

HARJO, NANCY

INTERVIEW

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An Interview with Nancy Harjo,
Age 58, Muskogee tribe, Fish
Pond Town (tulwa) 5 miles west
of Okemah, Oklahoma.
Billie Byrd, Field Worker.
July 23, 1937.

INDIAN DISHES

The corn is and has always been a favorite eating grain since long in the early days. It is prepared into many different ways and the following are just a few of the ways in which it is used.

The corn grits that are sold in the grocery stores are often used to make into a well-known drink and food called o-sofkey or sofkey and it is highly relished among the Indians of the Muskogee-Creek Nation.

This article is still better if prepared from the Indian corn called the flint corn. (cha-lud-we) The corn is shelled from the cob and after enough is shelled it is placed in a bucket or large pan and warm water enough to cover poured over it. After the corn has been in the water long enough to loosen the skin of the corn, part of the corn is placed in a kecho and beaten with a "ke-chu-bee". The "ke-cho" is a large block of wood, usually oak, about four feet in height in which a hole has been burned to any depth desired. This hole is the container for the corn.

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The "ke-cho" lasts a number of years if taken care of properly. The "ke-chub-bee" is fashioned from the pecan, or walnut tree or some other substantial tree. The stem and head comprised is about six feet in length. The stem is carved and narrowed down to the length of five feet and the one foot is left to make a sort of a head at end. When the stem is narrowed down, it is usually to a size that would be convenient to be held in the hands. The women take the "ke-chub-bee" in the hands and begin to pound the corn by dropping it up and down into the corn in the ke-cho and this is kept up until the corn has been broken at least into one or two bits. This is no easy task.

The first "ke-cho" full is not a really finished product as the corn and chaff (tus-ech-chee) have to be separated by shaking up and down in an article called the "tho th-thakko" (big eyes). This is a hand woven, basket-like article, the woven strips a quarter of an inch apart in which the all complete broken corn passes through leaving the extra large corn in the "tho th-thakko" which has to be pounded again. The broken corn passes into a larger basket-like article, also hand woven, but is more closely woven. This article is called the "a-de-na". A small amount of the

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broken corn is shaken up and down or sideways which tends to separate the chaff from the corn. The Indian women are experts, at least the older ones, to deftly use one hand to operate the "a-de-wa" up and down and take a snatch at the chaff with the other hand and throw it away. The large corn is pounded until of the right size and the women use their own judgment in regard to the size they wish.

The finished sofkey corn grits are washed and emptied into a large pot of boiling water. As much as six to ten gallons of the stuff is often cooked as all the Muskogee-Creek Indians are fond of it. When the corn and water have been boiling for while, a lye (kub-bee chuf-ke) made from green wood ashes is poured into it. The lye is made from ashes placed in a pan with small holes and hot water poured over the ashes and the water drips into another pan placed underneath. Only a small amount of the lye is poured into the boiling corn and water until an almost yellow color. Thus, this is kept in a constant and rapid boiling state until the corn is soft. It is good when it is freshly made yet some prefer it when it is two or three days old and has become a little soured. There have been stories told of how officers finding this sofkey among some of the Indians in a

soured condition took it for intoxicants and poured it out.

Pinto beans and corn grits cooked together makes another different kind of sofkey minus the lye. Even parched corn grounded and the chaff separated and cooked plain makes another sofkey. There is the hickorynut sofkey, loved for its different flavor, and can be had only during and after the hickory-nut season. The hickory nut is cracked or mashed very fine and sifted. The sifted fine rich meal is the one used. To this is added water, and the mixture is poured into the cooked corn and water (with no lye). This takes a little more time but it is very fragrant.

Another use of the corn grits is to ground it into a meal and make corn bread (sour corn bread). The corn grits are soaked overnight in warm water and then grounded or pounded into a very fine meal. In the course of the grinding, some of the coarse corn which is sifted and of about the size of rice is held back. This rice-like corn is placed in boiling water and cooked into a mush. It is poured into the prepared meal and stirred and stirred. When ready to use, the baking powder, soda, salt or sugar is added, It is usually not ready to use until it has set aside for three or four hours.

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This is cooked almost the same as any other corn bread. In the early days the corn had to be prepared and fixed into the corn meal before a meal could be cooked, usually in the morning.

In the persimmon season, this persimmon is gathered and the pulp separated from the seed by kneading with the hands. When the separation was completed, the pulp was placed in a large bread pan and baked. This article was kept indefinitely.

There is the Indian corn, usually blue or blue and white kernels, which is softer than the flint corn. Delicious hominy and blue dumplings are made from this ^{blue} corn. A large kettle of sifted, green-wood ashes is put into boiling water and the corn poured into it. Constant stirring is required and after a time the skins on the corn slip off easily. When this stage is reached, the corn is taken out of the pot and goes through several washings and changes of clean water, or until the corn has become free of the lye. The hominy can then be cooked down in clear water and seasoned with salt and drippings and served.

The blue dumpling meal is further prepared by grind-

ing the hominy corn, uncooked, or it can be pounded by the use of the "ke-chub-bee" and "ke-cho". In the course of grinding or pounding, a very small amount of some burned shells of the field or black eyed peas is mixed in the corn. This mixture produces a "bluish" colored meal. This meal is made into blue dumplings. Boiling water, enough to keep the meal together, is poured into the dumpling mixture and kneaded and fashioned into balls or flat cakes. These are placed in a big pot of boiling water and kept constantly boiling. When the dumplings are done, they rise or float to the top in the boiling water. Sometimes bits of sweet potatoes or even pinto beans are added during the mixing and kneading and cooked.

The abuskey is made from parched corn, usually green corn just before it is too hard. The corn is shelled from the cob and put into a pot which contains a small amount of hot ashes. A fire is kept under the pot and the ashes and the corn is kept in motion by the use of a long handled paddle [a-dob-a). When a nice brown the parched corn and ashes are taken from the pot and sifted in the "to th thakko", separating ashes and corn. The corn is wiped and dusted of ashes by a clean cloth and cooled. The parched corn can be taken

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to the mills or grounded and pounded in the "ke-cho" by hand with the use of "ke-chub-bee" and is of a finer texture by this method. Through the first round of pounding the chaff and corn is separated and pounded and sifted again and again. The finished product is an article in a finer texture than a corn meal. It is a deep golden-brown color. A small amount is mixed with sugar and quite a bit of water and used for a drink or beverage. This is relished almost the same as o-sofkey. Some bits of the parched corn is left which is about the size of the rice grains. This is cooked and served almost in the same manner of the rice or cooked in with the chicken to serve as a stew.

Note:

This Field Worker expresses himself in a naive Indian manner and no change is made in his manuscripts, as better English would not add but rather would take from their value.

Ed.