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Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

Food for the Leni Lenape

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Jennie Bobb and her daughter, Nellie Longhat (both Delaware), Oklahoma, 1915. Photo and map from Wikipedia.

When we want to prepare a meal for our family we usually start by going to our pantry, our refrigerator, our freezer, or our local super market to gather the items we plan to serve. The indigenous people who lived in this area several hundred years ago didn't have any of these conveniences and so feeding a family was a lot more complicated. The Leni Lenape were an interesting people in this regard. There was a certain division of labor with the women being the primary gatherers and agriculturalists and the men handling the hunting and fishing duties.

Deer, elk, bear, rabbit, beaver and raccoon were the most commonly hunted animals and there was little that went to waste. The meat was shared by all the members of the tribe and the skins and sinews were all put to good use. Evidence shows that bear fat was melted down and poured into bags made of skin, where it was stored until needed for cooking or other uses. Turkeys, ducks, geese, passenger pigeons and other birds were hunted by bow and arrow or through the use of nets. Their eggs, meat and feathers all had a use in Lenape households. Almost all provender gathered by the Lenape were used immediately but they realized the need for setting aside some food for the winter when food would be scarce so when they had a surplus, they took care to preserve as much of it as possible through drying and/or smoking it.

Fishing was quite important to the Lenape. Since most of their settlement occurred along streams, it's easy to understand why they would turn to the water to obtain a large portion of their sustenance. Here in this area, shad, salmon, and sturgeon were the species of choice. Supplementing the diet were fresh water mussels and crayfish. Very often the Lenape would bake the whole fish in clay and after the clay had hardened from the heat of the fire's ashes, it would be cracked open and the skin and scales would stick to the clay leaving the moist flesh of the fish readily edible.

Women gathered plants, roots, mushrooms and berries in season to supplement the diet. Additionally, the roots of cattail plants, water lilies, persimmons, wild plums, walnuts, butternuts, hickory nuts and chestnuts were also consumed.

Acorns were either roasted or crushed and boiled in water to remove their bitterness. The resulting meal would be eaten as a cereal or would be used as flour in baking simple bread.

The Lenape used an ingenious method to provide cooking oil for themselves. They would take the nuts they gathered, crush them and then boil them in water. The oil from the nuts would rise to the top of the simmering water where it would be carefully skimmed off using a spoon made from a clam or mussel shell. The oil was then stored in gourds or in clay pots until the need arose to use it.

One thing that can't be ignored about the diet of the indigenous people of the Cooks Creek area was the produce derived from their farming activities. The women were quite proficient in raising the basic three staples – corn, beans and squash, but they also raised sunflowers, herbs and tobacco (the latter was used primarily for religious ceremonies). Again, they ate most of their food fresh but they did dry a considerable amount of corn and beans which were stored in skin bags. Pumpkins and squash were cut into rings which were threaded on to sticks and left to dry in the sun. Once they were dried, they would be preserved for quite some time. When they were to be used, they were rehydrated and turned into ingredients for the soups and stews that were popular.

It's interesting to note that despite not having the conveniences we have today, the people who lived here hundreds of years ago were able to enjoy being well nourished with a considerable variety of foodstuffs all of which was unadulterated with chemicals and preservatives. They were able to sustain themselves for over a millennia in this fashion. We could probably learn a lot from their example.

Map of Lenni Lenape Area

