



History of Vegetarianism

Native Americans and Vegetarianism

This article first appeared in the *Vegetarian Journal*, September 1994, published by [The Vegetarian Resource Group](#)

By Rita Laws, Ph.D.

How well we know the stereotype of the rugged Plains Indian: killer of buffalo, dressed in quill-decorated buckskin, elaborately feathered eaddress, and leather moccasins, living in an animal skin teepee, master of the dog and horse, and stranger to vegetables. But this lifestyle, once limited almost exclusively to the Apaches, flourished no more than a couple hundred years. It is not representative of most Native Americans of today or yesterday. Indeed, the "buffalo-as-lifestyle" phenomenon is a direct result of European influence, as we shall see.

Among my own people, the Choctaw Indians of Mississippi and Oklahoma, vegetables are the traditional diet mainstay. A French manuscript of the eighteenth century describes the Choctaws' vegetarian leanings in shelter and food. The homes were constructed not of skins, but of wood, mud, bark and cane. The principal food, eaten daily from earthen pots, was a vegetarian stew containing corn, pumpkin and beans. The bread was made from corn and acorns. Other common favorites were roasted corn and corn porridge. (Meat in the form of small game was an infrequent repast.) The ancient Choctaws were, first and foremost, farmers. Even the clothing was plant based, artistically embroidered dresses for the women and cotton breeches for the men. Choctaws have never adorned their hair with feathers.

The rich lands of the Choctaws in present-day Mississippi were so greatly coveted by nineteenth century Americans that most of the tribe was forcibly removed to what is now called Oklahoma. Oklahoma was chosen both because it was largely uninhabited and because several explorations of the territory had deemed the land barren and useless for any purpose. The truth, however, was that Oklahoma was so fertile a land that it was an Indian breadbasket. That is, it was used by Indians on all sides as an agricultural resource. Although many Choctaws suffered and died during removal on the infamous "Trail of Tears", those that survived built anew and successfully in Oklahoma, their agricultural

genius intact.

George Catlin, the famous nineteenth century Indian historian, described the Choctaw lands of southern Oklahoma in the 1840's this way: "...the ground was almost literally covered with vines, producing the greatest profusion of delicious grapes,...and hanging in such endless clusters... our progress was oftentimes completely arrested by hundreds of acres of small plum trees...every bush that was in sight was so loaded with the weight of its...fruit, that they were in many instances literally without leaves on their branches, and quite bent to the ground... and beds of wild currants, gooseberries, and (edible) prickly pear." (Many of the "wild" foods Anglo explorers encountered on their journeys were actually carefully cultivated by Indians.)

Many of the Choctaw foods cooked at celebrations even today are vegetarian. Corn is so important to us it is considered divine. Our corn legend says that it was a gift from Hashtali, the Great Spirit. Corn was given in gratitude because Choctaws had fed the daughter of the Great Spirit when she was hungry. (Hashtali is literally "Noon Day Sun". Choctaws believe the Great Spirit resides within the sun, for it is the sun that allows the corn to grow!)

Another Choctaw story describes the afterlife as a giant playground where all but murderers are allowed. What do Choctaws eat in "heaven"? Their sweetest treat, of course: melons, a never-ending supply.

More than one tribe has creation legends which describe people as vegetarian, living in a kind of Garden of Eden. A Cherokee legend describes humans, plants, and animals as having lived in the beginning in "equality and mutual helpfulness". The needs of all were met without killing one another. When man became aggressive and ate some of the animals, the animals invented diseases to keep human population in check. The plants remained friendly, however, and offered themselves not only as food to man, but also as medicine, to combat the new diseases.

More tribes were like the Choctaws than were different. Aztec, Mayan, and Zapotec children in olden times ate 100% vegetarian diets until at least the age of ten years old. The primary food was cereal, especially varieties of corn. Such a diet was believed to make the child strong and disease resistant. (The Spaniards were amazed to discover that these Indians had twice the life-span they did.) A totally vegetarian diet also insured that the children would retain a life-long love of grains, and thus, live a healthier life. Even today, the Indian healers of those tribes are likely to advise the sick to "return to the arms of Mother Corn" in

order to get well. Such a return might include eating a lot of atole. (The easiest way to make atole is to simmer commercially produced masa harina corn flour with water. Then flavor it with chocolate or cinnamon, and sweeten to taste.) Atole is considered a sacred food.

It is ironic that Indians are strongly associated with hunting and fishing when, in fact, "nearly half of all the plant foods grown in the world today were first cultivated by the American Indians, and were unknown elsewhere until the discovery of the Americas." Can you imagine Italian food without tomato paste, Ireland without white potatoes, or Hungarian goulash without paprika? All these foods have Indian origins.

An incomplete list of other Indian foods given to the world includes bell peppers, red peppers, peanuts, cashews, sweet potatoes, avocados, passion fruit, zucchini, green beans, kidney beans, maple syrup, lima beans, cranberries, pecans, okra, chocolate, vanilla, sunflower seeds, pumpkin, cassava, walnuts, forty-seven varieties of berries, pineapple, and, of course, corn and popcorn.

Many history textbooks tell the story of Squanto, a Pawtuxent Indian who lived in the early 1600's. Squanto is famous for having saved the Pilgrims from starvation. He showed them how to gather wilderness foods and how to plant corn.

There have been thousands of Squantos since, even though their names are not so well-known. In fact modern day agriculture owes its heart and soul to Indian-taught methods of seed development, hybridization, planting, growing, irrigating, storing, utilizing and cooking. And the spirit of Squanto survives to this day. One example is a Peruvian government research station tucked away in a remote Amazon Indian village called Genaro Herrera. University trained botanists, agronomists and foresters work there, scientifically studying all the ways the local Indians grow and prepare food. They are also learning how to utilize forests without destroying them, and how to combat pests without chemicals.

The trend that moved some North American Indian tribes away from plant food-based diets can be traced to Coronado, a sixteenth century Spanish explorer. Prior to his time, hunting was a hobby among most Indians, not a vocation. The Apaches were one of the few tribes who relied heavily on animal killing for survival.

But all that changed as Coronado and his army traversed the West and Midwest from Mexico. Some of his horses got away and quickly multiplied on the grassy plains. Indians re-tamed this new denizen, and

the Age of Buffalo began.

Horses replaced dogs as beasts of burden and offered excellent transportation. This was as important an innovation to the Plains Indians as the automobile would be to Anglos later on. Life on the Plains became much easier very quickly.

>From the east came another powerful influence: guns. The first American settlers brought their firearms with them. Because of the Indian "threat", they were soon immersed in weapons development and succeeded in making more accurate and powerful weapons. But they also supplied weapons to Indians who allied themselves with colonial causes. Because it was so much easier to kill an animal with a rifle than with a bow and arrow, guns spread quickly among the Indians. Between the horse and the rifle, buffalo killing was now much simpler.

The Apaches were joined by other tribes, such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahos, Comanches, and Kiowas. These tribes "lost the corn", gave up agriculture, and started living nomadic existences for the first time. It wasn't long before their food, clothing, and shelter were entirely dependent on one animal, the buffalo.

George Catlin lamented this fact as early as 1830. He predicted the extinction of the buffalo (which very nearly happened) and the danger of not being diversified. Catlin pointed out that, were the Plains Indians only killing a buffalo for their own use, the situation might not be so grave. But because the great beasts were being slaughtered for profit, they were destined to be wiped out.

It was the white man who profited. There was an insatiable Eastern market for buffalo tongue and buffalo robes. In 1832, Catlin described a wholesale buffalo slaughter carried out by six hundred Sioux on horseback. These men killed fourteen hundred animals, and then took only their tongues. These were traded to whites for a few gallons of whiskey. The whiskey, no doubt, helped to dull the Indian talent to make maximum use of an animal. Among the tribes who did not trade with whites, each animal was completely used, down to the hooves. No part went to waste. And buffalo were not killed in the winter, for the Indians lived on autumn dried meat during that time.

But now buffalo were killed in the winter most of all. It was in cold weather that their magnificent coats grew long and luxuriant. Catlin estimated that 200,000 buffalo were killed each year to make coats for people back East. The average hide netted the Indian hunter one pint of whiskey.

Had the Indians understood the concept of animal extinction, they may have ceased the slaughter. But to the Indians, the buffalo was a gift from the Great Spirit, a gift which would always keep coming. Decades after the disappearance of huge herds, Plains Indians still believed their return was imminent. They danced the Ghost Dance, designed to bring back the buffalo, and prayed for this miracle as late as 1890.

In spite of the ease and financial incentives of killing buffalo, there were tribes that did not abandon the old ways of the Plains. In addition to the farming tribes of the Southeast, tribes in the Midwest, Southwest, and Northwest stuck to agriculture. For example, the Osage, Pawnee, Arikaras, Mandans, Wichitas, and Caddoans remained in permanent farming settlements. Even surrounded by buffalo, they built their homes of timber and earth. And among some of the Indians of the Southwest, cotton, basketry, and pottery were preferred over animal-based substitutes like leather pouches.

Catlin was eerily accurate when he predicted dire consequences for the buffalo-dependent tribes. To this day, it is these Indians who have fared the worst from assimilation with other races. The Sioux of South Dakota, for one, have the worst poverty and one of the highest alcoholism rates in the country. Conversely, the tribes who depended little or not at all on animal exploitation for their survival, like the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, and Chickasaw, are thriving and growing, having assimilated without surrendering their culture.

In the past, and in more than a few tribes, meat-eating was a rare activity, certainly not a daily event. Since the introduction of European meat-eating customs, the introduction of the horse and the gun, and the proliferation of alcoholic beverages and white traders, a lot has changed. Relatively few Indians can claim to be vegetarians today.

But it was not always so. For most Native Americans of old, meat was not only not the food of choice, its consumption was not revered (as in modern times when Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving as if it were a religious duty). There was nothing ceremonial about meat. It was a plant, tobacco, that was used most extensively during ceremonies and rites, and then only in moderation. Big celebrations such as Fall Festivals centered around the harvest, especially the gathering of the corn. The Choctaws are not the only ones who continue to dance the Corn Dance.

What would this country be like today if the ancient ways were still observed? I believe it is fair to say that the Indian respect for non-human life forms would have had a greater impact on American society. Corn, not turkey meat, might be the celebrated Thanksgiving Day dish. Fewer

species would have become extinct, the environment would be healthier, and Indian and non-Indian Americans alike would be living longer and healthier lives. There might also be less sexism and racism, for many people believe that, as you treat your animals (the most defenseless), so you will treat your children, your women, and your minorities.

Without realizing it, the Indian warriors and hunters of ages past played right into the hands of the white men who coveted their lands and their buffalo. When the lands were taken from them, and the buffalo herds decimated, there was nothing to fall back on. But the Indians who chose the peaceful path and relied on diversity and the abundance of plants for their survival were able to save their lifestyles. Even after being moved to new lands they could hang on, re-plant, and go forward.

Now we, their descendants, must recapture the spirit of the ancient traditions for the benefit of all people. We must move away from the European influences that did away with a healthier style of living. We must again embrace our brothers and sisters, the animals, and "return to the corn" once and for all.

(Rita Laws is Choctaw and Cherokee. She lives and writes in Oklahoma. Her Choctaw name, Hina Hanta, means Bright Path of Peace, which is what she considers vegetariansim to be. She has been vegetarian for over 14 years.)

Everything on this website is copyright © International Vegetarian Union, unless stated otherwise
| [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Archives](#) | [Celebrities](#) | [FAQ](#) | [History](#) | [Join](#) | [Phrases](#) | [Recipes](#) | [Religion](#) | [Resources](#) |
IVU Regional Websites: [Latin America & Caribbean](#) [Africa](#) [North America](#) [Europe](#) [Asia-Pacific](#) [India, South & West Asia](#)



This page was last updated on: April 18, 2001