

RHODE ISLAND LAND OF LEGEND & LIVELY LIVING



TWO DOLLARS

YEAR
BOOK
1964-65

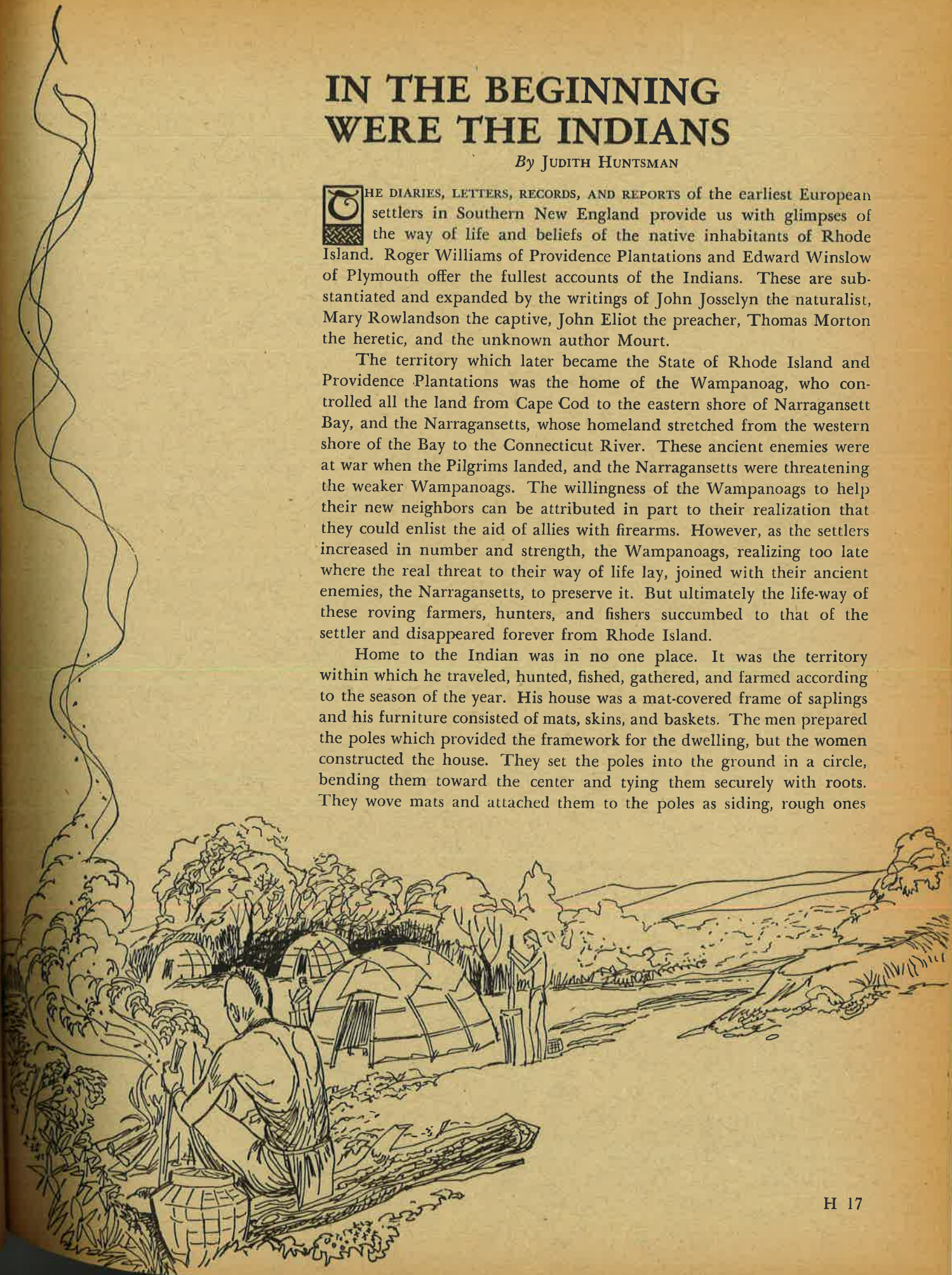
IN THE BEGINNING WERE THE INDIANS

By JUDITH HUNTSMAN

THE DIARIES, LETTERS, RECORDS, AND REPORTS of the earliest European settlers in Southern New England provide us with glimpses of the way of life and beliefs of the native inhabitants of Rhode Island. Roger Williams of Providence Plantations and Edward Winslow of Plymouth offer the fullest accounts of the Indians. These are substantiated and expanded by the writings of John Josselyn the naturalist, Mary Rowlandson the captive, John Eliot the preacher, Thomas Morton the heretic, and the unknown author Mourt.

The territory which later became the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was the home of the Wampanoag, who controlled all the land from Cape Cod to the eastern shore of Narragansett Bay, and the Narragansetts, whose homeland stretched from the western shore of the Bay to the Connecticut River. These ancient enemies were at war when the Pilgrims landed, and the Narragansetts were threatening the weaker Wampanoags. The willingness of the Wampanoags to help their new neighbors can be attributed in part to their realization that they could enlist the aid of allies with firearms. However, as the settlers increased in number and strength, the Wampanoags, realizing too late where the real threat to their way of life lay, joined with their ancient enemies, the Narragansetts, to preserve it. But ultimately the life-way of these roving farmers, hunters, and fishers succumbed to that of the settler and disappeared forever from Rhode Island.

Home to the Indian was in no one place. It was the territory within which he traveled, hunted, fished, gathered, and farmed according to the season of the year. His house was a mat-covered frame of saplings and his furniture consisted of mats, skins, and baskets. The men prepared the poles which provided the framework for the dwelling, but the women constructed the house. They set the poles into the ground in a circle, bending them toward the center and tying them securely with roots. They wove mats and attached them to the poles as siding, rough ones



of the outside and finer, decorated ones on the inside. Wooden sleeping platforms about a foot high were built around the sides of the dwelling and covered with mats and skins. Each house had two facing doors, the one to the lee open and that to the wind covered with a mat or skin. An opening was left in the center of the roof to allow smoke from the central fire to escape. The family belongings were stored in baskets of many sizes and shapes.

The size of the Indian settlement varied from season to season. In the fall, single families would travel alone while the man hunted, but in the early winter many families would join together for the annual feast and ceremony. During the winter a group of families would settle together in a wooded valley protected from the biting winter winds and storms. In the Spring each family would move to the area of its cornfields, do its planting, and then move to the shore for fishing. During fishing season large numbers of Indians would gather at the shore, where the women harvested the shellfish and the men and boys fished and competed in ball games and races. Summer was a time of frequent movement from fields to shore. But when fall came and the corn, beans, and squash were harvested, they would again take to the woods for the fall hunt.

They wore skin clothing. The basic garments for both men and women were a short apron at front and back, shoes and leggings in cold weather, and a cloak of animal skin or turkey feathers. They ornamented themselves and their clothes with feathers, shell beads, and paint.

The Indian's food came from many sources and provided a varied diet. Women cultivated the gardens. Their husbands helped them clear the fields, and the children scared marauding birds away from the newly planted crops. The men cleared the fields of all but the stumps of trees by firing them and cutting away the underbrush. Women, using wood and shell hoes, planted corn, beans, and squash in hills, using small fish for fertilizer. At harvest time they gathered the produce, ground the corn in wooden mortars, or stored it in huge baskets which they buried in the ground. The women also gathered nuts, roots, and berries, which gave variety to the various corn dishes. They gathered shellfish and dried them for winter food. The men fished with nets, hooks and lines, and spears. At night they went out in their canoes, with bark torches, and speared sturgeon that were attracted to the light. In the winter they fished through holes cut in freshwater ponds.

Hunting was a year-round activity for the men, but the fall was the great hunting season. Then the animals were fat from their summer eating and their skins were fine and heavy in preparation for the hard winter. Sometimes many hunters would join forces in a drive. They



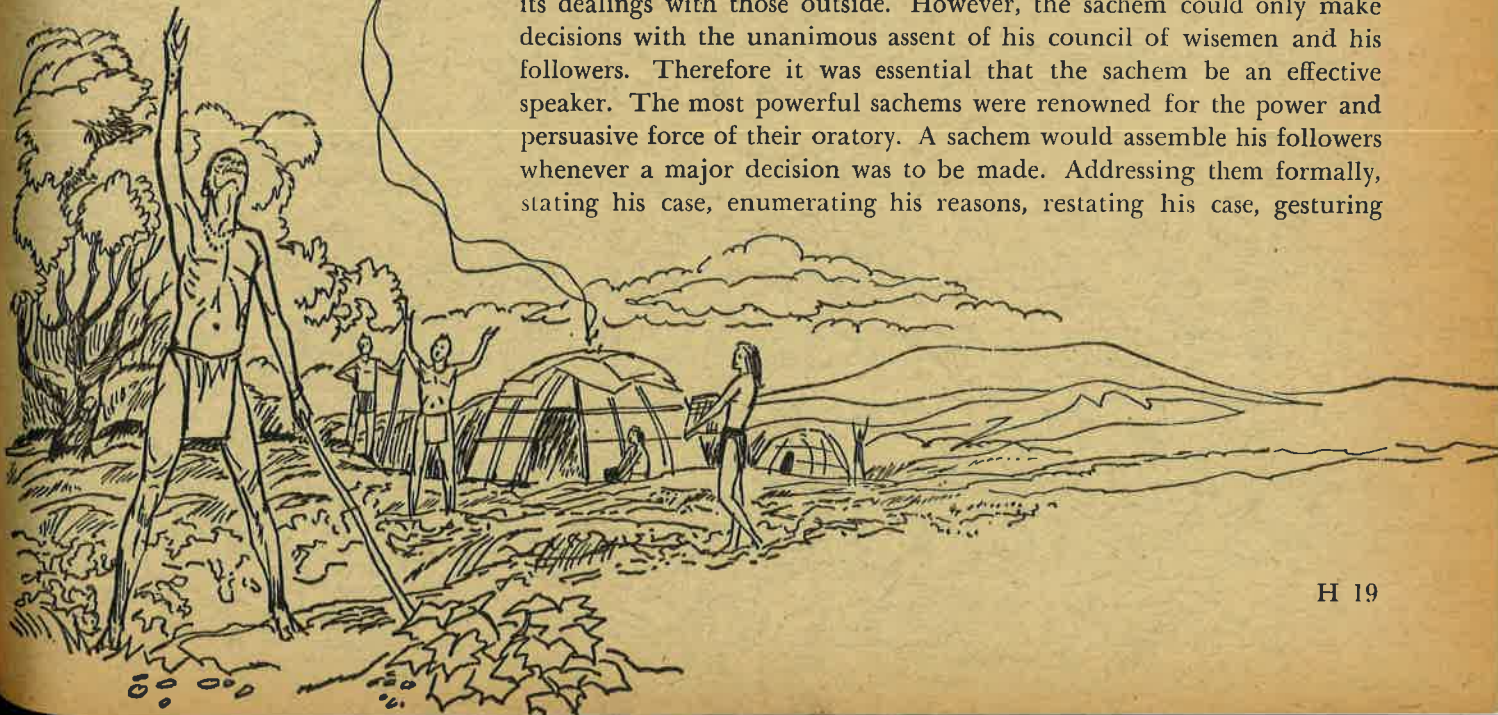
would fan out through the woods and drive the animals before them into a trap or over a precipice, or they would set fire to a section of woods to drive the animals out. Traps, bows and arrows, and lances were the usual weapons, and dogs were trained to help in the hunting of the larger game such as deer, moose, and bear.

Within the territories of the wandering Indians, leadership and political control were loose and flexible. Any leader was called *sachem* and exercised varying degrees of power depending upon his personal qualities. A sachem was expected to be wise, brave, strong, courageous, generous, and fair. He received tribute and cared for the needy, rewarded his followers with gifts, hosted visitors, dispensed justice, led communal activities, and spoke for the group to those outside it. Among those who acknowledged his leadership, he advised and harangued but could not dictate. Several lesser sachems might direct and lead a number of families within a given territory, but they would all be followers of a powerful sachem. By changing territory an individual or family would come under the jurisdiction of a different minor sachem while keeping its allegiance to the major one.

A sachem received tribute from those within his territory. Tribute in corn was given at the end of the harvest and part of the bag of the chase was presented to him. When a deer was killed in the winter, tribute skin or *pumpom* was taken to the sachem of the territory in which it was slain. The sachem was responsible for any among his followers who were in need. Orphans, widows, and the aged could depend upon him to care for their wants. In addition, the sachem regularly distributed gifts to his followers and acted as host to travelers and visitors within the territory, providing them with food and shelter in his own house. All these responsibilities of care and hospitality prevented the sachem from becoming wealthy despite the tribute he received.

He was the judge in all disputes and the prosecutor in all crimes. When he had judged a man guilty he imposed his fine or acted as his executioner. In the case of a capital offense the sachem either killed the offender himself or sent his own knife with an emissary who then killed the guilty party in the sachem's name.

The sachem directed most communal activities such as warfare, ceremonies, and hunting parties, and he was spokesman for the group in its dealings with those outside. However, the sachem could only make decisions with the unanimous assent of his council of wisemen and his followers. Therefore it was essential that the sachem be an effective speaker. The most powerful sachems were renowned for the power and persuasive force of their oratory. A sachem would assemble his followers whenever a major decision was to be made. Addressing them formally, stating his case, enumerating his reasons, restating his case, gesturing



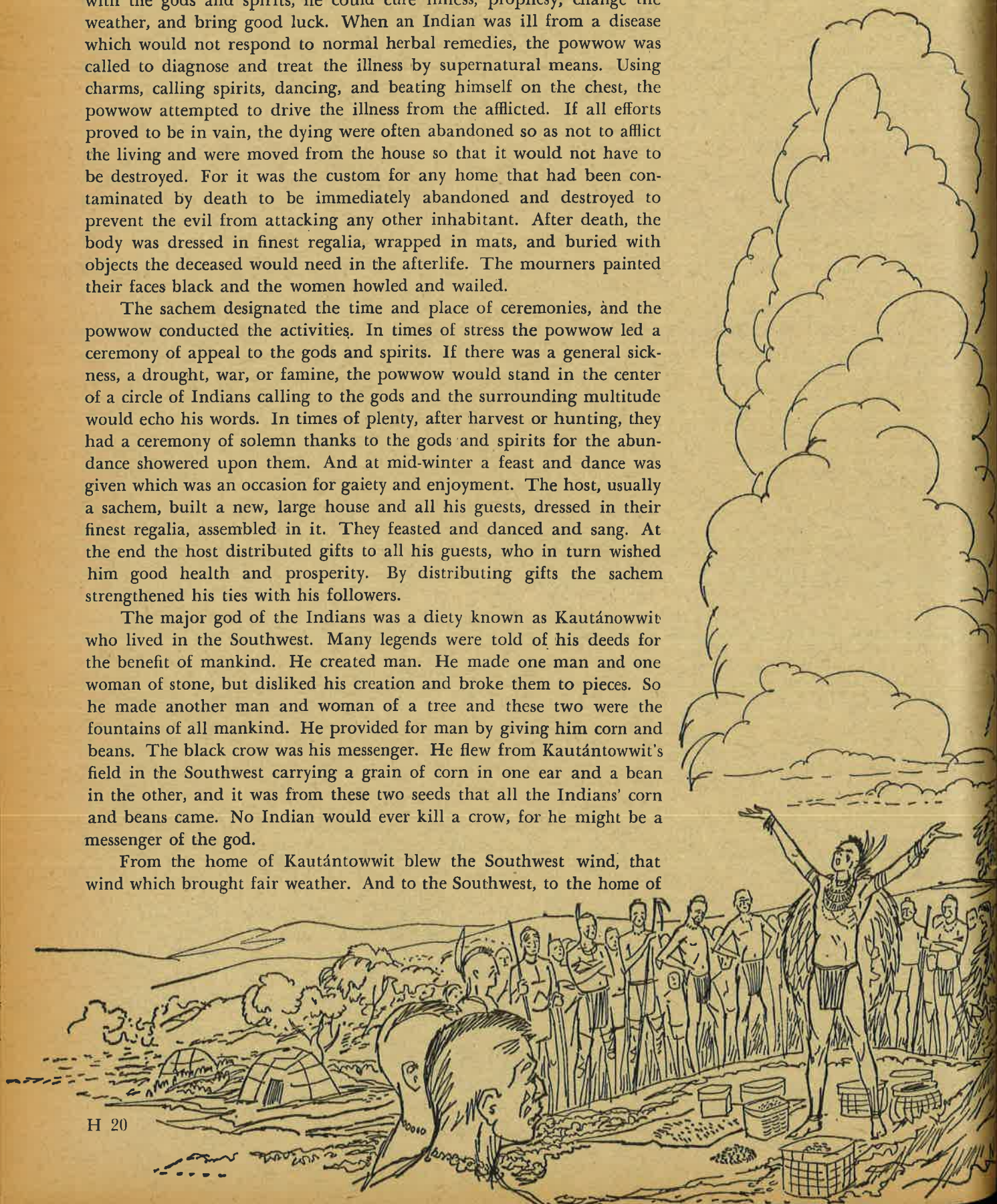
emphatically, he attempted to convince them of the wisdom of his decision. If they agreed they would shout their assent.

The *powwow* was the religious leader. Because he had close contact with the gods and spirits, he could cure illness, prophesy, change the weather, and bring good luck. When an Indian was ill from a disease which would not respond to normal herbal remedies, the *powwow* was called to diagnose and treat the illness by supernatural means. Using charms, calling spirits, dancing, and beating himself on the chest, the *powwow* attempted to drive the illness from the afflicted. If all efforts proved to be in vain, the dying were often abandoned so as not to afflict the living and were moved from the house so that it would not have to be destroyed. For it was the custom for any home that had been contaminated by death to be immediately abandoned and destroyed to prevent the evil from attacking any other inhabitant. After death, the body was dressed in finest regalia, wrapped in mats, and buried with objects the deceased would need in the afterlife. The mourners painted their faces black and the women howled and wailed.

The sachem designated the time and place of ceremonies, and the *powwow* conducted the activities. In times of stress the *powwow* led a ceremony of appeal to the gods and spirits. If there was a general sickness, a drought, war, or famine, the *powwow* would stand in the center of a circle of Indians calling to the gods and the surrounding multitude would echo his words. In times of plenty, after harvest or hunting, they had a ceremony of solemn thanks to the gods and spirits for the abundance showered upon them. And at mid-winter a feast and dance was given which was an occasion for gaiety and enjoyment. The host, usually a sachem, built a new, large house and all his guests, dressed in their finest regalia, assembled in it. They feasted and danced and sang. At the end the host distributed gifts to all his guests, who in turn wished him good health and prosperity. By distributing gifts the sachem strengthened his ties with his followers.

The major god of the Indians was a diety known as Kautánowwit who lived in the Southwest. Many legends were told of his deeds for the benefit of mankind. He created man. He made one man and one woman of stone, but disliked his creation and broke them to pieces. So he made another man and woman of a tree and these two were the fountains of all mankind. He provided for man by giving him corn and beans. The black crow was his messenger. He flew from Kautántowwit's field in the Southwest carrying a grain of corn in one ear and a bean in the other, and it was from these two seeds that all the Indians' corn and beans came. No Indian would ever kill a crow, for he might be a messenger of the god.

From the home of Kautántowwit blew the Southwest wind, that wind which brought fair weather. And to the Southwest, to the home of



Kautántowwit went the souls of all good men and women to see their friends and have their fill of all good things. The souls of evil men and women seeking entrance to the abode of Kautántowwit were turned away to wander forever in poverty and want.

Hobbamock was the god responsible for the evils of mankind. He appeared to the powwow in many guises, sometimes as a man, sometimes as a deer, eagle, fawn, but most often as a snake. Hobbamock sent disease and disaster as punishment to man for offending him, but the powwow could abate his wrath with prayers and gifts.

The Indians had legends of powwows with miraculous powers who lived far in the past. They could perform acts which powwows could no longer do. They could make water burn, make rocks move and trees dance, produce ice in the summertime, form a green leaf from the ashes of a dead one in the wintertime, and make a living snake from a snakeskin. They could also walk on water and turn themselves into flames.

The Indians believed in a god of the sun, a god of the moon, a god of the sea, and a god of fire. The fire god would emerge out of a cold stone in the form of a spark and warm the poor, cold Indian, but if the god was angry he would jump out of the fire and burn down the house or even the whole woods.

They also told of a tribe that lived about three hundred miles to the west called the Tree-eaters. They were also man-eaters. They planted no corn but lived on the bark of the chestnut and walnut tree which they dried and ate seasoned with the fat of beasts and of men.

They had a legend that a long while ago their country was drowned, and all the people and creatures were drowned also. But one powwow and his wife, foreseeing what was to happen, fled to the white mountains carrying a hare with them and so escaped drowning. After awhile they let the hare go and when he did not return they thought the waters had subsided and they descended from the mountains. The powwow and his wife lived for many years and had many children whose descendants again filled up the land with Indians.

No longer do the Wampanoags and Narragansetts roam the forests and shores of Rhode Island. No longer do they thank their god Kautántowwit for life and grain and abundance. No longer do they plead with Hobbamock to cure illness and avert disaster. Their way of life is gone, as are their legends and their beliefs, and we can only learn about their way of life from the reports of those who eventually destroyed it.

