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Picturing Food and Power at the Treaty Councils

Many native American men in similar dress sit on either side of a long cloth in Gustaf Sohon's *Chiefs at Dinner, Walla Walla Council, 1855*. They appear to be holding pieces of food in their hands. Identical plates and bowls have been carefully arranged in front of each man. At either end of the table, a white man in suit and tie serves food from what looks like an iron pot. A cooking area to the left of the table includes an open fire surrounded by several pots. Tents and a hastily constructed log cabin, built to offer protection from the weather, complete the picture.¹

Sohon, who had immigrated to the United States from Tilsit, Germany, in 1842, came to the Northwest with the U.S. Army in the early 1850s. A gifted linguist who learned the languages of Flathead and Pend’D’Oreille Indians, he frequently served as a surveyor and cartographer during army explorations. Impressed with Sohon’s abilities, especially his friendships with Native Americans who admired his ability to converse with them in their native languages, Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens requested that Sohon be transferred to his command as he brokered treaties with Indians in the Pacific Northwest. Sohon traveled with Stevens recording the treaty negotiations on location.² His extraordinary drawings are a significant source of information for scholars studying the history of Indian treaties.

*Chiefs at Dinner* depicts negotiations with representatives of the Nez Perce (Nimi’ipuu), Cayuse, and Walla Walla Indian tribes in May or June 1855. Giving the illustration a quick glance and seeing so many Natives, I first assumed that this was a dinner prepared by the Indians. A closer
examination and a reading of the official proceedings of the Walla Walla Council, as well as records kept by James Gilchrist Swan, a prolific writer who had settled at Shoalwater Bay in 1852, and others, reveals that the dinner probably was prepared by the whites and was meant to show the superiority and influence of Stevens, his officers, and aides. Swan, who had come to the Northwest from Boston in the early 1850s, lived near the coastal Indians for several years. He learned their language, ate their food, and observed their customs. All of this information Swan recorded in books and articles, some for newspapers and some for the Smithsonian Institution. Sohon illustrates the celebration of a “power dinner,” an event used by people desirous of influencing others.

*Chiefs at Dinner* is an excellent vehicle for underscoring that history is about more than dates and battles. I do not go so far as Peter Farb and George Armelagos, anthropologists who maintain that “once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among society’s members.” But I do believe that exploring the decisions that affect food choices, whether it is the choice of ingredients or the methods of cooking,
recognizes that the details of daily life are important to understanding history.

While at times I found myself wondering whether my twenty-first-century bias was influencing my thinking as I looked at this image, its significance became clearer after I read the official proceedings of the Walla Walla Council and checked historical descriptions of other “power dinners.”

The official proceedings of the Council in the Walla Walla Valley, which began May 22, 1855, show that both sides were concerned about who would provide food for the participants. The day before official negotiations commenced, Stevens told the Indians, “you have come here by our invitation and [as] our guests. . . . We therefore have brought provisions [beef, corn, potatoes] which we offer to you as a friend to a guest.” During the days of negotiations, Stevens or Palmer kept reminding the Native Americans that the “wild game, the roots and the berries would not last always” and that other tribes who had initially ignored similar warnings “finally concluded they had been acting foolish.”

Speaking for the tribes, Young Chief replied, “We have plenty of cattle, they are close to our camp. We have already killed three and have plenty of provisions. . . . If we want any we will come to you.” Believing that “Stevens wanted to take their homes and resettle whites on them,” the Tribes were suspicious of gifts from whites and “believed they were forced into making agreements which they did not have time to consider.” Just the April before, Kamiakin, a Yakima chief, had explained that he “had never accepted from the Americans the value of a grain of wheat without paying for it. . . . the Whites gave goods in this manner, and then claimed that the Indian lands were purchased by them.”

According to historians Clifford E. Trafzer and Richard Scheuerman, one way the whites justified the treaties and their supposed guarantee of an adequate food supply was the belief “that there was no indigenous agriculture among the Plateau Indians.” Yet, though “the Palouses and their neighbors were not farmers, some of them had small gardens where they raised corn, potatoes, and other vegetables.” And this fact was known. During one of the speeches trying to convince the tribes to sign, James Doty, secretary for Washington Territory, had stated, “You had your fields, horses and cattle, and raised your own milk, meat and vegetables.” In actuality, the U.S. government entered into the treaties so that whites could settle on the fertile land.

The people and objects in Sohon’s drawing offer several clues that provide the basis for my views. The first evidence is the formal table ar-
rangements and characterization of the Indians. Though the meal is served on the ground, there seems to be a cloth covering the dirt and a supply of dishes so that each Native man has the same plate, spoon, and bowl. These are Euro-American customs. Indians would have covered the ground with individual woven mats. They would not have had matching cutlery and dishes, as most tribes made their own spoons, bowls, and platters. Though they could have been similar, the table settings would not have been identical. In most Indian feasts, baskets of fresh water used to rinse the mouth would be near the table. None appear in this drawing.

The lineup of Native Americans, all dressed in similar clothes, strikes me as a portrayal of docile children or, even worse, prisoners waiting for a handout. The artist seems to be creating a scene that records the Americans’ superiority and the Native Americans’ dependency. It reinforces General Joel Palmer’s claim that, unless the treaty were signed, the tribes would not have “mills to grind your wheat and your corn . . . [and] provisions for your women and children.”

The cooking arrangements make it clear that Stevens’s men are preparing the food. By the 1850s, some Indian tribes did use iron cookware, but it was not their customary way of cooking. Traditionally, Native people in the Pacific Northwest either cooked with boiling water heated with hot stones in a watertight, coiled basket or wood container; steamed food in a hot pit filled with grasses, dirt, or both and covered with mats; or roasted over a smoldering fire. Meat was usually baked in a pit. None of these methods appears in the drawing, and the Indians are clearly the guests, giving the impression that, in this scene, at least, Indian foodways are not equal to whites.

The image places the white men in charge, for they are preparing and serving the food and most likely determining the menu. Though a single meal is not described, the food simmering in the pot was probably some kind of stew, with beef and/or game and potatoes. Hard tack, a dry bread, or — if they were lucky — fresh bread or biscuits may have been offered. These foods were readily available. James Swan had mentioned them just a few months earlier, when Stevens had invited him to the signing ceremony with the Coastal Tribes on the Chehalis River.

Dinners at which Europeans dismissed Native foods and substituted their own are not new. One memorable banquet happened in 1789 when George Vancouver, an Englishman, and Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, a Spaniard, met to settle sovereignty claims concerning Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island. The two commanders also wanted to assure the local chief Ma-Kwee-Na (Maquinna) that they would all be friends.
ON FOOD PREPARATION

Their method of cooking is by simply roasting or boiling. This latter process was formerly done in baskets by means of hot stones. The article, whether fish or flesh, was put in the basket, then covered with water, and a supply of hot stones kept up till the whole was cooked. I have seen them perform this process, as they fancy their salmon tastes better when cooked this way. The stones, when taken from the fire red hot, were first dipped in water to remove any dirt or ashes, then thrown into the basket, and soon the water would boil violently. I never perceived that any improvement to the flavor of either fish or meat was gained by this style, and much prefer our own custom of boiling victuals in an iron vessel over the fire. . . . Bread is made of flour and water without salt, baked in thin cakes in the ashes. When hot it is very good, but rather tough when cold. Most of them can make good bread when they feel like it, and some are able to make good cake and pies. These accomplishments have been learned from the white women they have occasionally met with.

. . .

When meat or fish is boiled, it is taken on to a large wooden platter or tin pan, and, after being cut up, is divided round by the matron of the establishment, each one receiving an equal share. The water which the food has been boiled in is considered a luxury, and each one has a clam shell, which is dipped into the kettle as often as they desire to drink of the broth.

—James Gilchrist Swan, writing about the Indians around Shoalwater (now Willapa) Bay in the 1850s


Ma-Kwee-Na invited Vancouver and Bodega y Quadra to a feast he had prepared. The Indian cook’s “trouble & skill [with dinner] was thrown away upon us for we had a far better dinner to sit down to,” observed Edward Bell, who accompanied Vancouver. The two commanders instead proceeded to serve a European-style dinner on sterling silver plates “in a style little inferior to what we met with at the Governor’s own house.” Don Quadra would “furnish the Eatables and Captn. Vancouver the Drinkables.” Without a doubt, the European commanders intended to indicate that their style was superior.

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Actually, Bodega y Quadra had already introduced the Natives to European food, bread, chocolate, and beans stewed in the style of New Spain. This, observes historian Warren Cook, “was tacit recognition and reinforcement of Spanish control over Friendly Cove.”

A picture, even one made at the time of the event, is of course subject to many interpretations. Some, on looking at Sohon’s drawing of the Walla Walla Council dinner may simply conclude that since Stevens and his party were hosts, it was right for them to provide and prepare the meals. Yet, even if that is so, the way Native Americans are portrayed in *Chiefs at Dinner* suggests much more. Peo-Peo-Mox, a Walla Walla leader, said, “When you show us something then we think it good, treating us as children, giving us food.” Even had I not read his statement, I would look at the drawing and feel sadness. Sohon may have been just sketching a dinner, but in showing whites serving food to a passive group of men who finally signed the treaty, he has given us a glimpse into the nation’s unsavory past. As culinary historian Margaret Visser points out, “Food is ‘everyday.’... [it] is one of the means by which a society creates itself and acts out its aims and fantasies.”

Notes

3. The Northwest Collection at the University of Washington Suzzalo Library contains a rich archival collection of Swan papers.
6. Ibid., May 29, 1855.
10. Stevens and his party might not have been carrying matching tableware, but these items would be mandatory at important dinners among whites.
13. Swan, *Northwest Coast*, 337. Swan mentions beef, mutton, deer, elk, salmon, wild geese, and ducks as well as hot biscuits and coffee.
15. Ibid., 337.