



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg and Russell Call

Interviewee(s): Mother Bear (Anita Peters Little) and Michelle Fernandes

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Brief summary of tape contents: Discussion of what Michelle Fernandes has produced during her apprenticeship; Mother Bear's background, Plimoth Plantation job and National Geographic shoot outfitting 90 Wampanoag men in regalia; painting regalia; Michelle introduction to pow wows, dancing, and making regalia; opportunity to study with Mother Bear; doing the fringing, her son Brice wearing regalia; needing to be calm to work on regalia; Wampanoag traditions going underground; pow wows; symbolism of design; getting deer skins; what Michelle has gotten out of working with Mother Bear; Mother Bear's work; historic photographs of relatives; what Mother Bear would like the public to know about the Wampanoags and their culture; dancing in pow wows; growing up in Mashpee, racism in Falmouth; commercialization of Mashpee; MB working at Plimoth Plantation and encountering white ignorance and hostility; MB's ancestor chart on deerskin; tribal land trial and federal recognition; the Massachusetts state flag- sword over Indian's head - blatant racism.

Counter/ABS	Contents
	MB: I'm Mother Bear from the Mashpee Tribe and we're in West Barnstable.
	MF: Michelle Fernandes, the same tribe.
	MB: We're here today with Michelle's products that she's made, her traditional regalias she's made for her son Brice: leggings, breechcloth, moccasins. And for herself she has a mantel, a one-shoulder top, and a skirt and moccasins that she's made. She's really done a great job, for her first effort and I'm really proud of her.
	MH: So you started out - tell me a little bit about your background Mother Bear. I know you mentioned attending a school in Boston in the interim. Just fill us in a little bit about how you started, when you were younger.
	MB: When I was younger my great grandmother, we spent a lot of time with her. And she made a lot of the regalias for the people, for the pow wows and things. That's where I first got interested in regalias. The School of Fashion Design in

Boston that I went to had nothing to do with the regalias (laughs) but I did learn more about the construction of clothing and stuff like that.

Then I got a job at Plimoth Plantation in the wardrobe department for the Wampanoag Program. We did a photo shoot for National Geographic where we had to outfit 90 Wampanoag men in traditional clothing. From there I worked clothing for the people that, the interpreters on site. And since then I've done in excess of 100 regalias for our tribal people.

MH: I think I've seen some of them because I've seen the Wampanoag Nation Singers and Dancers - Linda Coombs and Jonathan Perry. Was that some of your work?

MB: Jonathan's is. And my brother John. He's in that group. My sister is in that group.

MH: And are you related to Ramona?

MB: Ramona's my sister.

MH: That's great. When you say regalia, define that for someone that doesn't know what that means.

MB: Traditional clothing. That's it.

MH: I know there's a pow wow coming it. Is this traditional clothing specifically Wampanoag?

MB: Right, right. At the pow wow you'll see a lot of different types of clothing, but this is our tradition. A deerskin and the paint. The paint would have been made out of red ochre. We also use yellow ochre, graphite, robin's eggs. Then we would powder it up and then mix it with bear fat to make it stick to the deerskin.

MH: Where do you get the bear fat?

MB: We squeeze the bears (laughter). There were black bears in this area traditionally.

MF: They're running around. I think they said Weymouth they saw one.

MH: Well let's talk a little bit about what you've made for Brice and what we see here on the table. The leggings, for instance.

MF: Well I started out with Mother Bear's tutelage, I think her message is, really respect the leather first and foremost. Definitely be in the mood to fringe, to paint, and to learn about the texture and shape of it in its original form. So I had to learn that. My introduction to deerskin or deer hides was through my aunt and growing up. We were dancers in the pow wow when we were younger. We were brought in and told to do something with the leather, create a dress, because you were dancing and performing. But I kind of lost a lot of that, our family have separated and gone and done other things. Mother Bear keeps the tradition alive, thank

goodness. So when this opportunity came I had to be reintroduced to it. The original wording, the art work, I didn't know about the artwork until Mother Bear introduced it to me. But the fringing, I know the tedious nature of that. And I think, more than anything, it's just learning to be confident of how to cut it. So with working with the leggings, it's all about the size. And he's four so it's really small. You have to try it on him so that he knows that it's an honor to be able to wear this and have it made for him. So we started with that.

And then the traditional moccasins and just being able to sew in the different pieces of it. And it's very intricate.

MH: It's by hand?

MF: It's all by hand. Sinew - definitely a lot of needles and a thimble. Don't get lost without your thimble. And so it was just going from one piece to the other. Once I finished this, the breech cloth was next. Just working with him and making sure he's comfortable and then making the art work do what I was comfortable - I'm not yet a senior seamstress as Mother Bear is. She's really good at it. But I think that if I continue to do it for the community and continue to practice, I find peace in working with the leather. So that really helps me a lot.

MH: The fringing -- now is this where you work or do you have a work space?

MB: I bring it home and I'll do it if I have a calm moment. I have to be calm.

MH: Talk about that. Why do you have to be calm?

MF: Well, it just takes some concentration. It's kind of like what it would be to a European if they were doing knitting. Just having that continuous movement but yet you still have to concentrate on what you're doing. So a fringe, basically you start out, the way I did it or was taught was we did the bigger fringe and then you bring it in smaller and smaller and smaller. The better you get, the smaller the fringe, the more in line they look. More of a straight line. So it's just a lot just being calm. And I have five children so that takes a moment. But once you do, it's a lot of fun. Like I said, it does put you in a calm way of thinking. So I really enjoyed that part of it.

MH: I have a question about Wampanoag traditional arts in general. It's so wonderful to see this continuing. Are they endangered? Do you feel like you're carrying on something that is endangered?

MB: Sometimes during our history, our traditions went like more underground. And then they had their revival and it's the right time, they go back. And I don't feel they're endangered. I think they're coming out stronger and stronger now. Because more people are wearing the traditional, not the fancy satin and sequins and jingle dresses and all that.

MH: Is that more pan-Indian or western?

MB: Yeah, it's more western. And it really makes me proud when I see our people dressed in our traditional clothing. It's really a great feeling.

MH: And so the pow wow is one place. Are there other places you would wear this?

MB: Well in the summertime, there are pow wows, like every weekend you could go to a different pow wow. We have ceremonies and things like that. [cell phone rings]

MF: I actually think the pow wows do every weekend. There's a whole calendar of year, a whole year. Cause that is a career to a lot of native people. Oh yeah to go in and win a dance contest or to win a drumming contest. It's a way of life for a lot of Native Americans. You can see the calendar - obviously in warmer areas, when you do have them, but in this climate we can go to a pow wow every weekend.

MH: Can you talk a little bit about this painted symbolism? The decoration.

MB: A lot of the designs were collected by, I forget the woman's name, but she put them in a book. Originally, when men would dream about the hunt and the women would interpret them into different designs. So we have a big collection of the original designs. And then some people dream up their own designs.

MH: What is this piece here?

MB: This is her skirt. Our traditional clothing was a wrap-around skirt and then a one-shoulder top. The top is one shoulder. It ties on the top and then you wrap it and tie it around the waste.

MH: And where do you get the deerskin? Are you tanning it yourself?

MB: Oh no, no, no. There's a place in Florida called Spotted Pony that she really helps me out a lot. She sends it within a week. It will take four deer hides to make a woman's outfit. So, even though we do have a lot of deer here, it's a long tedious and gruesome job.

MH: I remember hearing in Georgia, where I used to live, they used to do brain tannin.

MB: Yeah, you'd rub the brains into the skin to make it soft and pliable. It has an enzyme in it that breaks down the skin and makes it soft.

MH: I think you may have already answered this but what does it mean for you to have had this studying with Mother Bear?

MF: When she approached me about the apprenticeship, I was obviously thinking about the T.V. show [with Donald Trump.] But I kind of got the picture and I think out of this endeavor I've got to know Mother Bear more and got to share some of her wisdom and see what she has to teach me. And just respect that. I think that's that what I got out of it the most. And being able to see just how she works with community and outfits them with the regalias. And her work, and if I could get to her platform, it would only be an honor, to be able to say, "Gosh, she

taught me everything I know." Her art work is very intricate. I had tried to study with her before the apprenticeship. Before, she was doing classes at the Mashpee High School. History classes, and this is part of our history. I would be really upset with myself because I'm just not an artist. It's definitely something that's learnt. It's definitely something you have to take the time out to learn. So that, through the apprenticeship, is what I've gained from it.

MH: Is some of your work here Mother Bear?

MB: Yeah. We're getting ready for the pow wow. This is one of the little boy's breech cloths here.

MH: This is the blue [indicating color on design motif.]

MB: We would use robin's eggs to make the blue. These are some leggings.

MF: Once you do get it on, even if it isn't perfect, when you're dancing it looks perfect. It really does. I've made mistakes on mine and you what, when you're out there, that looks beautiful.

MB: These are little moccasins. And a little dress to go with it.

MH: That's stunning. Look at the fringe; it's so regular. Is that very hard to make?

MB: Here's a picture - this is my great grandmother here. That's me. That's my brother Jim. Here's Ramona. That's our brother Carl. They're going to let us display our family photos at the pow wow.

MH: Any the other picture?

MB: Yeah, this one is . . . this is my mother here. And she was born in 1930 and that's her great grandmother. This is Dorcus Gardner, Michelle, she's great grandmother to the Fries and the Hicks. And have you ever heard of Miss Tink? That's Miss Tink. That's Marshal Jeffers. That's Lorenzo Jeffers was the supreme [?] at one time. That's my great uncle Billy James. That's Drifting Goose.

MF: No way.

MB: Yup. That's Barbara. And these two are Pells. Ambrose and Isadore Pells.

MH: Now they're wearing feather headresses so is that an influence from outside?

MB: Well, a lot of times people from the west would gift our people with these. Our men would replace the feathers with our wild turkey feathers. Cause traditionally the men would have these kind of straight up, not the long trailing ones. We interacted with a lot of different tribes and exchanged things back and forth. You always gift somebody when you come to visit them or you go to visit them.

MH: So are there other - I know there is wampum, the jewelry. Are there other things? Like your bracelet. Is that made out of cohog shell?

MB: Yup, wampum. My friends in Aquinnah, they gave me this. They inlaid wampum into cedar at the Smithsonian Museum.

MH: Oh, for the new opening of that museum?

MB: Mm-mm. So that's in the gift shop, their work is on the shelves.

MH: In two years from last May, we're going to be doing an exhibition at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington. And I would love to be able to display some of your work. Would that be a possibility?

MB: Sure.

MH: If there was something you wanted to communicate to the general public about this art form, what would it be? What would you want people who know nothing about Wampanoag traditional culture and art to be exposed to or to see or to understand about regalia?

MB: That we're still here. We're still very proud of our heritage. And especially when we're dancing in our traditional clothes, we know that our ancestors are smiling down on us.

MH: If I wanted to come to a pow wow to see some of this in action, is it on the 4th or is it that weekend?

MB: It's that weekend. I think it's the 1st. It's Saturday, Sunday, Monday. In Mashpee. This coming Saturday, Plimoth Plantation is Strawberry Thanksgiving. There will be a lot of Mashpee people there. They won't have on their dancing regalias because they'll be working on site. The guys will be playing the football games.

MH: Do the Aquinnah have different regalia?

MB: No, same nation. Even the Mashentuckets and Naragansetts, we're basically the same outfits.

MH: And would that be true of the Nipmuc?

MB: Nipmucs, yup. We all use deer.

MH: And again, I was just asking about the design here, cause this is repeated. Does it mean anything or is it just a graphic design?

MB: It's, like I said, I don't know how the women interpreted those dreams about hunting into these designs, but that's what they came up with.

MH: Anything else you want to tell me or question you might have?

MF: I think I would just say that when we do, we have these in a circle and we're amongst our family members, it is a proud moment to be able to walk in those regalias and the moccasins. So it's a great honor. We wear them at pow wows that are now open to the public but it's not really an entertainment form. It's more of an honor to be able to hold on to the culture that we're trying so hard to hold on to. And to pass on the legacy onto our children. So I would want you to walk away with that.

MH: That makes so much sense. It's more of a private, or group identity, than saying something to the outside public. I understand that. Well talk a little bit about your four year old. You were mentioning that he wants to dance--

MF: Well, I've always gone to the pow wows, so my children are being brought up the same way. They look forward to it. To wear this, he was, he had to dress at first, he wore a ribbon type outfit. He was shy and he didn't want to go out there. Then when it was time for him to come out, he ended up with the guys. They're competing. But this year I've seen a change in him where he's looking forward to

wearing the clothing and the regalia. It might be in part because he sees me working on it. He's temperamental though; he's a four year old. He might want it on one minutes and off the next. I just have to go with his personality. So I think that he'll do the right thing when it comes down to it.

MH: And do you dance? Do you take part in the pow wow?

MB: Yup. When we were young, (chuckles) when I was young, in America it wasn't cool to be a Native American. I was shy. I was embarrassed to go out because people would laugh at us and stuff. Even though we had our pow wows and they weren't as commercial as they are now. They were more tribal. But there were some outside people there. When I was growing up in Mashpee there were only tribal members so I was shy. When I see my grandchildren dance, it's just really great. And I do see a difference in people when they put on their traditional clothing.

It was hard to get 90 Wampanoag men to agree to do this photo shoot. A lot of them had never worn the traditional clothing and they would go, "No underwear, what are you talking about?" But as soon as they put on, it was like they were transported back in time. You could see them stand up so straight and be so proud. They just didn't want to take them off. I had to fight some of them to get them back.

MH: When you were growing up it wasn't something you could easily be proud of out in the public? Is that what you're saying?

MB: Right, because they had too many John Wayne movies during that time.

MH: What changed? And when?

MB: I guess America's attitude changed. You know, now, a lot of people come to us and say tell us about, teach us your ways. They're more open to learning about our ways than before. That's the way we were brought up and we didn't realize there was a difference until we had to go to Falmouth High School. (laughter) It was a culture shock, it was a real culture shock. Because growing up in Mashpee, you were related to everybody by blood or marriage. You knew everybody. Everybody would take care of you. Everybody would feed you. So it was a real culture shock when you go to outside world and find out that not everybody loves you. (laughter)

MH: Was there prejudice?

MB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

MH: Is that less so now, you think?

MB: Less so, yeah. But actually, the racism worked in our favor because we were isolated. We stayed together; we kept our ways. It worked out for us actually.

MH: But Mashpee today, is it more integrated?

MB: Oh wow, yeah.

MF: What goes in there is ridiculous.

MB: It's heartbreaking is what it is. It's heartbreaking.

MF: It's hard to go there and see everything that's being built up on the land. I was brought up at my grandmother's house. You couldn't even walk a little bit away

from the house without there being no street lights. The rest of the road was dark. To lose that, it's heartbreaking. To see everything so commercial, business.

MH: Well I think, like you say, the racism and the absolute ignorance about current day culture, right?

MB: That's why I didn't last too long at Plimoth Plantation.

MH: Oh can you tell us a story about some horrendous question someone might ask you?

MB: Well one guy wanted to know about our prophecies. You know, I said, "I believe in the prophecies. I remember my grandmother telling me about them, that it was going to happen, purification was going to happen in our lifetime. And that the white man's ways were going to go out of vogue,(laughter) shall we say. That people would come to us and ask us. And he's going, "This is America. Do you think that our society could be brought down like that.? And I said, it could happen in a day. Oh you're crazy, he goes, we're the most powerful nation on the earth." Within the week, 911 happened. I said, I know that man is back in New York saying, "That bitch!" (laughter)

MB: People would ask me questions. I wasn't mean to people but I would try to think of it in a humorous way so I wouldn't be upset. Like one lady came, we had these fox mantles, like capes made out of red foxes. And I would explain tot he kids that we did not eat animals that ate other animals. But if we found one in our trap, we could make a coat out of it or whatever. And this lady came up to me and she goes, "Did you kill those foxes?" I go, "No, we just asked them to unzip our jackets." (laughter) I don't know why she got upset. I thought it was funny.

MH: But there are some people that, doesn't Linda Coombs still work there? They must have a tough hide or something.

MB: Well, they kept telling me you can say whatever you want as long as you have a smile on your face. But I thought, no, because then they can dismiss you as a clown. No, I'm going to set them straight.

MH: And how long did you last there?

MB: Couple of months (more laughter) They have my ancestry chart. [She goes to get deerhide.] I have my ancestry chart painted on the back of this deer hide. So I would be sitting on a log and I would have the fur side up. And they would ask me, "Are you a real Indian?" And I would go, "Bam!" [swinging it around to show chart]. And the guy goes, "Well how do you know whether that's the real thing?" I go, "Because the white man also wrote it down and it's all documented." That was the only way they would believe it, if they could go to the town records.

MH: And wasn't there some huge trial? I remember reading all about this. That anthropologist, is it James Clifford? About the land trial. And then they lost.

MB: Isn't it ironic? We had a racist judge who said on the stand, from the bench, "You can be an Indian for any reason except taking back your land." I'm not a lawyer, but I knew it wasn't a jury type thing because a lot of white people don't understand what a tribe is. And that was the issue. It wasn't an issue because that's not what the non-intercourse act said that we couldn't sell our land without an act of congress. It didn't say you had to be a tribe. It could have been individuals. Buy he made that the issue; we were not a tribe. Well we were on this date, this

date, and this date. We weren't on this date. But then we were again on this date. So now the federal government is saying we are a tribe. So isn't that ironic?

MH: It's great. That just happened right?

MB: Well, they're taking another year to make it final.

MH: And what implication will that have?

MB: It's not like it used to be. They used to fund you for housing, education, and health services but the way they have it set up, they have a certain amount of money there. If a new tribe comes on, they don't increase the money. You just have to fight over it. So other tribes are not really hoping other tribes are going to get on. They used to give each tribe millions of dollars for the housing and all that stuff, but now they don't. You can apply for it, but you don't necessarily get it.

We don't need them to tell us who we are. Actually, I think we were better off. A lot of people in our tribe are not so happy about federal recognition. It's more like national exposure. Here, the tribes know us and respect us. That means more to us than if George Bush says you are -- Actually, I got an email that traces George Bush back to a Wampanoag and I go, No, no he's not!

MH: I think it would be good, even within Massachusetts, for people to understand and have more of a sense.

MB: You look at their state flag. You see that native guy with the ominous sword over his head. You know exactly how they feel about us. To me it's always been like if the state flag of Georgia had a black man hanging from a noose. That's what it's like. It's so blatantly racist. Massachusetts refused to get rid of that one. We've even provided them with an alternative, you know, like a pine tree of peace. No, they have to have that symbol to remind us.

MB: I do have some cds of photos as we were going along. The final report, I don't know if I have that.

MH: I sent it originally but if you don't have it I can just send you another one.