjhZmDrli1hu0WpWFJCuGampu&sig=AHIEtbSoRsQ7fS5ydq6gMrZk8jJOsHclqg&pli=1)
- Delaware Tribe of Indians (<http://delawaretribe.org>)
- Lenape Talking Dictionary (<http://www.talk-lenape.org/index.php>)

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