

drier regions of Utah, Nevada, California, New Mexico and Arizona--there is evidence of people who lived mainly on wild plant foods, such as acorns, pinon nuts, small grass seeds, sunflower seeds, lily bulbs, berries of many kinds, and many kinds of roots. This way of life is called the "Desert Culture", because it was practiced in the driest area of North America. This way of life is very old. Some Desert Culture remains from a cave in western Utah are dated at 9500 and 9000 B. C. The Desert people probably lived in small groups of related families. Each group moved about in its territory according to what wild plants or game animals were in season. One of their main implements was a flat milling stone on which they ground their wild plant foods into paste or meal. They also made baskets.

Probably they prepared their food very much like the northern Paiute Indians of Nevada did not long ago. The seeds they collected were parched with live coals in a flat basket. The basket was shaken so as to keep the coals and seeds moving and yet keep them from scorching. Then the seeds were ground into meal or flour on the flat milling stones. Then the flour was cooked in a basket and made into a mush or gruel.

You may wonder how it was possible to cook food in a basket without burning the basket. The Indians of the western desert areas have always been experts in the making of fine and sturdy baskets. Some of these were woven so tightly that they were watertight. Cooking was often done by dropping fire-heated stones into a large tightly-woven basket containing liquid. After adding a number of very hot stones, the liquid would be almost boiling, and the food would cook.

You may also wonder how we know these Desert people of thousands of years ago made baskets. Baskets would not be expected to last many years like stone tools--they would soon go to pieces in the ground or out in the weather. The answer is that some of these Desert people lived in the dry caves in the hilly areas and canyons in the southwest. Because the air in this part of the country is so dry, and because rain or other moisture never reached the inside of these caves, many things have been preserved which otherwise would have spoiled quickly. Archaeologists have found sandals, rabbit-fur garments, wooden arrow shafts, pieces of baskets, and many other things in these dry caves. These things tell us much about the lives of the Indians who live in these areas many years ago.



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