MON-DAH-MIN AND THE REDMAN'S OLD USES OF CORN AS FOOD

By Hen-Toh

INTRODUCTION

The title "Mon-Dah-Min, and the Redman's World Old Uses of Indian Corn as Food," appears on the original manuscript of the story by Hen-Toh, here published for the first time. The manuscript was received in 1918 by Mr. Joseph B. Thoburn, then Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society, from the well known Indian writer, B. N. O. Walker, who wrote under the pen name of "Hen-Toh." Interest in recipes for making different dishes from corn during the rationing of wheat and its products in World War I had led Mr. Thoburn to call on his Indian friends for the ways that they might know in preparing old time dishes from corn. Several manuscripts describing these Indian dishes were received, some of them crudely written in pencil on old fashioned blue-lined pencil paper. Among these manuscripts was one neatly typed from Mr. Walker along with a letter of explanation, a facsimile of which appears on another page of this number of The Chronicles.

B. (Bertrand) N. O. Walker was three-sixteenths Wyandot Indian, a member of the Big Turtle Clan in the tribe that was assigned a reservation in what is now Ottawa County, Oklahoma, in 1867. He was born on September 5, 1870, in Wyandotte County, Kansas, both of his parents being of Wyandot descent. His ancestors on both sides of the family were prominent as chiefs and leaders of the Wyandot from early colonial times, his great-uncle, William Walker having served as chief of the tribe and as the first Governor of Kansas Territory, in 1854. B. N. O. Walker came at the age of four with his parents from Kansas, who settled in the Indian Territory a few miles west from Seneca, Missouri. He attended the Friends Mission school at Wyandotte, Indian Territory, and later in the public schools and in a private academy at Seneca, Missouri. Mr. Walker served in the U. S. Indian Service as a teacher and later as a clerk from 1890 to 1917, at different times in the Indian Territory, Kansas, Western and Southwestern Oklahoma, California and Arizona. He devoted himself for about six years to the writing of his books and of articles and feature stories for magazines and newspapers then re-entered the U. S. Indian Service. He was Chief Clerk (appointed 1924) at the Quapaw Agency, Miami, Oklahoma at the time of his death on June 27, 1927. He was the true friend of the Indian people, and his host of friends among them watched over him in his last illness and mourned his passing. He had loved their history and legends, having collected a fine library and kept many of his family relics in his home at the old place settled by his parents when they first came to the Indian Territory.

Mr. Walker was a poet, a lover of nature who had lived all his life among the Indians. He was a versatile man, talented as a pianist with a pleasing voice as a singer.1 His literary ability is shown in his book of legends, Tales of the Bark Lodges (1919), beautiful Indian stories written in the broken English and dialect of the full blood Indian of half century ago. His book of poems, Yon-doo-shah-weah (Nubbins), published in 1924, hints at the story of corn and its uses appearing here in The Chronicles.

—The Editor.

1Mr. Walker's grand piano is in the Museum of the Oklahoma Historical Society.—Ed.
SENECA FAULT MINING CO.
MIAMI, OKLAHOMA

Seneca, Mo., February 16, 1918.

Mr. Joseph B. Theburn,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

My Dear Mr. Theburn:

I have your letter of the 12th inst., forwarded to me from Wyandotte, Oklahoma. I assure you that I have many times recollected the pleasant chat I had with you at the Agency office several years ago. I have always had a keen interest along the lines in which your work engages you, and have wondered if you were yet with the University. Wonder if it is a telepathic instance, that I have recently been thinking about the things of which you ask in your letter. I am enclosing herewith a carbon copy of an article that I prepared about six weeks ago, and sent to the Country Gentlemen. It was however, declined as not suited to their needs. Perhaps I should not have mingled legend and utility, but I did. I believe you will find in it all that you are asking. Only recently I mailed the original of the article to Mr. Hoover requesting that if he found any merit in it, that he would give publicity to the various recipes, and accept it as a "bit" offered by me in the world call for a wider use of corn. I have as yet had no reply.

The same preparations that I have mentioned in the article have for unknown ages been in use among the Seneca, Shawnee, Ottawa, Peoria, Miami, Quapaw, and many other tribes as well as the Wyandots. I have given the Wyandot names; since I have always been familiar with them. Only last evening we had here at home, some Ske-anh for supper, and we spoke of how good it was, and how we wished that Mr. Hoover might taste it; also how that we were certainly "doing our bit" in using and truly relishing the several different preparations of "squaw-corn". Today we had for dinner soup made from the Neh-ben-tah-wih, and I suspect that to-morrow we will have some of the corn that was left over from the soup warmed over with a bit of butter or cream to season it. I truly wish that you might be here to partake of some of it.

I am not employed at the Agency now, having resigned my position there at the close of last October. I am now living at my home on the Wyandot Reserve in Oklahoma, about a mile and one half from the little town of Seneca, Mo., which is situated on the Missouri and Oklahoma State line. At any time you may be in this part of the State, I would be very glad to see you.

With sincere good wishes to you and yours, I am

Cordially yours,

B.N.O. Walker,

Seneca, Mo.

Letter signed by B. N. O. Walker, "Hentoh," accompanying manuscript of his article on uses of corn.
Perhaps more has been written about corn during the past few months [1917] than ever before in the world’s history. That America taught the world the use of maize or Indian Corn is an undisputed fact, also that it is the one most useful, popular and productive cereal. One cannot help but wonder about the one who discovered corn in the Western world, and carried it back to Spain instead of the wealth of gold that so many of the early explorers hoped to find and carry back with them. This discoverer undoubtedly never dreamed of the benefit he was bringing to the future generations of this world and of the wealth of gold that would be acquired by the knowledge and cultivation of the grain which he had found grown by the so-called savages of America.

While scant credit has ever been given the Indians of North America as agriculturists, nevertheless when the first white man came as settlers to the New World, they found the Indians growing and cultivating corn, beans, pumpkins, and other products. Each of these furnished the tribes of the eastern part of the country, staple articles of food. No settled village but had its fields where by hard manual labor crops were grown and cultivated in sufficient quantities to furnish a large part of their winter stores.

That corn was the most popular of these products with the American Indian, is evidenced by the beautiful legend of its origin in their folk-lore. This tradition has been credited to the Ojibways, by Mr. Schoolcraft, and is fittingly pictured in Mr. Longfellow’s Hiawatha. The same legend with slight variations was current among the traditions and lore of all of the eastern tribes, dating back perhaps to an age when there were no tribal divisions, and all of the Indians were as one people. I can make this statement from my own personal knowledge since I have heard the legend from the lips of old Indians of the Wyandot, Seneca, and Shawnee tribes, during my childhood.

I can recall listening to it and to many others of the old Indian stories, from the lips of an aged aunt who lived many years in my mother’s family. Her version was as I give it here:

**Mon-Dah-Min**

In the very olden times a poor Indian lived with his family in a beautiful part of the country. He was poor indeed, and not only that but he was not a good hunter so he did not have an easy time getting food for his family.

He was a good and kind man, however, and never forgot to be thankful to the Great Spirit for all that he received. This gentle disposition was also shown in his eldest son who from his earliest childhood had always been most kind and thoughtful to and for everyone.
When the time came that this gentle youth was passing from boyhood to young manhood, it was necessary for him to undergo the ceremony of fasting and seclusion for a period to know what kind of a spirit would be his guide through life and to ascertain what would be his vocation.

In the days of early spring, his father built the boy a little lodge in a secluded spot some distance from their own, where he would be in no way disturbed during the sacred rite.

Everything being ready, the boy prepared himself in the customary manner, went to his quiet lodge and began his fast. For a time during the first days, he took long walks through the deep, quiet forest and over the hills, watching the early springing grasses and flowers, and wondering about the great power that caused them to grow and develop. Returning to his lonely lodge exhausted in body, he would throw himself down on his rude couch of skins and fall into a deep sleep. His mind stored with the thoughts of the plants and flowers would bring him pleasant dreams of them until his one thought was that his guardian spirit might be the means of bringing to his people something that would be a greater blessing than was known to them. Something that would make it easier for them to procure food than by hunting and fishing. Surely the Great Spirit would allow them this blessing. His earnest desire was that something like this might be found in the visions that would soon come to them.

On the third day he was weak and faint, so much so that he could not leave his couch. While lying there, he fancied that he saw a handsome youth about his own age coming slowly towards him from the distance. This youth was gaily dressed in lightly flowing garments of many shades of green, and on his head he wore a feathery plume of pale yellow. Every movement that he made was easy and graceful and his demeanor was most pleasing and benign. He quietly entered the door of the boy’s lodge and stood smiling before him saying:

“I come to you, my friend, from the Great Spirit who has made all things. He knew your motives in fasting, and sees that they are from an earnest desire to do something good for your people. That you desire not to become a great warrior, and so win praise but that you desire more to bring about some greater blessing to all of your people. I am sent to instruct you as to how your wish can be realized.”

The visitor then told the boy to arise and wrestle with him, for it was only by such means that his wish might be gained. The boy felt that his fasting had weakened him yet his courage was so great that he arose and determined to conquer his handsome opponent. The trial began and when the boy was nearly exhausted and felt that he must fail, the stranger said: “My friend, 'tis enough now, I will come again to try you tomorrow.” Smilingly he passed out of the lodge, and seemed to fade away into the air.
At the same hour on the following day, the youth came again to renew the trial. The boy felt that he was weaker than the day before yet his courage again rose even stronger, and he wrestled manfully to the point of exhaustion, when again the stranger gently told him to quit his fast, adding: "My friend, tomorrow will be your last real trial. Be strong, for it is only thus that you can overcome me and obtain your desire."

On the third day, the stranger appeared at the same hour, and once more the struggle was renewed. The poor boy was very faint with weakness, but again his courage flamed to greatness and he exerted every power, determined more than ever to win the contest or perish. After the struggle had continued for the usual time, the handsome stranger ceased his efforts and announced to the boy that he was conquered. He seated himself beside the boy on the couch, and began telling him what must now be done by him to receive the advantages of his victory. The visitor said:

"You have wrestled manfully, my friend, and have gained your wish from the Great Spirit. Tomorrow is the seventh day of your fast. Your father will bring you food to strengthen you, and as it is the last day of your trial, you will again win, thus finally conquering me. I know that it will be so, and must now tell you what to do to bring a great blessing to yourself and your people. Tomorrow I shall meet and wrestle with you for the last time; and when you have thrown me down, you will strip me of my beautiful garments, and lay me down on the soft earth. You must clear this spot of weeds and grasses, make the earth soft and bury me beneath the soft clean soil. When you have done this, leave me there and do not disturb me, but come often and visit this place to see if I have yet come to life. Be very careful not to let the weeds and grasses grow upon my grave, and every few weeks dig up the soft dirt above me and put over me another covering of the soft earth. If you do all this, you will obtain your wish to do good to your fellow creatures and will teach them that which I am now teaching you."

With a pleasant smile, the handsome stranger shook the boy's hand and disappeared. In the early morning the boy's father came to the lodge bringing a small bowl of food, saying: "My son, your fast has been as long as custom requires. If the Great Spirit is to grant your desires he will do it now. Seven days have passed since you have taken food, and the Master of Life does not ask that you sacrifice your life."

"My father," the boy replied, pointing to the western horizon, "wait until the sun is there. I must extend my fast to that hour."

"Very well," sorrowfully returned the old man, "I shall wait until that hour comes and will return."

At the usual hour, the stranger came, and the wrestling was renewed. The boy had not taken any of the food his father had brought, yet he felt that new and mighty strength had been given to him. He grasped his supernatural antagonist, threw him down and took from him his beautiful garments of green and his yellow
Finding him dead, he buried his body at once on the spot, being very careful to observe all of the instructions that had been given him. He felt assured that his friend would again come to life. He then returned to his father's lodge where he was gladly received. He ate lightly of the food that was at once placed before him. Nothing was asked of his visions.

Never for a moment did he forget the grave of his friend. He visited it often and kept the weeds and grasses from growing above his sleeping friend. He told no one anything of all this, until one day late in the summer when his father had returned from a hunting trip, he asked him to go with him to the scene of his fast. In the midst of the spot where the boy had buried his friend there was growing a stately and beautiful plant with nodding plumes, broad and graceful leaves, and clusters of grain on each side.

The boy pointed to it and said: "Oh my father! see, this is my friend, and the friend to all of our people. It is Mon-dah-min. Henceforth we will not need to depend on the chase alone for our food, for as long as this gift is cared for, the earth alone will give us food." He reached out and pulled an ear of the corn. He gave it to his father, saying: "This, oh my father, is what I fasted for and the Great Spirit has heard my voice and given to us this new blessing."

He then told his father of his whole vision and of the coming of the handsome stranger, of their fierce contest, and the result. Pulling away the husks, he showed the old man the succulent grains hidden beneath them. He told him how the ear must be held over the glowing coals until their outer skin became brown, when the beautiful grains could then be eaten.

They gathered more of the ears, took them to their lodge, and the whole family joined in a feast of the new-grown ears of corn, not forgetting to thank the Great Spirit for the treasure that had been given them. It was in this way that corn came into the world.

**Indian Corn Dishes**

Tradition says further that this first corn was red, white and blue-grained flour corn, or "squaw-corn," and this even today is the most highly prized among the Indians. When one stops to think for how many generations the seed has been preserved, and its uses as food have been handed down, it is really wonderful. No doubt there are many people who have never heard of the squaw-corn yet go into any Indian country, and you will most certainly find it in use. I might also state here that it is one of the best varieties for the silo because of its stooling growth.
Its popularity among the Indians is also shown by the many different ways in which all of the various tribes prepare it for food. And while many of such methods of preparation became known to civilization, many others which were long known to the Indians and handed down and taught from one generation to another within the tribes, have never become widely and popularly known. Some of such methods were universally used among nearly all of the tribes while others were peculiar only to certain tribes.

That any written recipe for the making of, as they are called in the Wyandot tongue, Tohn-tah, Eh-shren-tih, Skeh-anh, Neh-hentah-wih, and Teh—yes, and No-muh-shren-dah-tah-rah, is something strange to our thinking. Yet each of these almost unpronounceable names designate a separate and distinct preparation of food made from the Indian corn that has been well known and relished by all of the eastern tribes and their descendants for ages past. The method of preparation in each tribe is the same, yet each tribe gives the product a name in its own language or dialect. Among the remnants of the Wyandot, Shawnee, Seneca, Ottawa, Peoria, Miami, Quapaw, and Delaware tribes, as well as many others, some or all of these products are yet made, and prove to be the most substantial of their winter stores. Among many families where only a mere trace of Indian blood remains, these products are considered the choicest, and no field or garden is without its “squaw-corn” patch for use in making these palatable dishes. It is something remarkable, and I have noted it since my childhood that, as my elder brother said not long ago, “I never saw a white person, who first tasted Neh-len-tah-wih, but thought that it was the best thing he had ever eaten.” This is true, and the white settlers living among the Indians are always anxious to secure a supply of these Indian products.

All of these Wyandot dishes are generally made from dried corn yet the different way in which each is prepared and then cooked for the table makes it a distinctive dish.

Neh-hen-tah-wih: This dish is the most popular. The blue and the red squaw corn is taken when in the roasting-ear stage, and roasted over hot coals until the milk is cooked, the grains being slightly parched. Care must be taken not to scorch or burn them.

The Indians’ time honored way of roasting the corn was to dig a trench about a foot in depth and from eight to ten feet long. A fire of green and dry logs was made in this trench, and allowed to burn down to a good bed of hot and glowing coals. While the fire was in course of preparation, the roasting-ears were gathered and husked, care being taken in husking them to leave the long stems or shanks on the ears. When this was done and the bed of coals was ready, a forked stick was driven in the ground at each end of the trench, across which and not far above the trench was placed a green pole. Along each side of this pole, with their ends
resting on the ground were placed the ears of corn, and when the side of the ear just over the hot coals was roasted evenly, a turn of the ear was made, and the other side roasted. This is not an easy task by any means; but is on the contrary, well termed in the present day vernacular, "a hot job." My brother and I when making the winter's supply last season, found it much easier to stretch a strip of chicken wire over the trench of coals, and laying the ears on this the roasting proved to be a comparatively "easy job."

When the corn is all roasted and the ears have cooled, the grains are shelled from the cobs with a spoon or knife, and are then dried either in the sun or in a dryer. When it is thoroughly dried it is put away in sacks for winter use. The sacks of parched corn should be put out in the sun for a time every few days, for a month or more. This drives away any moisture whatever that might cause the corn to mould.

When neh-hen-tah-wih is to be cooked for serving, two teacups of the dried corn will make a half a kettle full when cooked, enough for a family of five or six. The dried corn is put into a kettle of cold water, just after early breakfast is over, placed on the fire and allowed to simmer and boil until dinner time. Plenty of water is put into the kettle for the soup is the best part, and a ham-bone, a piece of bacon or pieces of bacon rind, or anything else of the kind is put into the pot for seasoning. Fresh cracklins cooked with this corn makes the best soup that one ever tasted.

After the soup has been eaten there is always much of the corn left in the kettle. This can be warmed over in the kettle for another meal, or can be put into a skillet, and with perhaps a bit of other seasoning makes another most palatable dish, far more so than ordinary canned corn. Any of the corn that is left over may be kept warmed over for several days, and is better each time. There is never any of it to be thrown away unless it should sour when the weather is too warm.

Tohn-tah: This was one of the principal supplies of the Indian warrior ages ago, when he started forth on the war-path or other long journey, he carried the supply in a buckskin pouch at his girdle. Tohn-Tah is usually made from the white flour corn, or as the Indians call it, the "bread corn." The ripened grains are shelled and parched to a crisp brown. These are then ground in a mortar into a fine meal. Sometimes just a bit of salt is mixed with this, and again a bit of maple sugar. Carried on the trail in a buckskin bag, a small handful of this moistened with a little water, or even eaten dry—being very careful not to choke—made a hurried yet sustaining meal, since it is both palatable and nutritious. The war-path and the hunting trail are things of the dimming past yet Tohn-Tah is found to be as palatable and nutritious as a breakfast food when sweetened with sugar and moistened with thick cream.
Eh-shren-tih: This is what one might call another of the corn soups, and like Neh-hen-tah-wih is always relished by the new-comer who tastes it for the first time. Like Tohn-tah, it is made from the white flour corn. The corn is gathered when the milk has set and the grain is just beginning to harden. The grains are shelled from the cob with a spoon or mussel shell, and are “lyed” sprinkled with wood ashes then spread out on a cloth in the sun and dried. This makes most excellent soup when cooked for several hours and seasoned the same as Neh-hen-tah-wih, and the cooked corn eaten either cold or warmed over in a skillet with more seasoning is far more tasty than the ordinary hominy. In fact it has a distinctive flavor all its own. In “lyeing” the corn, one must be careful to wash it in several waters before spreading it out to dry, so that all of the lye and the outside covering of the grain can be removed.

Teh: This is the hominy made from the small flinty grained Indian corn. The ripened grain is pounded in a wooden mortar very gently, just enough to crack the grains and to remove the outside covering or hull of the grains. No little skill is required to wield the wooden pestle just right so that the grains are not pounded too much. It is then winnowed in a “fanner” basket, and it is ready for use. It also makes an excellent thickened soup, and can be cooked as the common hominy. It is good when seasoned with ordinary seasoning, or when eaten as porridge with milk or cream.

There is no soup more delicious than that made by the old Indian women from the green bread-corn, seasoned with jerked or dried venison. The grains are cut from the cobs when the corn is in the milk stage, and the milky mass is slowly poured into the cooking soup and constantly stirred. This was formerly one of the principal dishes of the Indians’ “Green Corn” feasts, held as a Thanksgiving by nearly all of the tribes, some time during the month of August.

No-mush-shren-dah-tah-rah: This bread made from green corn is indeed a toothsome morsel. The white bread-corn, or even the ordinary white field corn, is taken when in the “milk stage,” and the tops of the grains are cut with a sharp knife. The milky substance is then scraped from the ears into a pan or bowl; or better still, since the ways of civilization have come to the Redman, the green corn is grated on a coarse grater, and without putting anything whatever in it, the grated corn is poured into a deep baking-pan, to the thickness of an inch and a half to two inches or more and baked in an oven until the crust is a rich brown. This green-corn bread when eaten warm with a little salt and plenty of butter is most delicious. When the pone is cold, it is crumbled, dried in the sun, and put away, when thoroughly dry for winter use in making Ske-anh.

Skeh-anh: This is cooked quickly. An ordinary teacupful of the crumbled, cooked corn in a skillet with enough water to cover
it will soon fill the skillet. It may be seasoned with butter or cream, or with other seasoning. Some time just a bit of sugar is put in when cooking, though others prefer seasoning it at the table with salt and pepper. Sheh-anh makes an excellent dish that is relished by nearly everyone who tastes it. This has been called the "Indian breakfast-food."

All of these recipes have been in use in many American Indian families for generations and I believe they have never appeared in print. Since my earliest childhood recollections, I cannot recall a season when several of these various ways of preserving Indian corn for food were not used in my mother’s family. She always made or had made a good supply of Neh-hen-tah-wih and Skeh-anh, and also Eh-shren-tih, and her daughters and grand-daughters have always done the same. There is never a guest who eats some of these Indian dishes at our table for the first time but relishes them, and asks what each dish is, how it is made, and wonders why he has never before heard of it. All of the various dishes are wholesome and highly nutritious, and should be more widely known.