

Salish Reading II

The Bitterroot Plant By Frank John Arlee

The bitterroot returns to the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people when the spring waters run deep. Women have always been considered the caretakers of the bitterroot. For generations, women were appointed to watch over the plant to determine when it was ready for digging. When the bitterroot was at the right stage, the woman would report to the chief that it was ready for harvesting. The chief would then send runners to inform the community that the next day they would have the bitterroot feast.

The people began preparing for this special day by cooking meat and preparing dried berries and roots that had been harvested the previous year. The bitterroot feast was a day of great importance. The bitterroot was one of the most important food plants of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille.

On the day of the feast, the caretaker of the plant would be accompanied by some other women of the tribe, young and old, to help with digging and blessing the bitterroot. Men would accompany the women as guards and protectors.

The women would select the bitterroot plant to be honored and blessed. The pece, root digger, would be stuck in the ground near the plant to loosen the soil. As the plant was taken from the ground, the caretaker said prayers of thanks to the Creator. She would welcome the plant and give thanks for its return to the people. Prayers for a good harvest of the other plants and health throughout the year would be given. The group would then gather enough bitterroot for the feast that awaited their return.

The bitterroot was cleaned and cooked. The common method of cooking bitterroot was steaming the roots for a few minutes on a latticework of small twigs above water, sometimes with serviceberries or huckleberries. Broth could be made from bitterroots boiled alone or with meat. Bitterroot was sometimes sweetened with camas (?), but more recently sugar has been used.

When the cooking was completed, all the food was brought out for the feast. After the opening blessing for the meal, speakers were called upon to talk. As each person talked, they spoke to the bitterroot again, welcoming the plant back among the people, asking for blessings, a prosperous year and protection for their families, especially their children.

All the plants gathered each year were considered visitors, and you had to be there at the right time to gather them. The bitterroot can only be harvested for a few weeks in the early stage before it blooms. Once the plant blossoms, the roots begin to get woody and are hard to peel.

The people did not begin digging their own supply of bitterroot until after the blessing and feast day was completed. The bitterroot plant has a heart of its own, and when the

roots were peeled, the heart of plant was returned to the soil. Without the proper care and blessing, the plant would go back into the earth and not grow, punishing the people so that no one would be able to harvest the roots for that year.

The tradition of greeting and blessing the bitterroot's return has been passed down through generations of Salish and Pend d'Oreille families. Today, when spring comes to the Flathead Indian Reservation, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people will gather at Camas Prairie to welcome the return of their old friend. Generations of Sqelix^w will once again remember and honor the gift of the bitterroot.



Bitterroot flower, courtesy of Adam Schneider