Owen Seumptewa

Looking East Towards Shipaulovi
and Mishongnovi
WORK BY STUDENTS AT HOPI DAY SCHOOL FOR THE 1994 HOPI ART FAIR

**Mountain Spirits**
by Albin Mooma, Jr., Jacque Taylor, Daryl Siweumpteawa and Kristopher Norton
4th grade

**Cornfield**
by Cecilia Namihwa
3rd grade

**Answered Prayers**
by Natasha Taylor
3rd grade

**Untitled**
by Wameena Garcia
4th grade

**Totokya**
by Deldrick Pokeshla
3rd grade
TRADITIONAL SPRING EVENTS
Hotevilla Bacavi School, 3rd grade

Fig. 1, 2
Kwiyaława—The windbreaker moon. A time for men to set up windbreakers in their fields. It is also a time to paytsinta, clean out springs.
Figs. 3, 4
Two katsinas assist in the cleaning of the spring (Paysinta), the Motsin Katina and the Wiksinhoya. The Motsin Katina rounds up all the men and takes them to the spring to work. The Wiksinhoya puts scot on men who are just standing around.

Ears of Corn

Mt. Taylor, Looking East

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OWEN SEUMPTEWA
PIKI OF THE HOPI INDIANS

Victoria Spencer and Marlene Sekaquaptewa

As the sun rises, spreading light and warmth over the golden landscape of the Hopi mesas, a woman goes to her piki house and carefully lays a fire of specially cut cedar under a large, inlaid stone mounted in one corner of the room. She pauses for a moment, silent, then goes to the kitchen and sets out a well-worn pottery mixing bowl, a sturdy greasewood stirring stick, and a large tray made of local reeds. She will make piki today.

The foodways of a people are among the most significant reflections of their culture. The examination of foodways reveals many aspects of a general lifeway, including agricultural practices, social organization, the ceremonial cycle, world view, and aesthetic values. References to special foods are embedded in songs, legends, the visual record, and conversations. Piki (pronounced pee'kee) is such a special food for the Hopi.

Piki is a unique paper-thin wafer made of corn meal. Although piki making has traditionally been a Pueblo activity, it is the Hopi who have raised it to an art form and for whom it is a central element in both ceremonial and everyday life. Today, women in the Hopi villages make piki in the age-old way of the ancestors. Piki-making ability, an art which takes many years to develop, is a highly desirable skill for a Hopi woman.

Most Hopi women continue to practice this tradition, even though it is a time-consuming and tedious activity, for piki is inextricably woven into Hopi life.

In a special place, a piki room or house, Hopi women make piki from a thin corn meal batter on a hot piki stone which is often called a piki oven by non-Hopis. The stone, when cured, has a highly polished black surface and rests on side walls about 8 inches above the floor. A fire heats it from underneath and a large chimney hood over the oven allows an escape for smoke. Traditionally, a small room adjacent to the living room contained the piki-making area. Today, a small structure, a “piki house,” is more often separate from the main living area. In either case, this space is usually reserved entirely for activities connected with piki making.

THE PIKI STONE

Far below the mesa tops Hopi men quarry special sandstone for piki stones. The stone is hewn from this golden sandstone during the month of May—the appropriate time for this activity.

The stone is taken from deep in the earth so it is actually damp and soft to the touch when first removed. The men must work quickly and very carefully to cut and shape the stone to the desired size and thickness before the stone becomes hard from exposure to the dry air. More than one piece of stone may be quarried at a time because not every piece is guaranteed to become a useful piki stone. It can be damaged or broken while being
transported, dried, smoothed, mounted, or during the curing and firing process.

The roughly hewn stones are laid out to set and harden before any attempt is made to move them from the quarry to the village. Once the stones are brought to the home, they are carefully protected until they are completely dried and thus less fragile.

Once the stone has dried, the woman will then go to work smoothing it by rubbing it for many hours with a harder grinding stone until she achieves the smoothness necessary for use as a piki stone. Finished stones weigh 35-45 pounds and range in size from about 12 to 16 inches tall, 16 to 24 inches wide, and 2 to 4 inches thick.

**Curing and Firing a New Stone**

The piki stone is mounted on a special fireplace and a fire is built underneath for the initial curing and firing by the Hopi woman. Pilon pine is used to fire the stone as it creates an extremely hot fire due to its high oil content. The fire is maintained under the stone for several hours and it will take a full day to prepare a new piki stone.

Once the stone has become red hot, pilon pitch is spread over the top surface as part of the initial curing process. The stone and fire are too hot to approach, so the pitch is applied with a long-handled applicator (a cloth tied to one end of a stick) to protect the woman from the intense heat. The surface of the stone is covered evenly with the pitch which ignites into a fiery blaze, liquifies, and then penetrates into the stone.

The woman must work carefully, quickly, and thoughtfully throughout the curing and firing process. A melon seed mixture (predominantly watermelon seeds) is applied to the stone's surface as part of the curing. Several handfuls of dried, toasted, and coarsely ground seeds are distributed over the hot stone. A flame is applied to the seeds, igniting them and releasing the oil; when the flame has died out, a folded cloth is used to rub the oil from the seeds into the stone.

When this step is completed, the stone is allowed to start cooling down. As it cools, the woman prepares herself mentally and spiritually to test the new stone. She prays that this effort has been fruitful and that the stone will perform properly.

She mixes a small amount of batter, and when the stone is cool enough for her to touch (although still several hundred degrees Fahrenheit), she takes a deep breath and applies batter to the stone for the first time. When the piki curls and lifts up off the stone of its own accord, the firing of the stone is a success. With proper care and maintenance the stone will serve piki makers for generations. Piki stones are passed from mother to daughter to granddaughter, and a properly cared for stone is a family treasure.

As part of the general maintenance of the stone, seeds are used to season the surface throughout the life of the piki stone. Watermelon seeds are carefully collected by Hopi women during melon season and laid out to dry in the sun. The dried seeds are then toasted, cooled, and coarsely ground before storing. An industrious woman can collect and dry as much as five pounds of seeds during the season.

At the end of a piki-making session, seeds are distributed over the stone while it is cooling and left, covered, until the next session. When the piki maker begins a day of piki making, a fire is laid beneath the stone, and when the stone is hot the seeds are ignited simply by touching a flame to them—an indication of their high oil content. As the seeds burn, the oil is released and rubbed into the stone with a folded cloth, creating a non-stick surface.

Cattle brains, sheep spinal cord, or bone marrow are used to lubricate the stone throughout the piki-making process. These are used sparingly so the piki will stay fresh longer and not spoil while stored.

**Making Piki**

Piki is made of only three ingredients—corn meal, ash, and water—but many steps must be taken before piki making can begin. First, corn is plastered and carefully nurtured through the growing season by the Hopi farmer, through tending of the plants and praying for rain. After harvesting, the husk is removed and the corn is dried, sorted, and stored on the cob. Later it is shelled, winnowed, washed, and dried again. The dry kernels are now ready for grinding into corn meal. Traditionally, the corn was ground by hand on a series of grinding stones, but today most women use a hand or electric mill.

Six to eight cups of very finely ground corn meal (most often blue) are placed in a special pottery piki butter bowl. Scalding water is stirred into the meal with a sturdy stirring stick made from a branch of greasewood, a desert bush found in abundance around the Hopi mesas.

Next, boiling water is strained through fine ash—made of bean plants or, more commonly, greasewood—into the corn meal, which immediately changes color to deep blue. Piki makers may tell you that the purpose of the ash is to enhance the color or the flavor of the piki. "Judging from experience," says a piki maker, a woman
will know when "the right color" is achieved. In fact, these women are unwittingly perpetuating the wisdom of their ancestors as the ash acts to transform the corn into a power food. Science tells us that a pH of 7 or above is "right" because that level of alkali breaks down the compounds which trap the niacin in corn. Hopi women tell us that it is "right" by the color—and in fact the mixture turns deep blue just as the amount of ash liquid added becomes sufficient to create a pH level of 8.

As the mixture cools, it is kneaded by hand into a soft dough. Then cold water is added in small portions until the desired consistency is achieved—a thin, smooth batter. The preparation of the batter takes about an hour or more and throughout this process the woman periodically checks on the fire and the stone to be certain it is heating evenly and not too quickly.

When the batter has been made, the woman moves out to the piki house and arranges herself at the piki stone with everything she will need within easy reach: her cedar woodpile to feed the fire, the bowl of batter, a container of water to periodically thin the batter, clean cloths for wiping the stone, brains, marrow, or spinal cord for lubricating the stone, and the reed tray for the accumulation of piki. She now begins a session of several hours of making piki.

The piki maker tests the stone for proper temperature by touching it or applying a small amount of batter. During the piki-making process it is important to maintain the fire to keep even heat under the stone. While the intense fire of pinyon wood is required for the initial firing of a stone, cedar is used for the actual making of piki.

Taking a small amount of batter in the top portion of her hand, the woman quickly spreads a thin, even layer on the hot stone. This step is repeated until the full surface of the stone is covered with batter, usually 10 to 12 full wipes. Once satisfied with the application, she pauses to let the paper-thin piki cook before carefully lifting up the entire sheet of piki from the stone and placing it on the piki tray. She then takes a clean heavy cloth to wipe any crumbs of piki from the stone and also to apply a very thin coat of lubricant. The first crumbs are usually "fed to the fire" as an offering with a prayer for a good piki-making session.

The woman begins again, taking a small amount of batter from the bowl with her fingers and applying another sheet to the stone. When the stone is covered once more, she quickly and carefully takes the first sheet from the tray and places it on top of the sheet now cooking on the stone. The steam from the cooking sheet softens the first one, enabling her to fold and roll the sheet of piki. As the day wears on, the tray beside her fills with rolls of piki—about 80 rolls for a full day's work. Throughout the day, children and other women may visit the piki maker while she works, drawn by the smell of piki cooking in the room.

**Fig. 7** A cooked sheet of piki is carefully lifted from the stone and placed on a special tray made of local reeds.

**Fig. 8, 9** A cooked sheet of piki is placed over one that is still cooking. The steam softens the cooked sheet for folding or rolling.
of piki cooking or the sight of smoke through the piki chimney. It is customary to offer a roll of fresh piki to any visitors, and small children often return several times for a fresh roll.

**Uses of Piki**

Piki is an important part of Hopi life and has many different uses. In addition to its role as a staple food in Hopi homes, several ceremonial and religious rituals require various forms and amounts of piki. It is made specially for weddings, baby namings, initiations, work party meals, gifts, and for paying back social obligations. Depending on the intended use, piki is either rolled, folded, or left flat.

For everyday use, rolled piki is most common. It can be eaten plain, dipped in water, with melon, or even crumbled and lightly toasted with salt and shortening. It provides a light, easily transportable and highly nutritious meal. Through time, Hopi men have carried piki with them to the fields when they tend their crops, to the countryside when they herd sheep or round up cattle, or when they make a long journey.

For weddings, three to four sheets of piki are folded together in one large square. High stacks of these squares are presented in enormous quantities to the groom’s family. For initiation into the religious societies, several sheets of unfolded piki are layered on a tray and presented on behalf of the initiated child to the kiva for the ceremonial father. At the time of death, four sheets are folded together to make one square to be part of the last meal for the deceased’s final journey.

Piki is made in a variety of colors, depending on how it will be used. If ash is not added to blue corn meal, the resulting piki is lavender and called “uncolored”; the addition of ash acts with natural dyes in the blue corn to yield a rich, slate blue color. Brightly colored piki, made from white corn meal to which red or yellow dyes have been added, is distributed only by katsinas during the dances.

A people’s history is embedded in their foodways. For the Hopi, piki has no beginning and no end; it always has been, and always will be. Piki’s status as an ancient tradition is supported by the archaeological record: piki stone fragments dating from the 13th century have been found in several sites in the Southwest. Piki making today reflects both the past and the realities of contemporary Hopi life. Through time, however, the centrality of piki has changed little. It persists.

Piki has been, and always will be, part of the balance, part of the Hopi way.