

American Heroes

by Dick Pierce

While we are generally well-versed in the historical names and dates of the Colonies, much less is known about the crops that physically and economically sustained our pioneering forebears. Most of their fruits and vegetables were, like them, *immigrants*, some of them *average Joes*, some *overlooked workhorses*, and a few *over achievers* with compelling stories.

“Maize”

Any story about the food of America must begin with *corn*. This wasn't how the Pilgrims foresaw it. Their plan had been to grow wheat. But that was before the storms, the leaks and the break in the Mayflower's main beam delayed their trip. That was also before the frigid winter and low food stores killed half of the new arrivals, and before the miserable attempts to farm in rocky soil and brutal summers. That was before they learned that wheat doesn't thrive in new soil; it requires ground that's been tilled for years. It was wheat that the settlers had expected to sustain them. But they soon realized that the wheat seeds that they brought would take years to cultivate.

Columbus did not realize that the gift of *maize* was far more valuable than the spices or gold he hoped to find. He had no way of knowing that the history of maize traced back some 8,000 years or that it represented the most remarkable plant breeding accomplishment of all time. This plant, developed by peoples he judged poor and uncivilized, far outstripped in productivity any of the cereals bred by Old World farmers - wheat, rice, sorghum, barley and rye.

Almost as soon as the Pilgrims arrived in the New World, they found themselves utterly dependent on a strange, coarse grain that they most likely would have scoffed at in England: CORN. They had traveled for 66 days and crossed several thousand miles of ocean to encounter the humble plant that would alter their fate. *Corn*, also called *maize*, had traveled nearly as far on its trip to cross paths with the Pilgrims, but had taken much longer to do so.

Originating in central Mexico, corn traveled northward, passed along by native tribes. It entered the United States in the Southwest, continuing on to the Midwest and then the eastern woodlands.

Tribes, such as New England's Wampanoag, had only had it for a few hundred years by the time of English contact, but they had already developed many different types, white, blue, red, yellow, orange and multicolor, including sweet corn, hominy and popcorn. Finding hidden Wampanoag caches of corn may have been the first lucky break the Pilgrims had since disembarking from the *Mayflower*. Although they didn't realize it when they were packing their wheat seeds in England, they needed a grain that would dry well and store easily, that would feed animals as well as people and that would grow easily in scrubby soil. Wheat didn't fill the bill, but corn did. Low-maintenance corn also

didn't demand a lot of attention, freeing the Colonists to clear land, build houses and fences, and tend to other crops. Corn was the food that made America. Plentiful, portable and nonperishable, corn quickly became critical to the settlers, who added European touches -- salted beef, shellfish, and herbs -- to the Indians' fare. "*If it were not for corn, the settlers could not have gone across the nation building a country*", says Long Island food historian Alice Ross.

Corn immediately became a staple of Colonial tables in both New England and Virginia. Of course, before the hard corn could be eaten it had to be processed. In the days before windmills, the Indians crafted an Asamp pounder, an oversized mortar and pestle, to do the work of making the coarse meal which was called Samp. The mortar was fashioned from a tree stump that was burned and scraped until a 12 to 15 inch cavity was hollowed out. The spring pole to maneuver the pestle came from a nearby sapling, bent over the mortar. The pestle itself was a long, section of tree trunk, rounded at the end and fastened to the spring pole.

To soften the corn, kernels were soaked overnight in water and lye (or ashes) then rinsed, dried and brought to the pounder. Particularly, among the settlers, autumn Saturdays were samp days, when villagers would cart their kernels to a central mortar, and the thumping lasting into the early candlelight.

Though the settlers took many recipes from the Indians, none was more important than the recipe for *samp porridge*, a heavy, stick-to-the-ribs corn, bean and meat stew. It was eaten any time of the day, breakfast, lunch or supper. Started on Saturday, it would simmer on the hearth all week, altered day by day with a bit of meat here, an addition of shellfish there. No one got bored. By the end of the week, a popcorn flavored crust had formed around the pot which was eaten as a treat. This might be a predecessor of our Doritos. Quick-cooking corn bread was eaten three times a day.

The story of these first arrivals is another presentation in itself, but I wish to digress briefly to give you a short history lesson.

In 1600 the *Wampanoag* probably were as many as 12,000 with 40 villages divided roughly between 8,000 on the mainland and another 4,000 on the off-shore islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. The three epidemics which swept across New England between 1614 and 1620 were especially devastating to the Wampanoag and neighboring Massachusetts with mortality in many mainland villages reaching 100%. When the Pilgrims landed in 1620, fewer than 2,000 mainland Wampanoag had survived.

The earliest contacts between the Wampanoag and Europeans occurred during the 1500s as fishing and trading vessels roamed the New England coast. Judging from the Wampanoag's later attitude towards the Pilgrims, most of these encounters were friendly. Some, however, were not. European captains were known to increase profits by capturing natives to sell as slaves. Such was the case when Thomas Hunt kidnapped several Wampanoag in 1614 and later sold them in Spain. One of his victims - a Patuxet named Squanto was purchased by Spanish monks who attempted to "civilize" him. Eventually

gaining his freedom, Squanto was able to work his way to England (apparently undeterred by his recent experience with Captain Hunt) he signed on as an interpreter for a British expedition to Newfoundland. From there Squanto went back to Massachusetts, only to discover that, in his absence, epidemics had killed everyone in his village. As the last Patuxet, he remained with the Wampanoag as a kind of ghost.

To Squanto's tragic story must be added a second series of unlikely events. Living in Holland at the time was a small group of English religious dissenters who, because of persecution, had been forced to leave England. Concerned their children were becoming too Dutch and the possibility of a war between Holland and Spain, but still unwelcome in England, these gentle people decided to immigrate to the New World. The Virginia Company agreed to transport them to the mouth of the Hudson River, took their money, and loaded them on two ships (Speedwell and Mayflower) with other English immigrants not of their faith. The little fleet set sail in July only to have the Speedwell spring a leak 300 miles out to sea. Accompanied by the Mayflower, it barely made it back to Plymouth without sinking. Repairs failed to fix the problem, so in September everyone was crammed aboard the Mayflower, and the whole mess sent merrily on its seasick way to the New World.

Landfall occurred near Cape Cod after 65 days and a very rough passage, but strangely enough, the Mayflower's captain, who had managed to cross the Atlantic during hurricane season, suddenly was unable to sail around some shoals and take them farther south. This forced the Pilgrims to find a place to settle in Massachusetts and try to survive a New England winter with few supplies. For the Virginia Company, there was no problem, since in 1620; Great Britain claimed the boundary of Virginia reached as far north as the present border between Maine and New Brunswick. So the Pilgrims were still in Virginia (although perhaps farther north than originally promised), but remembering Britain's concern at the time about French settlement in Nova Scotia, the misplacement of the Pilgrims to New England may not have been entirely an accident.

The first concerns of the new arrivals were finding something to eat and a place to settle. After anchoring off Cape Cod on November 11, 1620, a small party was sent ashore to explore. Pilgrims in every sense of the word, they promptly stumbled into a Nauset Indian graveyard where they found baskets of corn which had been left as gifts for the deceased. The gathering of this unexpected bounty was interrupted by the angry Nauset warriors, and the Pilgrims beat a hasty retreat back to their boat with little to show for their efforts. Shaken but undaunted by their welcome to the New World, the Pilgrims continued across Cape Cod Bay and decided to settle, of all places, at the site of a deserted Patuxet village. There they sat for the next few months in crude shelters - cold, sick and slowly starving to death. Half did not survive that terrible first winter. The Wampanoag were aware of the English but chose to avoid contact them for the time being. In keeping with the strange sequence of unlikely events, Samoset, a Pemaquid sachem from Maine hunting in Massachusetts, came across the growing disaster at Plymouth.

Having acquired some English from contact with English fishermen he walked into Plymouth in March and startled the Pilgrims with "Hello Englishmen." Samoset stayed the night surveying the situation and left the next morning. He soon returned with, you guessed it, Squanto. Until he succumbed to sickness in 1622, Squanto devoted himself to helping the Pilgrims who were then living at the site of his old village. Squanto also served as an intermediary between the Pilgrims and Massasoit, the Grand sachem of the Wampanoag. Whatever his motivations, with great kindness and patience, he taught the English the skills they needed to survive, and, ironically, in so doing assured the destruction of his own people. I am proud to mention that two of those Plymouth pilgrims were my 8th great-grandparents, John and Priscilla Alden.

Nearly 400 years later, corn remains the top U.S. crop export. Corn production is double that of any other crop, consuming more than 70 million acres of American farmland. It contributes to more than 3,000 grocery items as well as inedible products like nylon, synthetic rubber and linoleum.

Tobacco

In the Virginia Colonies, dependence on corn as a cash crop was rivaled only by dependence on tobacco. The Colonists "wanted money" "They wanted to turn every possible acre into tobacco and corn." And for several decades, that's what they did. It may be hard now to imagine the gratitude the Colonists held for tobacco. From beginning to end, tobacco played a major role in the Colonial era.

Its cultivation and export marked economic survivability for Jamestown, the first permanent English Colony, and it partly financed the Revolution by serving as collateral for French loans.

In 1614, Jamestown Colonist John Roife sent an initial shipment of about 200 pounds of tobacco to England. The Colony, sponsored by a capitalistic enterprise called The Virginia Company had already tried to make money producing silk, glass, lumber and sassafras. Colonists and shareholders alike were relieved when English merchants welcomed the Colonial leaf grown from seed Roife acquired while in the Caribbean.

Tobacco existed in North America well before Rolfe's arrival: Native Americans are believed to have domesticated the plant around A.D. 900. But the Colonists and their English buyers didn't like the flavor of the domestic tobacco of the Indians, preferring instead a more fragrant variety from the West Indies. Prior to Jamestown, this product could be bought only from Spain. England imported 40,000 pounds of tobacco from Virginia by 1620, just six years after the first delivery. That same year, the English Crown and The Virginia Company established a trade agreement prohibiting English tobacco cultivation in exchange for a one shilling per pound tax on Virginia tobacco.

By the turn of the century, England imported about 38 million pounds of tobacco annually from the New World. Wanting to protect their product and profits, wealthy Virginia landowners created the House of Burgesses in 1619. The first order of business

for the legislative body, the first in the Colonies, was to set a minimum price for the sale of tobacco. Its trade and production dominated the Burgesses' agenda for the next twenty years.

Around the same time, tobacco pounds became currency in Virginia, used to pay taxes, buy wives (initially, 120 pounds of tobacco would pay a woman's passage to the New World) and measure the value of all traded goods. Eventually, tobacco would be grown in Maryland giving the Chesapeake Bay the name "Tobacco Coast" as well as in the northern Colonies.

The reason behind the plant's popularity isn't hard to understand: It grows quickly and isn't finicky about soil or climate. "The problem with tobacco is that in order to sell your crop, you had to go through middlemen in England. It's the typical thing where the farmer doesn't do nearly as well as the middleman." In the 1760s, tobacco prices dropped sharply, plunging many planters into debt. Anxiety descended on the Colonies. To add to the troubles, decades of single-cropping had depleted the soil. Many men, including Bro. George Washington, abandoned this major crop and turned their fields over to wheat, rye, barley and other products.

Tobacco continues to be a major US export, although most domestic attention is focused on limiting its use. Anti-tobacco campaigns are almost as old as its use: In the 1600's, Pope Urban VIII banned smoking and taking snuff in holy sites and threatened excommunicate anyone who did so. (Pope Benedict XI 11, a tobacco user, repealed this in 1724).

As early as 1602, an anonymous author writing about the soot-related illnesses of chimney sweepers suggested that tobacco may create similar ill effects. The next year, English doctors complained to King James 1st that people were taking tobacco without prescriptions. By 1632, Massachusetts was the first Colony to forbid public smoking; 15 years later, the Colony of Connecticut followed suit and limited private smoking to once a day. Today, at least one New York City restaurant touts tobacco's future as a spice. After the city banned smoking in bars and restaurants earlier last year, Chef Serafina Sandro unveiled a menu that included filet mignon with a tobacco-wine sauce and tobacco-laced chocolate soufflé.

Apples

The Colonists didn't import apples to bake pies; they imported them to ferment into hard cider. "Apples were grown to be drunk," says author Michael Pollan, who delved into the heritage of the apple while writing *The Botany of Desire* (Random House, 2001).

This was because of a small but important detail about apples that most people don't know: The fruit doesn't breed true. If you were to plant the five or so seeds from an apple, every seedling would lead to a different variety. Most of them would be inedible. The only way to keep a line pure, to keep growing Jonathan's and Macintoshes, is by cloning the plant through grafting.

Most of the grafted apple trees that the Colonists brought with them died in the New World's hard winter and unexpected late-spring frosts, forcing them to plant seeds instead. A few of their wild apples, the *Newtown Pippin*, the *Roxbury Russet*, and the *Early Chandler* turned out to be pleasingly sweet or tangy for eating.

The green-skinned Newtown Pippin became the first and only American fruit "to achieve lasting fame and fortune in England," according to Peter Hatch, Director of Monticello Gardens and Grounds. The Newtown Pippin originated in the early 18th century along Newtown Creek on the estate of Gershom Moore, in what is now Queens across the East River from Manhattan. By the mid-1700s, the Pippin grew in several Virginia orchards; these local varieties were called the Albemarle Pippin. Past Grand Master Benjamin Franklin imported barrels of the fruit in 1759 while living in London, and by 1807, the Horticultural Society of London's "Select List" of apples included the Newtown Pippin.

Americans adopted the phrase; "as American as apple pie" despite the pie's English origins, maybe because the apple's story reflects their own. A tasty wild apple points to individual achievement, to a fruit that has mustered all of its genealogical and environmental resources to rise above its lineage. "The botany of the apple squares very nicely with the American myth of the self-made hero," says Mr. Pollan.

The apple's early history as the source for an intoxicating beverage puts a new spin on John Chapman, also known as Johnny Appleseed, whose apple orchards were grown from seed because he considered grafting sinful. Keeping one step ahead of westward expansion, Chapman ensured settlers that alcohol would be available regardless of their primitive surroundings. By the 1830s, he had established nurseries all the way into Indiana. In the early 20th century, prohibitionists launched an attack on the apple. Through catch phrases like "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," the apple industry's public relations arm turned the fruit from a racy little liquor-maker into the symbol of clean living we know today.

Can the tobacco industry find any inspiration in the apple's turnaround? "That's a bit of a stretch," says Mr. Pollan. "Cigarettes have to labor under the fact that they can kill you. Apples have never quite had that public relations challenge."

Now, in my opening remarks I mentioned that most of our pioneering forebears' crops were like them: Immigrants. Allow me to bring this dissertation to a conclusion by mentioning a few other foods that our ancestors relied upon.

Asparagus

Eastern Mediterranean. Asparagus was cultivated by ancient Greeks and Romans. One of the oldest vegetables in Western civilization, it was imported by Colonists. Growing asparagus from seed requires three or four years before the plant is ready to be harvested. The wait pays off: healthy asparagus will produce for 30 or more years. While most vegetables bear stamens and pistils, asparagus grows in two gender-specific plants.

Carrot

Yellow and violet carrots trace their roots to Afghanistan, from which they traveled to Iran, Syria and then Spain; the white carrot is a European native. The orange root we think of as a carrot developed in Holland in the 1600s and was brought to the Colonies by Dutch Mennonites. If carrots are allowed to cross freely, they eventually will devolve into an orange relation of wild carrot, we know as Queen Anne's Lace.

Coffee

Ethiopia. Coffee was in the Near East by the 1500s and in England around 1640. Foretelling the Starbucks-ization of America, coffeehouses proliferated in the Colonies, where men gossiped and complained about politics. Anti-tax Colonists picked coffee over tea and were rewarded with an inexpensive supply from the Caribbean.

Cucumber

India (Himalayan valleys). From there, the cucumber followed the Silk Road to China. By the 16th century, the English were cultivating cucumbers in cold frames. The cucumber thrived in America's steamy summers, however, making it common in the New World. The Colonists ate it with bacon or ham, or with vinegar, pepper and oyster broth.

Onion

Central Asia, then through western Asia to the Mediterranean. The Spanish introduced the onion to the West Indies, its launching pad to all corners of the New World. By the 1770s, Native Americans as well as Colonists cultivated it. Onions belong to the massive Liliaceae family, which also includes chives, leeks, garlic, hyacinth, tulips and lilies.

Pea

India and Afghanistan. Pea seeds have been found in archaeological digs in Troy. The pea was first mentioned in London in the 12th century. The Colonists could store peas through mid-winter if they cooked, strained, dried, then bottled them with melted mutton fat. The bottles were then corked and put in the cellar.

Sweet Potato

South America, exact location unknown. Spanish explorers transported it to Europe as well as the East Indies. From there, it traveled to China and India. Virginia Colonists cultivated it by the mid-1600s. One of the oldest varieties of sweet potato is the Spanish Potato, which grew in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania. This variety supposedly came from the Caribbean and was enjoyed by all Colonists, regardless of social class.

Rhubarb

Central Asia. Used medicinally in China as early as 2700 B.C., rhubarb was found in Western Europe by the Middle Ages. It is believed to have arrived in the newly formed United States in the late 1700s. An odd combination: Rhubarb, a natural laxative also makes a light champagne.

Tomato

Peru. Francisco Pizarro is credited with importing the tomato to Spain in 1530. From there it traveled to Italy, where its floral beauty is mentioned by 1554. Recipes including tomatoes appear in Hannah Glasse's 1758 *The Art of Cookery*, a cookbook owned by Martha Washington. Colonists grew it as a flower; Dr. John de Sequeyra, who served on the board of the Public Hospital for the Insane 1774C96, is believed to have introduced the tomato to Williamsburg. It gained U.S. popularity for its flavor in the mid- to-late 1800s, possibly because of the influx of Italian immigrants and the rise of the canning industry.

An interesting fact is that Catsup predates the tomato; an English Catsup recipe calls for vinegar, white wine, anchovies, mace, ginger, pepper, lemon peel and horseradish.

I close with what I said at the beginning: Most of our ancestors fruits and vegetables were, like them, *immigrants*, some of them *average Joes*, some *overlooked workhorses*, and a few *over achievers* but all with compelling stories.