

USES OF THE CAT-TAIL BY THE ARIKARA INDIANS

The manner of life of any primitive people is strongly influenced by their physical environment. Two very important elements of this environment are the native fauna and flora. A people restricted to local resources through lack of facilities of transportation for distant products will sometimes show wonderful ingenuity in the utilization of such things as nature has provided for them near at hand. Even a plant, which to people of our present form of civilization, may seem to be of no significance, may be of considerable importance in the economy of a people living under another complex of circumstances. For example, the common cat-tail of our marshes. In aboriginal times in America, this humble plant found many uses for utility and for play among the people of various Indian tribes. It supplied materials for food, for leather dressing, for cushions, for sanitary appliance, and for children's games.

I will give here some of its old-time uses by the Arikara Indians, a tribe resident on the upper Missouri River in what is now the State of North Dakota. The Arikara are a tribe of the same racial stock as the Pawnee, a tribe perhaps better known, residing on the Platte River, in what is now the state of Nebraska.

The Arikara name of the cat-tail is *tsiri-tsinu*, meaning eye-inflammation, from the effect on a person's eyes when the light, downy seeds of the plant are blown into one's eyes by the wind. They call the rootstock of the cat-tail *s'tkatats*, tallow, because it tastes like tallow. The Arikara people, especially the boys, dug the rootstocks to use as food because of their rich, agreeable taste. When the cat-tail heads were just about ripe, they were gathered to use in finishing the dressing of tanned deerskins. The fine, granular, chaffy seeds were rubbed from the cat-tails by hand upon a tanned deerskin pegged down upon the ground. When a thick layer of cat-tail seeds had been deposited thus upon the deerskin on the ground then another deerskin was spread over the first, having at each end a stick attached horizontally for a handle. Then some cobblestones were laid upon the upper deerskin to hold it down and to give weight for friction. The process was operated by two women sitting upon the ground facing each other with the deerskins between them. They each grasped with both hands one of the sticks fastened at either end of the upper

deerskin, and each alternately drew the upper deerskin towards herself; thus it was drawn forth and back, with the stones holding it down and furnishing friction for the buffing of the two skins by the fine downy cat-tail seeds between them, ultimately giving to both a very fine surface finish. Obviously, this work could be done only at such times as the weather was perfectly calm. Any little wind would prevent by blowing away the cat-tail down.

Children used cat-tail in an active game. Three long leaves of cat-tail were plaited together in such fashion as to form a cross. To form the cross one leaf was laid down and then another leaf was attached at right angles by bending one end squarely about the middle of the first leaf. The third leaf was attached in like manner, but extending at right angles on the opposite side of the first leaf from the second.

This game might be played by girls alone or by boys and girls together. Four children would step up to the cross of leaf blades and join hands diagonally over it. Thus holding hands they must dance rapidly about the cross, being careful to step over and not upon the crossed leaves. If one should misstep and stumble upon one of the leaves all would immediately loose hands, the one who made the misstep would run away, and the other three would give chase, each armed with a cat-tail stalk. With these they struck the fleeing one if able to overtake him. When the fugitive was struck the cat-tail clubs shed their downy seeds and the air was full of the flying down. The children had a merry time.

Another use of cat-tail was for the care of young infants. When a new little member of the family was expected all the female relatives of the mother busied themselves to help in gathering a supply of cat-tail down to provide for the expected need. No white mother takes greater care in the preparation of the layette for the advent of her darling than did the Indian mother and her relatives. Cat-tail down was used to pad the cushioned lining of the cradle to be a soft nest for the little one. The Indian mother in old times had no cotton diapers to provide for her infant as the white mother has, but in place of these she provided a sufficient supply of cat-tail down to be used as an absorbent pad within the soft-tanned deerskin swaddling, a supply sufficient for renewing at every need of change. The deerskin swaddling was not wrapped diaper-fashion as white people do, but was wrapped cylindrically, band-like about the hips and thighs of the infant, with a soft pad of cat-tail down laid under the hips and between the thighs.