

North Carolina Legends & Myths: The “Three Sisters” ^[1]



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as told by Shelia Wilson

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When Native people speak of the “Three Sisters,” they are referring to corn, beans, and squash. Known as the “sustainers of life,” these are the basic foods of sustenance. They are seen as three beautiful sisters, because they grow in the same mound in a garden. The corn provides a ladder for the bean vine. The squash vines shade the mound and hold moisture in the soil for the corn and beans. The well-being of each crop planted is said to be protected by another. Many a legend has been woven around the Three Sisters—sisters who should be planted together, eaten together, and celebrated together. Legends vary from tribe to tribe. Here are two versions.

The legend of “Three Sisters” originated when a woman of medicine who could no longer bear the fighting among her three daughters asked the Creator to help her find a way to get them to stop. That night she had a dream, and in it each sister was a different seed. In her dream, she planted them in one mound in just the way they would have lived at home and told them that in order to grow and thrive, they would need to be different but dependent upon each other. They needed to see that each was special and each had great things to offer on her own and with the others.

The next morning while cooking breakfast, she cooked each daughter an egg, but each was different: one hard-boiled, one scrambled, and one over-easy. She told her daughters of her dream and said to them, “You are like these eggs. Each is still an egg but with different textures and flavors. Each of you has a special place in the world and in my heart.” The daughters started to cry and hugged each other, because now they would celebrate their differences and love one another more because of them.

From that day on, Native people have planted the three crops together—Three Sisters helping and loving each other. A long time ago, three sisters lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their height and in the way they carried themselves. The little sister was so young and round that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second sister wore a bright, sunshine yellow dress, and she would spend many an hour reading by herself, sitting in the sun with the soft wind blowing against her face. The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters, looking for danger and warning her sisters. She wore a pale green shawl and had long, dirty-yellow hair.

There was one way the sisters were all alike, though. They loved each other dearly, and they always stayed together. This made them very strong. One day a strange bird came to the field: a crow. He talked to the horses and other animals, and this caught the attention of the sisters. Late that summer, the youngest and smallest sister disappeared. Her sisters were sad. Again the crow came to the field to gather reeds at the water’s edge. The sisters who were left watched his trail as he was leaving, and that night the second sister, the one in the yellow dress, disappeared.

Now the eldest sister was the only one left. She continued to stand tall. When the crow saw how she missed her sisters, he brought them all back together, and they became stronger together again. The elder sister stands tall looking out for the crow to this day.

Shelia Wilson is a member of the Sappony tribe. She has told the tale of the “Three Sisters” at the American Indian Heritage Celebration, held each November at the N.C. Museum of History.

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