



> **TRIBAL LORE** American Indian Veterans of Michigan chair Chris Franklin is helping to preserve the tradition of "ghost suppers."

Spirited Meals

A seasonal ceremony lives on at South Eastern Michigan Indians Inc.

BY JEFF WARANIAK //
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CYBELLE CODISH

Before the "first" Thanksgiving holiday, there was another fall harvest tradition. It began long ago and was already in practice when the Great Lakes region's primary inhabitants were the Anishinabe, the Three Fires People — members of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi tribes.

Each season, after the last harvest was pulled from the ground but before the first snowfall, tribe members held a feast to commemorate those who had "walked on" and to aid those who had not received proper funeral rites in their journey back to the spirit world.

Members of the tribe cooked enormous meals, invited the entire community to join, and left their doors open to the spirits of ancestors so that they

could eat and mingle with the living again. Guests went from home to home eating and visiting until all the food was gone and no one was hungry, neither the living nor the dead. The Anishinabe called these ceremonies "ghost suppers."

At South Eastern Michigan Indians Inc. (SEMII), the tradition of the ghost supper carries on according to Euphemia "Sue" Franklin, SEMII's executive director and a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. SEMII is an urban American Indian facility that doubles as a center for the American Indian Veterans of Michigan, a separate organization that's chaired by Chris Franklin, Sue's husband and a member of the Oneida tribe.

Sue has prepared the traditional suppers as part of SEMII's fall feast for the past nine years. Each year, the nonprofit hosts between 60 and 80 people at its office in Center Line, which provides services to veterans, nonveterans, and members of more than 85 tribes represented in southeastern Michigan.

As with other events such as the American Indians Veterans of Michigan annual steak dinner fundraiser, the fall feast typically draws members of the Odawa, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Oneida, Cayuga, and Mohawk tribes, along with many others, not to mention members of the general public.

"[Ghost supper] has never been limited to Native [people] only," Sue says. "It never has been. And that's the way the first one was, you know, what they call the first Thanksgiving. The story in Amer-

ican culture is the Indians saved the pilgrims' lives, and that's what Thanksgiving was all about. Really, they were having a feast very much like we have at our center every year."

SEMII's fall feast features traditional foods made from local ingredients. There's three sisters soup — a medley of corn, bean, and squash; stuffed pumpkin with wild rice, venison, cranberries, and vegetables; and staples like yams, turkey, and the crowd favorite, frybread. As part of the ghost supper tradition, other specialty foods are brought to the table.

"We try to always bring a favorite food of a loved one that passed away," Sue says. "I lost my oldest son nine years ago, and every year I remember him with honor and respect and love, and to enjoy those memories of him, I'll eat some of the foods that I knew were some of his favorites. It's a way of holding a memory close to you."

Aside from traditional and ceremonial foods, participants at SEMII's fall feast — many of whom are veterans — also preserve other ghost supper customs. Chris Franklin cleanses the building with sage in a process known as "smudging" to purify it before the feast. He also prepares a traditional spirit plate — a sampling of each food at the feast, which is left outside to nourish visiting spirits.

Amid the feasting, older members of the Indian community share family stories and aspects of traditional life with the younger generation.

"What we try to communicate with them is that so many answers to your future come from the past," says Sue Franklin. "There's a garden in your mind and we just have to sprinkle the words like the water and it'll grow and you'll understand."

As much as it is a ceremony to honor the people of the past, the ghost supper helps those of the present to continue forward on their own journeys. The combination of tribal stories, foods, and customs help to reconnect all those who participate in it with those who live on in memory.

"We try to invite people who are still in a lot of pain over losing somebody," says Sue, "and try to help them understand that when someone passes away they're not lost to us forever." h



> **FALL FEAST** For ghost suppers and other events, Euphemia "Sue" Franklin prepares traditional foods from local ingredients.

