

curing all the other articles of food I have named, the women only are employed, and I believe that three-fourths of the food of an Indian family is thus supplied by the women.

Editor's Note and  
Selected Article from  
Inella Burns

### SOURCES

*Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year, 1849, Agriculture* Washington: Office of Printers to House of Reps., 1850.

**Credits:** Drawing of Digging Prairie Turnips by Chet Kozlak, from *Dakota Indians Coloring Book*, Minnesota Historical Society, 1979.

Drawing Tilling the Soil by Frederick N. Wilson from *Goodbird the Indian*, Gilbert L. Wilson, reprint edition 1985, Minnesota Historical Society, Press.

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### New Annual Member

Juanita Floth  
Paul D. Silliman

### Special Thanks

The following people have made generous contributions to the Blue Earth County Historical Society during the past months:

GENERAL FUND: Mrs. Mildred Jones  
Mrs. Blanche Barnhart  
Mr. & Mrs. William Carlson  
Mrs. Ward Gray  
Dr. & Mrs. Donald Heckel  
Ms. Anita Stone  
Mr. & Mrs. Ogden P. Confer  
Mr. Charles Piehl

PALMER FOUNDATION MATCHING FUNDS:  
Bert and Inella Burns

## AROUND THE COUNTY



We know that within our membership we have many individuals with "special" areas of interest in Blue Earth County History. If you would be willing to share your knowledge or expertise on that "special" subject let us know. We are always anxious to provide speakers, newsletter articles, and workshops by and specifically for our BECHS members. GIVE US A CALL TODAY — WE'RE WAITING TO HEAR FROM YOU!!!

If you wish to submit an item for the "Around the County" section of the newsletter, please write or call the museum, 345-4154 before the 10th of the month preceding publication.

### Special Needs

We could use any of the following items for storing and protecting articles in the collection. Your contributions would be most appreciated.

- Bed Sheets
- Hat Boxes
- Shoe Boxes
- Boxes in which bulk paper is received with telescoping lids

### Memorials

In Memory of: Mrs. Howard (Bernice) Draper  
for Restoration Fund for the R.D.  
Hubbard House

From: Ogden and Jane Confer

In Memory of: Mrs. Howard (Bernice) Draper  
From: Arnold and Bernice Meyer

In Memory of: Earl "Bud" Hofmaster  
From: Arnold and Bernice Meyer

### New Business (Patron) Members

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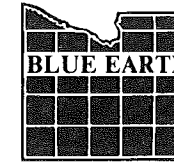
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PAID  
Mankato, MN 56001  
Permit No. 343

Blue Earth County  
Historical Society  
606 South Broad  
Mankato, MN 56001

Address Correction Requested

Published monthly by the Blue Earth County  
Historical Society, 606 So. Broad St.,  
Mankato, MN 56001

Editorial Staff: Inella Burns, Audrey  
Hicks, Denise Hudson, Gail Palmer,  
Louisa Smith, Marcia T. Schuster



BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## February 1986

### Farming Among the Sioux Indians

Editor's Note: In 1849 the area which later became Blue Earth County was a part of the new Territory of Minnesota. The town of St. Peter was called Saint Peters, and the Minnesota River was known as the St. Peters River. Many Dahkota (Sioux) Indians lived in the Minnesota (St. Peters) River valley and in the adjoining woodland and prairie area. Following is a report by Philander Prescott, superintendent of farming for the Sioux as it appears in *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1849, Agriculture*. Although it carries a Saint Peters dateline, circumstances described can be assumed to apply also to what is now Blue Earth County.

Saint Peters, Minnesota, 10 Nov., 1849

Sir:-I notice from the Patent Office Reports, that it is your wish to obtain all the information you can from the different parts of the Union, in relation to farming, &c. I do not find anything from your newly sprung up Territory of Minnesota, and supposing you might not be displeased to receive some information from this part of the country, I have, with the assistance of a friend or two, collected such accounts of the agricultural means of our new Territory, as I suppose it would be desirable to make public. I have also sent you some account of the mode of cultivation among the Dahkotah (Sioux) Indians, with the list of the roots, &c., used by them as food, and a short description of their manner of procuring, cooking, and curing them for use.



A lithograph of Indian corn from the Patent Office Report, 1853.

When I first removed into this country in the winter of 1819-20, the Indians planted small patches of corn, digging the ground with a hoe purchased from the trader, or the branch of a tree sharpened. Their fields were from  $\frac{1}{4}$  to 1 acre, the hills raised from 8 to 12 inches high, the top levelled to the size of 6 or 8 inches in diameter, and from 10 to 20 grains of a very small kind of corn were planted in a hill. The produce, ears of corn from 3 to 8 inches long, was mostly consumed as roasted corn, though some was boiled when green, the grain being then scraped off the cobb, and dried in the sun. Thus cured, the corn will keep 2 or 3 years. When a dish of green corn soup is wanted in the winter, the Indians throw in a couple of handfuls of this sweet corn into a kettle of venison, and in half an hour they have a dish of fine rich soup.



Tilling the soil, drawing by Frederick N. Wilson.

Of wild roots there are several kinds that the Indians dig for food, when other food is exhausted.

- 1st. Mendo, or wild sweet potato.
- 2nd. Tip-sui-ah, or wild prairie turnip.
- 3d. Pang-he, or artichoke
- 4th. Omen-e-chah, or wild bean

The first is found throughout the valleys of the Mississippi and St. Peters, about the bases of bluffs, in rather moist but soft and rich ground. The plant resembles the sweet potato, and the root is similar in taste and growth. It does not grow so large or long as the cultivated sweet potato, but I should have thought it the same, were it not that the wild potato is not affected by the frost. A woman will dig from a peck to a half a bushel a day.

The Indians eat them simply boiled in water, but prefer them cooked with fat meat.



Digging prairie turnips, Tip-sui-ah, drawing by Chet Kozlak

The second (prairie turnip), grows on the high dry prairies, one or two together, in size, from that of a small hen's egg to that of a goose egg, and the same form. They have a thick black or brown bark, but are nearly pure white inside, with very little moisture. They are met with 4 to 8 inches below the surface, and are dug by the women with a long pointed stick, forced into the ground and used as a lever. They are eaten boiled and mashed like a turnip, or are split open and dried for future use. In this state they resemble pieces of chalk. It is said that when thus dried they may be ground into flour, and that they make a very palatable and nutritious bread. Mr. Lamre Picot, a French naturalist, has lately incurred a

very considerable expense to obtain the seed, which he has carried to France, believing that it is capable of cultivation, and may form a substitute both for potato and wheat.

The third (wild artichoke) is found in every part of the country where the land is rich and loamy, but particularly near fallen and decayed timber. It is a plant too well known to need further notice. It is eaten only by the Indians when in a state of starvation, from dread of its flatulent qualities.

The fourth (wild bean) is found in all parts of the valleys where the land is moist and rich. It is of the size of a large white bean, with a rich and very pleasant flavor. When used in a stew, I have thought it superior to any garden vegetable I have ever tasted. The Indians are very fond of them, and pigeons get fat on them in spring. The plant is a slender vine, from 2 to 4 feet in height, with small pods 2 to 3 inches long, containing 3 to 5 small beans. The pod rises and opens, the beans fall to the ground, and in spring take root and grow again. The beans on the ground are gathered by the Indians, who sometimes find a peck at once, gathered by mice for their winter store.

We have also several kinds of edible roots growing in the ponds or small lakes, and gathered by the Indians for food.

The psui-chin-chah, or swamp potato is found in mud and water about 3 feet deep. The leaf is as large as the cabbage-leaf. The stem has but one leaf, which has, as it were, two horns or points. The root is obtained by the Indian women; they wade into the water and loosen the root with their feet, which then floats, and is picked up and thrown into a canoe. It is of an oblong shape, of a whitish yellow, with 4 black rings around it, of a slight pungent taste, and not disagreeable when eaten with salt or meat.

The psui-chah, with a stem and leaf similar to the last, has a root about the size of a large hickory-nut. They grow in deeper water, and being smaller are much more difficult to get, but the Indians prefer them; they have an agreeable taste, and are harder and firmer when cooked. Both these roots are found in large quantities in the muskrat-lodges, stored by them for winter use.

The ta-wah-pah, stem, leaf, and yellow flower, like the pond lily. It is found in the lakes, in water and mud, from 4 to 5 feet deep. The Indian women dive for them, and frequently obtain as many as they are able to carry. The root is from 1 to 2 feet in length, very porous; there are as many as 6 or 8 cells running the whole length of the root. It is very difficult to describe the flavor. It is slightly sweet, and glutinous. It is generally boiled with wild fowl, but often roasted.

All these roots are preserved by the Indians for their winter use, by boiling, and then drying them in the sun or over the fire.

The wild rice is another and very favorite article of food with the Indians. They use it in all their great feasts. It is found in lakes, where the mud and water are from 5 to 20 feet deep. The rice harvest continues only from 4 to 8 days; when ripe, the slightest touch shakes it off, and if the wind should blow hard for a day or two, the rice is all lost. The Indians obtain it by paddling a canoe among the rice, when, with a hooked stick, they draw the stem over the canoe, and then whip off the grains. They continue to push about the canoe, and whip off the rice, until the canoe is full, carry the cargo on shore, and return again; and so continue until the rice season is ended. To dry the rice, they erect scaffolds about 4 feet high, 8 feet wide, and 20 to 50 feet long, covered with reeds and grass. On these the rice is placed, and dried by a slow fire kindled under the scaffold and kept burning about 36 hours. The beard is longer than that of rye, and to remove it and the chaff, they make a hole in the earth about 1 foot wide and 1 foot deep, in which they place a piece of skin. About a peck of the dried rice is placed in this hole at a time, and an Indian steps in, and holding himself steady by a stake planed near, he commences half jumping, first on one foot, then on the other, and so continues until the rice is ready to winnow. It is then cleaned, and put into bags to be stored.

Being of a dark color, the wild rice is not so good-looking as the Carolina rice, but the flavor is generally preferred. In preparing rice, the men take an active part. In gathering and