

Indian Perspectives on Food and Culture

Et-twaii-lish, Marjorie Waheneka, is a food gatherer for the tribal Longhouse at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla. She is of Cayuse, Palouse, Umatilla, and Warm Springs descent. "I do not know everything and will never say I do," she explains, "but the traditional knowledge I acquired came from older people who lived during a time when life was hard physically and mentally but who survived to share their knowledge and experience."

I WAS ASKED TO PRESENT the Indian perspective on food and culture. I agreed to the assignment with the intent of clearing the air, as the saying goes. When I sat and thought about this subject it came to me that yes! I should be truthful. I have had the opportunity to work on an exhibit here at Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute on the Treaty of 1855 relating to the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla tribes. For two years I researched material. I visited the National Archives in Maryland, where I viewed the actual Treaty papers. I visited the Washington Historical Society in Tacoma, Washington, and examined the Gustav Sohon drawings done at the treaty council. I attended several public programs by Paul McDermott and David Nicandri on Sohon and the Treaty of 1855. All this research leads me to say that what Ms. Williams describes of the *Chiefs at Dinner* drawing is just that many interpretations will come forth. In *Northwest Chiefs: Gustav Sohon's Views of the 1855 Stevens Treaty Council* (p. 10), David Nicandri has a copy of the drawing and an explanation underneath. Also in the book *Life of General Isaac I. Stevens*, by Hazard Stevens (vol. 2, pp. 36–7), a description

is given of this dinner. I, too, have read the Treaty proceedings recorded by various individuals, and it was the Nez Perce group that dined with the officers. They were the only tribal group who took the rations offered by the U.S. Army officials. The Cayuse leader Young Chief spoke up and told Stevens he had his own provisions and was providing them for others like Kamiakin the Yakama leader.

I have learned much these last few years researching for the exhibit our facility has on the Treaty of 1855. The Confederated Umatilla Tribes is the first Columbia Plateau tribe to work with the National Archives in Maryland to request a loan for pages from the 1855 document. It was expensive and the restrictions overwhelming, but when the documents arrived at our building an overwhelming feeling was felt by the drivers who transported the documents out here and by staff who accepted the delivery. These four pieces of paper out of eleven pages came “home” after being housed in a temperature-controlled building, locked up in a security-tight room where appointments are made in advance to view them. The feelings were of “feeling scared,” anxiety, tears, and a heaviness in the heart. Staff immediately gathered in the room with the documents in a special crate and conducted a prayer service to ease the “feelings” and to welcome the papers “home.” At the end were three prayer songs, songs the men whose “X’s” mark an agreement to cede lands to the U.S. government sang 150 years ago in the Walla Walla Valley. Those who gathered in the gallery reassured our ancestors who made their mark that we did not forget their sacrifice and their thinking seven generations into the future for us.

I read the article written by Ms. Williams numerous times. I then searched her resource material and some of my own. I sought advice from the “old man” of our sweathouse, several elders, and both Tribal and Federal co-workers. I appreciate very much their listening, their insight and advice.

I AM ONE OF THE FOOD GATHERERS for our Longhouse, a duty I have committed myself to since 1974. An elder Aunt asked if I was interested in assuming a role my mother had, since they were both the same age and at the end of the line. My Aunt was the head food gatherer, a position I would have to work my way up to. I really didn’t have a choice. My Grandmother just told my Aunt yes, she’ll do it!

A Longhouse is a community gathering place. Traditionally, our Longhouses were made from bulrush or tule reeds sewn into mats using string



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made from the plane dogbane. These mats were laid on pole frames measuring anywhere from 50 to 150 feet long. The width depended on who was instructing the group. If it was really cold, dirt would be piled along the bottom of the pole frames to a depth of a foot or more. Both the earth and the tule reeds offered insulation. The mats were laid on the pole frames in layers, and when it would rain or snow the top layers acted like a sponge, soaking up the moisture and swelling up so the rain would run off just like it does on roofs today. Tule lodges were set up during the winter months, and several families lived in each.

At gatherings in the long tule lodge, everyone sat on the ground. Special tule-reed mats were sewn (twisted) to make the “table,” and more simple mats were used for rugs. The

only protocol for seating was that the male drummers sat at the head of the table and others sat in a semicircle, maybe twice around the edge, depending on the size of the structure and how many people were in attendance.

I used to hear my Grandma say that a long time ago, before community Longhouses were built, private homes were used or a family would build a long tent by placing all their tepees on a long pole to make a frame similar to a tule lodge. The cooking was done outside on camp stoves in great big pots, and the salmon and deer were placed on wooden spits and roasted over the fire. She said sometimes they had to serve two or three times at community meals, clearing the table of dirty dishes, setting up clean ones to serve another group, and repeating the process. We had to

heat lots of hot water in big galvanized tubs to do dishes and hang our dishcloths on clothesline to dry. We used “real” — enamel — dishes and serving dishes, saucers, cups, and utensils. Today we are spoiled because we use paper products when possible. There are some Longhouses where people still hang on to the tradition of using “real” dishes but also have modern dishwashers or plenty of big sinks and space to wash, dry, and store the dishes.

Today many tribal people utilize their Longhouses for dinners no matter what the occasion. A modern Longhouse is a building with one large, open space where “church” services are held on Sundays and funerals and other special ceremonies are conducted, which the tribal community attends. The building also has a separate cooking area with commercial stoves, ovens, kitchen counters, and a dishwasher with big sinks and more counter space. Some have bathrooms with showers and benches like a gym, big storage areas, or separate rooms used for smaller functions like family dinners or fund-raising events.

FOOD IS PART of many of our ceremonies. In addition to the first food feasts, there are the first kill and salmon feasts for the boys and first roots and first berries feasts for girls. Food is also important at gatherings that mark weddings, baby trades (when in-laws exchange gifts between the families and for the new baby), funerals, receipt of an Indian name, and the end of a mourning period as well as modern events recognizing birthdays and sport or educational accomplishments. It doesn't have to be anything special, just your family getting together all in one place. When food is shared and eaten, it is a time to open your heart and speak truthfully about how you feel.

What type of foods might be served? There are two answers to this question: 100 to 150 years ago the Indian people survived on the Indian foods provided by Mother Nature. Their diet consisted of salmon and other types of fish available from the nearby rivers and creeks; deer and elk meat; berries; and the roots of bitter root, biscuit root, camas bulb, Indian carrot, and a variety of others. Such roots are now scarce because private landownership, the grazing of animals (cows and sheep), and the use of pesticides block access or interfere with plant growth. Berries included huckleberries, chokecherries, blackberries, wild strawberries, gooseberries, elderberries, and others found along the Indian trails. It was after contact with non-Indians and the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in the area that other foods became available. In 1836, when Marcus and

Narcissa Whitman established a mission among the Waiilatpu band of Cayuse Indians, Marcus Whitman became the first farmer in the area. Some of the Indians were soon planting their own gardens.

The second answer to this question concerns contemporary times. There has always been a small group, mostly from one family, who have managed to maintain their traditional identity while living the *natitayt tamanwit* (Indian law). This family group still goes out to fish and dry the fish. They hunt and dry or cut up and freeze the meat, and some even bring the meat to a commercial meat-processing business and have it made into burgers, steaks, roasts, and sausages. The women still do the work of the food gatherers — they go out and dig the roots and dry them and pick the berries, which they preserve by canning. All is kept for ceremonies, funerals, and feasts. This small group provides traditional foods for community functions, and they also work in the kitchen to prepare and serve the foods. Today, traditional foods are served along with modern dishes such as salads, fresh vegetables, stews, cakes, pies, fresh seasonal fruits, and whatever any guests contribute to the meal.

The women do most of the cooking, but we change with the times just like anyone else. Today we have men who cook the meat and salmon outdoors on grills, and the rest of the preparation is done in the kitchen by the women. Traditional roots are boiled just like macaroni or rice and eaten plain or with sugar. The Indian people always planned ahead and had their cache, not only with food but also with material things for funerals and ceremonies recognizing naming, first kill, salmon, roots, berries, weddings, baby trades, and memorials. We were always taught to have things available when the need arises. In contemporary times, it is easier and cheaper just to go to the nearest Wal-Mart, Kmart, ShopKo, or Target to purchase inexpensive items. Before, all giveaway items were handmade, with the work done throughout the year. If a person was in good financial status they purchased the better blankets, shawls, and material to sew their own clothing. My Grandma said even horses with all the gear and cows were given away if a person owned them.

I RECALL MY GRANDMOTHER TELLING ME that when people gathered at their home, it was to conduct business or prepare for a special event. After the meal, the women and children were sent out of the room and the men discussed matters. After decisions were made, the women were invited back in to discuss preparation tasks. My Grandma said it was a joint effort of a married couple and their families to have open

communication and respect for one another to accomplish big events. Today when food is shared we are reminded that it not only nourishes our bodies but it also strengthens our bond as family and friends, and so it is medicine for the heart and soul. I was recently reminded of that when a death occurred in our family unexpectedly. So many family and friends came to the funeral, and it was a reminder to our family that we were not alone. The people came to show their support and express their love and respect for our family.

The Indian people were very hospitable folks, as has been recorded by many non-Indian people in diaries, books, and oral histories. I was taught as a child that when company came to your home you offered them something to eat and drink immediately and if you didn't partake of what was offered you offended your hosts. It didn't matter if you had just eaten, you would have to eat again. I can still hear my Grandma say, "Even if you just offer them bread and water, give it to them."

Indian groups have always been a "curiosity" to non-Indian people. Ever since Lewis and Clark we have been documented for our culture, traditions, language, religion, foods, and lifestyle. Even today the documentation continues by college students working on dissertations. Personally I am thankful for these people as they have done what some of us have thought about but for whatever reason never done! I am thankful to Gustav Sohon for being present to record with an artist's eye and hand interactions among the people at the 1855 Treaty Council. He left behind what he saw — the people, the landscape, the camp scene, the activity, the dress, and various age groups present during that time.

BEING A LADY OF THE LONGHOUSE is a very big responsibility, one a person can't just do when she feels like it or when it fits into her schedule. You take on the responsibility of being a servant to the people, the community. The responsibilities can overwhelm a person, especially if she wasn't raised by an older person, which is one reason why we try to recruit and train our younger daughters, nieces, and granddaughters.

I learned my duties by observation and by asking questions. I had very patient Grandmothers and Aunts who taught by being involved, by action, and by example. When my Aunt came to ask me to serve as a food gatherer, I had to ask my Grandma, "So what am I supposed to do?" She explained that I was going to be taking care of the foods given to us by the Creator. I would go out and dig the roots, pick the berries, and bring

them back for the people in the community to eat at the new foods feast. Foods are gathered in a seasonal round, and after the new foods feast is held the community would be allowed to go out and dig the roots or pick the berries to prepare for the winter months. I would also be at the beck and call of families within the community as a cook or kitchen helper for funerals or other ceremonies conducted at the Longhouse. The most important events I am involved with are the celery feast in March, the root feast in April, the Fourth of July horse parade, and the huckleberry feast at the end of July or early August.

There has always been a small family group who still practice the traditional ways, and my family has been the strongest on our reservation. There have been times we have been completely exhausted beyond measure. As I get older I find it harder to bounce back. My stamina is weakening. My Aunt is no longer able to go out digging or huckleberry picking with us, and so the prayer songs she sang are no longer heard at the beginning of our day. These last two years that responsibility has fallen down to me, because I know songs from our Indian religion and I have also struggled to learn my Indian language — two high requirements for a woman leader. There are several women older than me in my family, but the responsibility has come to me and I didn't refuse. I close my eyes, envision my Grandmas, pray from my heart, and the words and song come before we go out and dig or pick the new foods.

I refer to my Grandmother a lot because she was my teacher, and I held her in very high esteem. She was also the oldest daughter of Chief Willie Wocatsie, co-chief of the Walla Wallas and a recognized leader on our reservation. She shared so much oral history with me, and many times today I reflect back on her teachings to keep myself in order. She was born near Bickelton, Washington, in 1902, and when her mother was widowed around 1910 they moved to the reservation of the Confederated Umatilla Tribes. My Grandma made her home and raised her family along the Umatilla River until her death in 1981. I was by her side until she left us behind.

I am forever indebted to all my elders — Grandmas, Grandpas, parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and children for giving me the strength to believe in the Creator and all the bounty of this land; to look into the future with promise, as now I am a teacher and an example to my children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren; and to preserve and protect our culture and heritage to the best of my knowledge. Thank you all for allowing me this opportunity to express my teachings and the love I have for this *tuicham* (land).