

File

Sioux and Chippewa Food

(From a manuscript prepared for the project by Frances Densmore)

The principal food of the early Sioux was meat. In the winter they ate muskrats, badgers, otters and raccoons, in the spring they ate fish and the roots of certain wild plants, in the summer they had wild pigeons and cranes as well as fish and certain roots, and in the autumn they killed wild ducks, geese and muskrats. These were animals that were plentiful at different seasons of the year. The buffalo was hunted twice a year, and the meat was eaten fresh or dried and prepared in various ways. The tongue of the buffalo was considered the nicest part. In the earliest times the Sioux boiled meat by digging a hole in the ground and lining it with a fresh hide. They put water in this, with the meat, and added stones that were heated in the fire. These heated the water, cooking the meat.

Buffalo meat was cut in strips and dried in the sun or over a fire. This was called "jerked meat" and used by many tribes living on the plains. But the favorite way of preparing buffalo meat was in the form of pemican. For this, thin buffalo steaks were dried, then laid on a broad, flat stone and pounded with a smaller stone. In the old days, the Indians dug a hole like a large bowl in the ground and lined it with a piece of hide, fitting it neatly all around. Then they put in the dried meat and pounded it with a heavy stone. The pounded meat is like a powder with many shreds of threads or fiber in it. This was usually mixed with melted fat, but marrow made even nicer pemican. Sometimes the Indian women pounded wild cherries, stones and all, and mixed them with the pemican. The mixture was put in bags made of hide, and melted fat was poured on the top to seal it tightly. Buffalo hide was often used for these bags, with the hair on the outside. Pemican was very nourishing and could be kept in the sealed bags for three or four years. The bags

were of various sizes, those in common use weighing from 100 to 300 pounds.

The Sioux, like other tribes of Indians, had no salt until the traders came, and it took them a long time to learn to like it. Even in 1912 the older members of the tribe did not like the taste of salt.

Some of the Sioux who lived around the upper waters of the Minnesota River raised a small quantity of corn and beans, but their chief vegetable food was a root that was commonly called "Dakota turnip" or "tipsinna," although it has several other names. This root was dug in August and was about as large as a hen's egg. The Sioux ate it raw, or boiled it or roasted it in the ashes; they also dried it and stored it for winter. The dried root was mashed between stones until it was like flour; then mixed with water, this was made into little cakes and baked over the coals. It did not have much taste, yet it was not unpleasant to eat and was very nourishing. Two interesting travelers came to Minnesota in 1823 and mentioned this root in their description of their trip. These men were Major Stephen H. Long and Professor William H. Keating. Near Lake Traverse, they became acquainted with Chief Wanotan who invited them to a feast. There were many large kettles and the food was emptied into "dozens of wooden dishes which were placed all around the lodge." The food "consisted of buffalo meat boiled with tepsin, also the same vegetable boiled without meat in buffalo grease, and finally the much-esteemed dog meat, all which were dressed without salt." The white men were polite and tasted of the dog meat. They did not enjoy eating it, but Keating wrote that it was very fat as well as "sweet and palatable" and quite dark in color. The Sioux considered it a great honor to a guest when they placed a dish of nicely cooked dog meat before him. The writer has seen this custom among both the Sioux and the Chippewa. A small dog, when cooked, looks somewhat like a platter of large chicken.

When the Sioux lived in northern Minnesota, they ate the wild rice that grows

in the shallow lakes. This was a nourishing food and easy to gather.

After they learned to raise corn and beans, the work in the field was done by the women. They never planted corn until the wild strawberries were ripe. That was supposed to be exactly the right time to plant corn, and they soaked the seed corn until it sprouted before they put it in the ground. The women planted it quite deep, and when the little plants had two or three leaves the women loosened the earth around the roots with their fingers. When the plants were taller the women made the earth into a little hill around each plant, using hoes for the work. White people gave the Indians several sorts of seed corn, but they usually planted a small kind of corn that ripened quickly.

The women gathered the ripe ears of corn in their blankets and spread them on platforms or scaffolds. The women and children had to stand on the platforms to drive away the birds that came to get the corn. When the husks began to wither, they took off the outer husks and braided the rest in stiff braids as they had been taught to do by the white people. These were hung up so the corn would dry. Some of the corn was boiled, dried and put in bags that contained 1 or 2 bushels. A round hole was dug in the ground, and the bottom and sides were lined with dry grass. The bags of corn were put in the hole, which was filled with earth and firmly stamped down. Corn stored in this way is said to have kept dry and fresh from September until the next April. The hole containing the corn was covered in such a way that no one could see it, but the man who hid the corn could find it even though the ground was covered deep with snow.

The food of an Indian family depended on where the tribe lived. The Chippewa lived on the shores of Lake Superior and along the rivers, so their principal food was fish. They ate fresh fish in summer and dried or smoked fish in winter. They were satisfied

in the old days if they had nothing but fish for a meal. The littlest babies were given fish soup, and the heads of fish were said to be very nice when boiled and seasoned with maple sugar.

The Chippewa had many ways of cooking fish, from the little sunfish to the large pickerel. Fresh fish were cleaned and put between the sections of a <sup>N</sup>plit stick that was placed in the ground, leaning over the fire. Sometimes the fish, without being cleaned, were stuck through with a sharp stick, head uppermost, and the stick slanted above the fire so that it could be turned and the fish cooked on all sides. Fish eggs were boiled or fried with the fish.

In the fall, the Chippewa strung the sunfish in bunches of 10 or 12 and froze them for winter use. When the snow was deep around the wigwam, they peeled the skin from these little fish and cooked them. Sometimes they strung small fish on strips of basswood bark and hung them in the sun to dry, then packed them in layers, without salt.

The Chippewa had no special food for children, and little children were given very strong tea and meat. It was thought that the meat would make them strong.

Maple sugar was used to sweeten and season all food. Like the Sioux, these Indians had no salt until it was brought by the white men, but they learned to like it. In a treaty made with the Chippewa in 1847, the Government promised to give them 5 barrels of salt every year for five years. This is known as the "Salt Treaty."

Ducks, wild pigeons and other birds came in the fall, and the Chippewa cooked them in various ways. Sometimes they cooked little birds in hot ashes without removing the feathers, and sometimes they put a sharp stick through the bird, after removing the feathers, and put the stick upright in front of the fire. They also boiled birds with rice, potatoes and meat.

The deer was the principal game hunted by the Chippewa, though they also killed

moose, bear, rabbits and other animals at various seasons. Beaver tails were considered a great luxury because they were so fat. Fresh venison was sometimes boiled with wild rice and sometimes cut in thin slices, roasted and then pounded on a flat stone. Then it was stored in birchbark boxes, ma-kuks, and the covers sewed down with split spruce root. If the deer was killed in the fall, they cut a portion of the meat in strips, dried it over a fire and wrapped it in the hide. In the winter they boiled this meat or prepared it in other ways. Sometimes they cut the dried meat in pieces, spread it on birchbark and covered it with another piece of the bark. A man then stamped heavily on the upper piece of bark until the meat was crushed. Meat prepared this way was called by a name meaning "foot-trodden meat."

If a deer was killed during the winter, they dried the meat enough so that it would keep until spring. Then they put it in the sun to finish drying.

After the Chippewa had driven the Sioux out of northern Minnesota, they had plenty of wild rice. Here, as in Wisconsin, were quantities of strawberries, blueberries, cranberries, wild plums and cherries, as well as other fruits. They had several recipes for cooking acorns and dug certain roots commonly called "Indian potatoes." In the spring they made maple ~~sugar~~ and syrup, and in early summer they planted corn, pumpkins and squash. We do not know how much gardening they learned from early white traders and settlers but they made gardens many years ago.

It is said that the Chippewa women were very good cooks and knew how to use all sorts of seasonings, though they had no pepper nor salt. They used wild ginger a great deal in seasoning meat and other food. They made tea out of wintergreen or raspberry leaves, or little twigs of spruce, and in summer they made a refreshing drink by putting a little maple sugar in a cup of cold water.

Before the traders brought steel knives, the Chippewa made knives of the ribs or

other bones of animals. These were sharp enough to cut meat. They often used clam shells for spoons. Pointed sticks were used to take meat out of a kettle if it was too hot to take with the fingers. Cups and all sorts of dishes were made of birchbark, and it is said they could heat water in freshly cut birchbark. To do this they made a "kettle" of folded birchbark, fastened at the ends with strips of bark. The inside of the birchbark was on the outside of the "kettle." This was cool and moist. The Indian woman put water in it and hung it over the fire, and the water heated before the bark was dry enough to take fire.

The old-time Chippewa ate only once a day, usually about the middle of the morning, but children could get food whenever they were hungry. If food was plentiful, the Indians ate as much as possible. A man might go to seven feasts in one day, and he was expected to eat everything that was put in his dish. If food was scarce, the people suffered terribly. They did not know how to store food when they had plenty in order that they might not starve when winter came and the hunting failed.

The first time a Chippewa woman saw a pie, she was very curious to know how it was made. She had bought flour at the trader's store and tried to make bread like that made by the white women, but here was blackberry sauce in the middle of what looked like a flat piece of bread. How did it get there? These Indians make up a name for whatever is new to them and the word describes the object. So the Chippewa made up a name for blackberry pie and it is one of the longest words in the Chippewa language. It tells all about the pie except how to make it. This is the Chippewa word -- muckode-tutute-gominun (blackberries), bashkominisigun (sauce), bukwezhigun (bread). A Chippewa can say this whole word without stopping for breath.

A funny story is told about an old chief who went to Washington with others to sign a treaty. Usually the Indians who go to Washington enjoy eating many good things that

they do not have at home. When they sit down to dinner they order more than they can eat. This chief, it is said, knew only one English word for food and did not like to show his ignorance. His word was "rosbif." So whenever he was asked what he would like to eat, he said "rosbif." He ate roast beef day after day and watched the others eating all sorts of interesting new kinds of food. He was very tired of roast beef when he got home, but proud all the same that he had been able to order his food in English.