



Diggers Prepare for Root Feast

By Miranda Vega Rector of the CUJ

Women of the Umatilla Indian Reservation keep traditions alive by gathering first foods of late spring to prepare for Root Feast.

Anyone was welcome to attend the Longhouse feast and taste the freshly picked Bitter Root, Luksh, and Coos. Other First Foods such as Salmon, Deer, Elk, Huckleberries and Chokecherries are offered as well.

February is the beginning of the First Foods season in which a native species of Celery is gathered. In the early spring, Salmon begin to travel up the Columbia River and are caught at traditional fishing sites then dried and stored for later use. Bitter Root, Luksh, and Coos are gathered in late Spring. Berries are picked late in the summer then canned for the remainder of the year. Deer and Elk are also hunted in the late summer and fall, and then come February, the cycle starts over.

Preparing for the root feast is a long process. Not only do the women have to plan a year in advance to have enough canned berries but the fisherman spend long hours on the river catching the Salmon and hunters go out looking for deer. Picking of the roots isn't an easy process either, but they are the bells of the ball, so to speak, and only come around once a year.

In preparation of the Root Feast, women split up into different teams:

The longhouse ladies arrive around 5 a.m. to cook breakfast, set up tables and

chairs, and serve the food. After breakfast, they clean up and begin preparing for dinner.

The root diggers arrive around 7 a.m. for prayer and breakfast. They then pack their vehicles with lunch and supplies, and head out to the digging site. Usually the digging site is over 45 minutes away on rocky hills. The weather varies from windy, sunny or rainy but despite the conditions, the diggers stay for up to eight hours gathering the roots. This is a two-day process.

Tribal women of all ages can partake in the root gathering as long as a relative teaches them the process and the cultural importance. Some of what they learn is how to use a kupin, how to differentiate the correct plants from the others, how deep to dig in order to not break or lose the root, and how to properly restore the dug-up ground. This year the

youngest digger was 10-year-old Shayla Nix, daughter of Camille Spino.

"It is a lifetime commitment," said Linda Jones, eldest leader of the group and Natural Resources' Administrative Manager. "It's not just a once in a while thing."

Jones was raised learning the traditions and process of root digging but many of the women have been digging for less than 10 years. She explains that as part of the tradition, first-time diggers will give their bag of roots to someone who cannot dig anymore, whether that's due to age or illness.

"It's fun, I like it," said first-time digger, Rosa Arinas, daughter of Jessica Thompson and granddaughter of Ramona Dick and Darryl Thompson. "It's really calming, especially when you can hear the birds."

Many of the sites that the women go to are usually

private property. Ranchers have given permission for the women to use their land to gather roots before they become over grazed by cattle, since the cattle eat the roots too. Jones is appreciative of land owners who have offered their land and is always looking for more sites.

"It's important to not dig in the same areas every year in order to allow the roots to replenish," said Jones.

Finally, after they have gathered enough roots, the women spend another two days cleaning and preparing the roots for the feast. The purpose of the feast is to inform the community that the roots are ready and that others can go out and dig for their annual supply. This year the Feast was held on April 26 in Mission.



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