What Early Indians Ate

Connecticut Indians of the earlier civilizations were essentially hunters and gatherers. They ate the meat of the animals they hunted, the shellfish and fishes they caught and the uncultivated fruits, nuts and vegetables provided by their environment. A dominance of vegetable products didn't appear until Late Woodland times, when many tribes had become agriculturalists. Broadly these are the main evidences from modern archaeological diggings and early Colonial journals as outlined by Fred Warner of Collinsville, Conn., speaker at the opening SVAS program meeting last October.

Diet Differences

The diet of early Indians in different parts of the state may have differed, but seasonal migrations probably had a tendency to lessen the dietary distinctions among the Connecticut groups.

Many of the animals prominent in early Indian diets are no longer to be found in these parts -- mammals like black bear, elk, pumas, moose and caribou. But the white-tailed deer, the most common food in early Indian diets, still abounds. The Indians caught these deer in various ways, shooting them with bow and arrow being the most usual.

Second in priority for early Indian hunters was the black bear. These were taken mostly in winter -- by bow and arrow and by noose. Aside from the meat they provided, their thick coats were used for bedding. There is an amusing tale written by one early white author proposing that hunters chase the bear to a village -- to avoid having to carry it after capture.

The presence of moose was revealed in 68/60 sites where food has been reported. Beaver was not present in the earlier sites, but bulked large when the Dutch settled the Connecticut Valley. Traces of otter were in the most recent cultures; skunks in 4/60; and also black wolves (which apparently were used in religious rites). Short-legged Indian dogs, found at almost all sites were also sometimes a part of the food bank. They were fed in times of plenty and eaten when other food was not available. Also eaten commonly were rabbits, muskrats, porpoises, harbor seals and mink.

Fish and shellfish were eaten in quantity and variety. Sturgeon were in evidence almost everywhere; also sharks, striped bass, alewife eels, catfish and Atlantic salmon. Shellfish included clams, whelk (from which wampum was made), mussels, and snails of all sorts. Oysters were part of some diets, but clams were more numerous. Lobsters were in great abundance and were often dried, sunbaked and smoked for storing.

Corn, beans and squash, the Three Sisters of Indian agriculture, were the vegetables most cultivated and eaten. But non-cultivated plants were the source of most of the vegetables -- and also served other-than-dietary uses. Acorns and walnuts furnished oil. Then there were chestnuts, plums, choke cherries and currents; also the fruit of Solomon's seal, huckleberries, raspberries, cranberries and ground nuts. One of the most important wild fruits was the strawberry. Also planted was the Jerusalem artichoke.

Some reports say that the more recent Indians lived only on shellfish when they lived at the shore. But if an Indian ate only shellfish he would have had to eat 30 lb. per day to survive. Since this is obviously unlikely, he probably ate mostly vegetables, notably corn. He could be content without meat, if none were available. This clearly illustrates the importance of the advent of agriculture, because, before that time, the Indians would have starved without meat.

Membership Up Again

Membership is on its way to a new high for the third year in a row.

In 1970, SVAS's first year, membership totalled a modest 90. For 1972, it registered a whopping 56% gain, to 147. For 1973, the signs all point to another increase, despite a significant increase in dues.

But it is important that new memberships reach the Society as early as possible in December. Some phases of the planned program of expanded service to members must await firm knowledge of total 1973 dues income. So we urge anyone who has not yet written that check to -- Do It Now! Dues categories are: $10 regular, $5 student, $25 contributing, $50 sustaining and $100 benefactor.
AFTER HOURS
-with SVAS President Ned Swigart

As I sit in my study looking at the artifacts gathered so carefully by my adult volunteers and Gunnery, Wykeham and Shepaug Regional School students, I cannot help but dream of the people who used them and wish that somehow I could go back through the mists of time to view the depths of their experiences. How did this 2520 B.C. small stemmed point break on a rock? Deep inside some panting animal fleeing in terror at the sudden pain in its side? What caused this Indian pot to be broken beside a small stream—a child tripping over it? A mother startled by some sudden, unexplained sound? Perhaps as our archaeological research continues we may find tentative answers to such questions—if we are given the necessary time.

We have located some 75 Indian villages within eight miles of our proposed American Indian Institute. Yet each year we are losing about 20% of them.

Each year it gets harder to find new sites to replace those going under macadam, houses and supermarkets, and those ruined by the plow and by the well meaning, but unscientific, diggers. Inexorably and with increasing speed, the sites are being taken from us before we have even the slightest chance to see what history they might contain.

Digging a site properly, you see, is a frighteningly slow process. After five years and thousands of man-hours of work, we have so far dug only one site completely. Only with the Bethel site are we confident we have unearthed the full story buried there to share with mankind. Five other sites have been partially excavated—enough to catch glimpses of the history written there. But the story is still fragmentary at best. SVAS lives in a constant state of concern that our diggers' next trip may find another site ruined or totally destroyed. Within the next 10 years, many of these villages representing the last remnant of the Indian heritage in Connecticut will probably be gone. Then it will be too late.

It is my sad duty and my message to inform and awaken you to the terrible urgency of our cause. We need your support, not only financially to build our Center, but as a volunteer digger trained by and working for the Society in this great quest. Not only must we redouble our efforts to excavate endangered sites scientifically, but also we must try somehow to protect and preserve as many of these irreplaceable historic shrines as possible—before the legacy from ancient man to his modern brother is forever taken from us.

EdCom Sparks Talks, Kits

Since June 1, 1972, the Society has given more than 30 lectures to various schools and organizations in Connecticut. The Society has exhibited artifacts and displays at the following: Schaghticoke Middle School, New Milford; The Woodbury Savings and Loan, Heritage Village; Housatonic Valley Days-Environmental Fair, Cornwall; Danbury Mineral and Gem Show, Danbury; Old Quarry Nature Center, Danbury; Richter Center, Danbury; Middle Gate School, Newtown. It is estimated that more than ten thousand people viewed the Society's exhibits.

PROJECTS
1. Two portable exhibits are nearly complete, and will be available to schools and organizations shortly.
2. Demonstration kits will be available from the Society in December. These kits will contain materials and directions for the following demonstrations: arrowhead making, using a flint drill, working with bone, decorating pottery: New England style, Indian tools, and polished stone artifacts.
3. The following slide/tape programs should be available in December: Stone Artifacts of Connecticut Indians, Projectile Points of Connecticut Indians, Tools of the Precolumbian Indian, Indian Pottery Styles and Methods of Decoration.

John A Pawloski, Chairman,
Education Committee

FIREPITS Were Village Hubs

The FIREPIT was a central feature of most early Indian civilizations. Like other elements of communal living, its design and even its purposes varied from culture to culture. But always, this hearth, where the Indian cooked and/or dried meat and fish and/or gathered around for warmth, was a part of the settlement in each generation.

SVAS diggers have unearthed the second oldest firepit so far discovered in Connecticut. It now resides in the Gunn Memorial Museum, where it can be viewed by all visitors. This particular firepit (which is being examined by SVAS President Ned Swigart and his fellow-founder of SVAS, Sidney Hessel, in the accompanying picture) is of the type in which a fire was built. Then cobbles were placed on top to be heated. Cooking was done

Founders

Swigart

Hessel
SVAS Hits The Big Time

The Shepaug Valley Archaeological Society, its aims and its exploits, are now big time news.

During October, the SVAS story reached hundreds of thousands of readers of the NEW YORK TIMES via a feature news article (with pictures) on October 9. Just a week later, CBS aired the results of its camera-crew’s recording of SVAS operations and progress to the millions of listeners to its prime-time (6 p.m. - 7 p.m.) CBS NEWS broadcast . . . And that’s not all. CBS subsequently released the 5-minute SVAS segment to all of its network stations for use as a news filler when, as, and if desired. (Advertising friends to SVAS calculate that this broadcast time, had it been bought commercially, would have cost something in excess of $150,000!)

The NEW YORK TIMES story carried a 3-column headline: "Ancient Indian Sites Are Dug Up." The 500-word article told the story of SVAS's discoveries from its start three years ago to the recent launching of the drive for The American Indian Institute funds. The 3-column picture used by the TIMES was captioned: "Edmund Swigart, leader of the archaeological enterprise in Washington, Conn., at work with Charles Heaven (left) and Mat Brusilow sifting dirt in the background."

CBS camera crew came to Washington late in October to film typical groups of SVAS diggers at work -- and CBS reporters came along to take back to television audiences the sensational story of SVAS's first three years of achievement.

in a container of inflammable material, such as bark, by either dropping the heated stones into the container filled with water and food, or by placing the container on heated stones. Thus the food was boiled. This firepit has been C-14 dated at 2405 B.C. and represents the Sylvan Lake culture -- which was a hunting and acorn-gathering subsistence civilization.

1115 B.C. Firepit

A second type of firepit discovered by the Society and C-14 dated at 1115 B.C., is a hearth made up of charcoal with large flat stones on top of one-half of the pit.

A third type of pit, the commonest the Society has unearthed, was relatively small size -- 18" deep; 21" in diameter. It could have been used for cooking, drying meat or fish, and perhaps for warmth. Firepits of this type have been found for most civilizations and many have been C-14 dated.

Usually on the surface of the level of the culture to which they belong, some firepits however, are recessed below the surface. One unearthed by SVAS diggers (dated about 1000 B.C.) was found 32" below the level of its civilization. It was approximately 19" in diameter. Another, C-14 dated 385 B.C., was found 5" below the civilization level to which it belonged.

Artifacts

Published quarterly for members of the Shepaug Valley Archaeol. Soc., Washington, Ct.

SVAS Officers: Edmund K. Swigart, President; Ronald Whittle, Vice President; Tate Brown, Vice President; Mrs. John Sheehy, Secretary and Elmer Browne, Treasurer

Editors: Norman Shidie, Ruth Glanz

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Printed by Shiver Mountain Press
How C-14 Tells Artifact Ages

How do SVAS diggers know that the artifacts they have unearthed come from different Indian cultures, separated from one another by hundreds or even thousands of years? How can they know that one unearthed fire pit has been there for some 2400 years and another for nearly 5000 years? Are they just guessing — or is there some practical way to measure the years?

Answer: No, they aren’t guessing. Yes, there is a practical way to measure the years, thanks to 1960 Nobel Prize Winner, Dr. Willard Libby.

Professor Libby developed a geiger-counter device which reveals how much radioactive carbon has been lost by any "living" object since it died. With it, for the first time, ancient bone, pieces of wood, fragments of papyri can be fairly closely dated as to the time of existence, going back as far as 60,000 years. The measurement is based on the fact that, ever since life existed on earth, every living organism (including human beings, plants, trees) has been bombarded by cosmic rays from outer space. Because of this bombardment, nitrogen is being changed into radioactive atoms of Carbon-14 until the time the organism dies. With death, the carbon atoms inside the tissues begin to decay and diminish, at a rate that can be predicted. It was known that after an organic object died, it lost half the Carbon-14 inside it in a period of 5,568 years. Armed with this knowledge, Dr. Libby invented his device and now it is the basis of complex tests by professional laboratories.

Six Tests So Far

SVAS so far has had six C-14 tests of charcoal from fire pits unearthed at its New Milford and Shapua River sites. The high carbon content of charcoal and the ease of obtaining clean samples make charcoal the most desirable and reliable material to test, according to Geochron Laboratories of Cambridge, Mass. It is possible, however, to test wood, pea, shells, bone, paper, parchment, cloth, inorganic carbonates, and many other materials, including leaves, pollen, nuts, and any other carbon-bearing object.

The size of the sample needed for testing can vary from 1 gram to 5 grams, depending on the expected age and the carbon content. Considerable preparation is involved in selecting, cleaning and otherwise preparing a sample for testing. The cost of a single C-14 reading may run around $160 and there is always the possibility the sample may have been badly contaminated at some later point in time.

The six readings made for SVAS resulted in the following:

One sample from the New Milford site was determined to be from 385 B.C. (+ or - 140 years), indicating that it is from the Meadowood culture. Another from the same site was dated as of 1115 B.C. (+ or - 175 years), indicating Oriental culture; and a third from the New Milford site was dated at 1715 B.C. (+ or - 180 years), indicating it was from an unknown culture which preceded the Snook-Kill culture.

Shepaug Samples

Testing of two samples from the Shepaug River site resulted in one being dated 2403 (+ or - 182 years) and the other 2515 B.C. (+ or - 240 years). Both were from the Sylvan Lake culture. A third date had been clearly contaminated (probably by recent cow manure, according to Geochron-Laboratories) and resulted in a date of 1695 A.D. (+ or - 90 years), instead of somewhere around 1500 B.C., which the exclusively Snook Kill cultural material would have warranted.

Orient Data At Boulder Site

John A. Pawloski, the SVAS leader who excavated New Milford’s Boulder Home site in 1971, comes up with some interesting conclusions as a result of his work.

"It is obvious," he says, "that the Boulder Home was visited for short periods from the middle Archaic to the Late Woodland civilizations. The projectile points show that. Except for the projectile points, however, all the other artifacts are crude — made from pebbles or cobbles. This points toward a temporary home or stopover, either for hunting or protection from foul weather."

A total of 5 1/2 squares were excavated and sifted, he reports, revealing:

1. A poorly defined stratigraphy, interrupted by large slabs of rock which had fallen from the shelter roof.
2. Stratum 1, a dark brown soil contained eight Levanna points, pottery fragments from two late 18th century bottles, and one horse shoe. One hearth was uncovered in the basalt portion of this stratum.
3. Stratum 2, a red-brown sandy layer of varying thickness, contained the bulk of the artifacts. The range of artifacts are from Archaic to Late Woodland. Several hearths and one midden — garbage pit — were uncovered in the shelter. A crude rock wall was constructed near the northern end of the shelter. Charcoal was collected for later testing.

Projectile Points

4. Based on a "A Typology and Nomenclature for New York Projectile Points" by W. A. Ritchie, 1961, the following projectile points were found: Levanna (5), Wading River Notched (4), Sylvan Lake (2), Orient (1), Susquehanna (3), Bare Island (1), Brewerton Side Notched (4), untyped or broken (12).

5. The remaining artifacts include: scrapers (22), knives (7), flake knives (15), choppers (8), pestle (1), hammerstones (4), whetstones (2), muller (4), pitted stones (2), paintstones (14).

6. Six types of pottery were found, these are rocker stamped (1), smoothed cord malleated (92), smooth red (7), corded (4), cord malleated (12), smooth thin black (5).

7. Numerous animal remains were found, which seemed to be mainly deer. Other identifiable animals were shell fish, fish, birds and rodents.

Program

December 7, 1972 A film entitled How We Learn From the Past. This film presents a detailed examination of an archaeological dig in the southwestern United States. Its main emphasis is on techniques of excavation.

January 4, 1973 Mr. Edmund K. Swigart, President of the Shepaug Valley Archaeological Society, will report on digs conducted by the Society during summer of 1972. He will display artifacts uncovered during that period and will comment on their significance.

February 1, 1973 A film entitled Ishi in Two Worlds. This outstanding film about the last survivor of the Yahi Indians of California illustrates many tool making and hunting techniques.

March 1, 1973 The Cooper's Craft—a film produced by Colonial Williamsburg which dramatically details the skills of a nearly extinct trade.

April 5, 1973 A program conducted by Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Hart of New Milford devoted to authentic reconstruction of Indian crafts and tools.

May 3, 1973 A slide-lecture devoted to early American pottery and porcelain—especially designed for up-coming summer digs.