



SARA FILLS THE PIPE

ON THANKS & THANKSGIVING

Sara Fills the Pipe was busy cutting fabric strips for a colorful green and turquoise star quilt when PWNA staff visited her. She can produce a full size (non-satin) star quilt in about three days, if she sticks with it. She is grateful the small fabric squares that make up the star are no longer cut and sewn individually – “the strips make it much easier,” she says. Sara sells some quilts and gives some away.

Recently celebrating her 70th birthday, Sara likes to visit the Oglala Elderly Meal Center on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. There, she can enjoy a meal, visit with friends and prepare her fabric strips for sewing. “I forget to eat” when I stay home and sew.

LEARNING ABOUT THANKSGIVING

After a while, our conversation turned to an upcoming holiday — Thanksgiving. We asked how and when she learned the infamous story of “the first Thanksgiving.” Sara responded, “I learned it in school in Pine Ridge. My grandmother sent me there when I was six years old. I didn’t know English and the teacher would hit me with a ruler whenever I spoke Lakota.”

Like many youth growing up around her on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Sara attended boarding school as a teen. Sara explains, “My grandmother had passed and I was sent to Brainerd (Indian School) in Hot Springs,” an hour away from Oglala. “There were a lot of prayers at school and the clothing had to cover your neck and arms, you had to wear nylons and no open toed shoes. Needless to say, I ran away, and then my mother moved me to Denver.” What Sara liked about Denver was having a strong Indian community in a city, including Elder groups, beadwork, sewing and painting. It was important to Sara to pass these skills onto her own children so they would be able to do it for themselves.

Over the years, Sara has learned a different version of that first meal shared between the Indians and the pilgrims, and this is the version she shares with her grandchildren now. “I tell them, you listen to the Indian version and then you’ll understand why some people don’t celebrate [Thanksgiving]. We [Native Americans] never had holidays like President’s day, Easter or Christmas. After learning the truth about the colonists, the boats, the land taken, she wonders out loud, “to what are we giving thanks,” and her grandchildren plea, “Come tell us so we can go to school and tell our teachers.”

SHARING THE HOLIDAY WITH FAMILY

While understanding the real story of the first Thanksgiving, Sara also recalls the years when Thanksgiving was big in her household, the years spent with her second husband and their family. “Our holiday tradition was the meal and it would take three days from start to finish — it used to be a big holiday — the longer it took, the better it tasted! My husband was from Tennessee and we were married 20 years. The first year we cooked together and then he took over the cooking and I learned to like it. After he passed, I was burning the food!” They prepared elaborate Thanksgiving meals of “turkey, ham, menudo, chitterlings and hog maws, candied yams, collard greens, corn, acorn squash with butter, sugar and cinnamon, sweet potato pie and egg custard pie.”

Over the years, Thanksgiving traditions have changed for Sara. With five adult children, 20+ grandchildren and two great grandchildren residing in Colorado, Minnesota and South Dakota, she gets invited for the holiday and no longer needs to cook, and the degree of celebration on Thanksgiving depends on what children she is visiting.

Sara is clearly thankful for many things, like her health and her ability to create beautiful blankets that are shared with others during celebrations. Sara speaks so proudly of her children and grandchildren. For all of these gifts, she is giving thanks every day, not just one day.

