

American Indians Developed Today's Crops Centuries Ago

Fall harvest time always reminds people of food – but few people realize that approximately 50 per cent of the plants grown in America today were developed centuries ago by In-

dians.

This observation was made recently by Dr. Raymond B. Farnsworth, nationally known agronomist from Brigham Young University, in a speech to some 150 couples attending an agricultural and home management conference at BYU in Provo, Utah. Participants came from the Midwest to the West Coast, and from Canada to Mexico.

“Contrary to popular belief, American Indians of the past were not mainly hunters and fishers. The vast majority of them lived in villages and tilled the soil,” Dr. Farnsworth pointed out.

Americans and others in the world today could not even think about going without corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, watermelon, beans, squash, pumpkin, sunflower, artichoke, pineapple, or banana.

The Indians developed these and more!

They domesticated such wild berries as the strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, and gooseberry – as well as grapes. They are responsible for long staple cotton and for nuts such as the pecan, walnut, butternut, hickory nut, chestnut – and particularly the use of the Pinon nut which westerners like so well.

Dr. Farnsworth also pointed out that Indians developed the use of rubber, certain athletic

activities, the birch bark canoe, the hammock, and tapping the maple tree for its syrup. Many concepts included in the Constitution of the United States also came from the Indian people through their practice of tribal government well known among the early eastern settlers.

“Probably the greatest of all the contributions by the Indians was the development of corn. It is apparent that Indians were some of the best plant breeders and selectors of crop varieties

about which we know,” Dr. Farnsworth said.

“The discovery of America was the discovery of corn. Today corn is the backbone of American agriculture – and had it not been for corn the early settlers received from the Indians, their colonies would have undoubtedly ended in tragedy and the colonization of the New World delayed for many years,” he added.

Dr. Farnsworth pointed out that corn is believed to have

(Continued on page 10)

Indian Husbandry . . .

(Continued from Page 7)

been developed from the annual "Teosinte" plant. Modern plant breeders have not yet duplicated the original work by the Indian in the basic development of corn.

A wild prototype of corn has never been found, and in its present highly-developed condition, could not exist anywhere in a wild state. All of the changes and improvements which white men have made are insignificant when compared with the work of the Indian with this plant, the noted agronomist said.

In his visits to Mexico and other Latin American countries, Dr. Farnsworth said that he was amazed to see the tremendous varieties of corn. In these areas are found the greatest reserve bank of "corn-germ-plasm" in the world.

He said that in some of BYU agriculture projects in south-eastern Mexico, agriculturalists have attempted to introduce American sweet corn. The insects and bugs literally "feast on the plant" while native varieties appear to be disease and insect resistant.

Historically, Dr. Farnsworth said, early explorers wrote accounts of what they saw that amazed them. Columbus' expedition to Cuba in 1492 reported a great deal of tilled land, some sowed with beans and a corn called maize which tasted well, baked or dried, and made into flour.

A French expedition in the Iroquois area of western New York in 1687 reported that they spent five or six days cutting down corn with their swords. In the villages nearby, they found plenty of horses, black cattle, fowl, and hogs.

Dr. Farnsworth observed that the horses referred to in this account were evidently developed from the remnants of

those brought to America by the Spanish. The horse has since been an important asset of the Indians, although it has largely been replaced by the "pickup" truck today.

"The Indian was entirely responsible for survival of the early American settlers. They taught the colonists to plant corn with a fish in order to increase the productive capacity of the soil," he said.

One of the plants most generally associated with the Indian is tobacco. It was a luxury to them and was not commonly smoked. However, it was used primarily in religious rites and as a means of welding the "bands of peace and friendship." Some tribes, however, did have both men and women smoking the "sacred" plant.

Many tribes believed that tobacco had unusual healing powers and was used to preserve and maintain good health. Roger Williams reported that it was used extensively to relieve rheumatism and toothache.

Dr. Farnsworth pointed out early Indian use of tobacco was in accord with the teachings of the first LDS Church prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr. In his "Word of Wisdom" declaration, he said that the Lord tells us that "tobacco is not for the body, neither for the belly, and is not good for man, but is an herb for bruises and all sick cattle, to be used with judgment and skill."

After congratulating the Indian participants for what their ancestors have contributed to the food and agriculture industry, Dr. Farnsworth described in detail how important the women were and are to Indian life — everything from caring for the fields to the variety of home management and cultural skills found in the home.