

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Native American Food and Diet in the Ohio Lands

The Native American tribes of Ohio (primarily Delaware, Shawnee, and Miami) had a varied cuisine even before the first pioneer settlers arrived in the area. Based on hunting and gathering, it also included the cultivation of crops, dependent on the environment and ever-unpredictable Mother Nature.

The cold weather of winter found tribes and families in winter hunting camps. With shortened days, outdoor activities were reduced. Time spent indoors was used making tools and preparing for the busier seasons ahead. The men hunted non-hibernating animals, providing fresh meat, a valuable protein source. The Indians relied on what they had saved over the previous year to provide sustenance for their families. If stored provisions in underground pits (similar to underground silos) were not enough, it was a time of privation and hunger.

With spring came intense activity for Ohio's first inhabitants. Trees were cleared, and smaller shrubs were burned to prepare fields for planting. Indians migrated to new locations every decade or so because they believed that overuse of the land would ruin the soil. Corn, the most important crop, was considered sacred and was planted in hills 2-3 feet apart. Several varieties were planted (red, dark blue, soft white, and white), each with a different use. The mainstay of their diet, their corn had stubby cobs with only one ear per stalk, in far fewer rows of corn than today's corn. Implements were crude, and methods of farming simple. Apart from some weeding, crop success depended on Nature. Beans and gourds/squash were planted between cornstalks later in the season and allowed to climb up the stalks. Other crops included pumpkins, cabbage, sweet potatoes, onions and leeks. Europeans introduced melons in the 1600's, and Ohio's first people started growing them soon thereafter.

In spring migratory birds were abundant and easy to hunt. Wild greens emerged from winter dormancy, and these succulent morsels were a fresh treat. Spring floods stranded fish in backwaters, and spawning fish in shallow riffles were easy to pluck. Animals emerged from their dens and were chased. Spring was a time of renewal and brought welcome dietary relief from winter.

Summer was a labor-intensive time for Ohio's Indians. As a succession of wild fruits and berries ripened, they were collected and savored. Fishing techniques changed: hooks and lines were used rather than the mass harvesting of spring. Box turtles, rabbits, squirrels, porcupines, and birds were a food source. The fields were tended and patrolled during the day to keep predators away. Corn was harvested, with any surplus stored for wintertime. Wild herbs were gathered and dried to season meat, and other wild plants (onions, roots) were savory additives to stews. Agricultural crops, an important food source, suffered from destructive forces. Drought or blight might shrivel plants, thunderstorms might flatten fields, or nocturnal animals might raid the vegetable patch.

Autumn was even busier, with tribes stashing enough food to last until spring. The nuts gathered from hickory, butternut, black walnut, chestnut, and oak trees were a rich source of carbohydrates, protein, and oil. Harvesting and drying the crops was an arduous activity for the women and older children. The men's hunting was important all year, but a more concerted effort was made in autumn when the deer, buffalo, bear and turkey reached their maximum weight. Meat was dried and stored for winter, hides were made into clothing, and bones were carved into implements.

Ohio's woodland tribes prepared their foods out in the open. Meat was roasted, boiled, or fried unless it was smoked or dried. There were lots of preparations for corn - from pounding it into cornmeal to fermenting it into a beverage. Indians combined the abundant natural foods of the land with their crops to feed their families.

Native American foodstuffs were vastly different from today's table fare, but many of their ideas and methods remain worthwhile. By careful stewardship of the land Indians practiced the first form of rotational farming. Their closeness to and respect for Nature demonstrated a conservation ethic - with food as a gift of the earth.

