

How Pemmican Was Made

Pemmican, the meat of the buffalo from which pemmican was made, and grease which also was essential to its production, were the principle products of the Souris Plains for a great many years until the buffalo disappeared completely early in the last century.

Here are two descriptions of how pemmican was made:

(From the Beaver Magazine, Nov., 1922, "Indians of the Plains" by Rev. J. Hines.)

They had three ways of preserving their meats, viz., by making it into pemmican, pounded meat, or dried meat.

For the sake of brevity, I will first tell how dried meat was made. When an animal was killed, the women would cut from the carcass as large a piece of flesh as they possibly could and, placing it on a piece of parchment before them, would then draw their knife across it parallel with the grain, making a gash about half an inch deep and in a slanting direction. Then they would take hold of the lip with the left hand and cut slantingly with the right hand, and as they cut across they turned the lump over, and then another cut, and so on until the whole piece had been pared away, so to speak, and instead of a lump of meat there would be a steak from one to three feet long.

This was repeated until all the meat on hand had been cut up into thin steaks. Then a sort of stage would be erected and rods put across, and on these rods the slices of meat would be hung and left to dry in the sun. If the blue flies were bad, a small fire would be kindled beneath the meat. The fire helped to dry the meat and the smoke not only kept away the blue flies but also imparted a pleasant flavour to the meat.

When considered sufficiently dry, the women piled the dried steaks neatly one on top of the other until they formed a pile two feet long by one foot wide and one foot high. The pile was then bound tightly with line made from the hide, and put to one side either for personal use or for sale. This is what was called a bale of dried meat. Meat cured in this way and kept dry would last a whole year or longer, and it could be eaten just as it was or boiled or toasted before a fire.

Pounded meat was made from the dried meat by beating it with flails until it became as small as desired and then stored away in bags.

Pemmican was made by beating either of the above until the largest piece was the size of a filbert nut; much of it, of course, would be like mincemeat.

A whole skin made into parchment served for the threshing floor. The young men invariably did the pounding, and, whilst this work was in process, the women would be rendering down all the fat they could get; even the bones were broken and boiled to get all the marrow fat they contained.

Others would be employed making bags of parchment about two and a half feet long and one and a half feet wide. When these were finished and everything was ready, hot grease was poured on the heap of pounded meat and the whole mixed up with wooden shovels in the same way that men mix mortar. Then, when the grease was thoroughly mixed with the meat, it was put into the bags and sewn up neatly. This was called pemmican.

The bags were not allowed to lie on one side for

more than a few minutes at first, lest the fat should settle to the underside; so every ten or fifteen minutes the bags were turned over to ensure equal distribution of the fat.

Buffalo meat cured in this way and kept dry would last for years. No salt was ever used in either of the above processes. By travelers, pemmican was considered a very convenient food, as it could be eaten just as it was and the only instrument required in the culinary line to make it fit for the table was a hatchet to chop it out of the bag, for it became as hard as mortar.

Travelers often made a very rich soup by boiling a quantity of it for a certain time and then adding a little flour to make it thick. In my time, after we started growing vegetables, we made pies and stews of it in the same way as such things are made with the flesh of domestic animals.

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(From the Beaver Magazine, Sept. 1926, "Pemmican" by Chas. H. M. Gordon.)

To manufacture pemmican, the flesh of the buffalo was first cut up into large lumps, and then again into flakes or thin slices, and hung up in the sun or over the fire to dry. After it was thoroughly desiccated, it was taken down, placed upon raw hides, spread out on the prairie, and pounded and beaten, sometimes by wooden flails, again between two stones, until the meat was reduced to pulp.

Bags made of buffalo hide, with the hair on the outside, about the size of a flour sack, were standing ready, and each one was half filled with the powdered meat. The tallow or fat of the buffalo, having previously been boiled by itself in a huge kettle, was then poured hot into the oblong bag in which the pulverized meat had previously been placed. The contents were then stirred together until they were thoroughly mixed, the dry pulp being soldered down into a hard, solid mass by the melted fat. When full, the bags were allowed to cool and then sewn up tightly.

Each bag weighed one hundred pounds. The quantity of fat accounted for nearly half the total weight and the whole composition formed the most solid kind of food that man could ever conceive.

There was very little risk of it being spoiled, for, if ordinary care were taken to keep the bags free from mould, there would be no limit to the time it would keep; in fact, it was one of the most perfect forms of condensed food known, and was unexcelled in its hunger-satisfying nature.

The flavour of pemmican depended much on the fancy of the person eating it, and it is difficult to define its peculiar flavour by comparison. One of the tastiest forms, and one more often mixed than any other for table use, was "rubeiboo", consisting of pemmican boiled down with a mixture of potatoes, onions, and other vegetables. This, when properly seasoned, was very palatable.

The kind largely in vogue with the voyageurs was "pemmican straight". This was uncooked, and was eaten after mixing it with a little flour and frying it in a pan. The appetite had to be sharp and there had to be nothing else to eat to make "pemmican straight" seem palatable. Pemmican was peculiar to the fur land and particularly to the service of the Hudson's Bay Company.