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Corn Shelling with the Mesquakies

by *Susanna Ashton*

Corn-on-the-cob isn't for everyone. Some people like to eat canned corn that has been scraped off the cob by machines. But how did people get corn kernels off the cob before machines, or even metal tools, were used? That's where the clam shells come in.

Many different Indian tribes have grown corn for thousands of years. Every tribe has its own way of preparing corn. Many tribes, like the Mesquakie Indians of Iowa, use clam shells taken from nearby rivers as the perfect tools for this job. A clam shell is easy to hold and just the right shape for scraping kernels off quickly and easily.

Shelling Corn with Shells

Corn shelling isn't just another boring chore for the Mesquakie. Corn shelling is an important part of their culture. Today many traditional people often gather to do it. It used to be mostly women, but when Mesquakie get together these days to shell corn it's usually a family activity.

Juanita Pudhill, shelled corn in 1976 with an Iowa Mesquakie family, and described it:

During August, green corn is gathered, husked, and boiled in large iron kettles over the open fire. The kernels are removed from the cob and laid out on large sheets of plastic to dry in the sun. It is then stored for winter use. It was the uncle's job to keep the fire and pots going. The corn was put in to boil at a certain time in the afternoon to make sure that things would be ready when the children were home from school. The harvest ceremony is for all members of the family to take part in. We all gathered in the front room, most of us sitting on the floor with a large old tablecloth draped over our legs. Everyone chose a mussel shell which would fit well into the palm of his or her hand. I, being, right-handed, chose the shell to fit in that hand. The shell lies between the thumb and forefinger, with the sharp edge down. You press the sharp edge down in between the rows of kernels and pry them out. The kernel must not be cut in removing it from the ear. The next day, the corn was laid out to dry and after drying, it would be put into containers ready for winter use.

A game is played to see how many kernels can be removed without breaking them apart. On this particular evening the grandmother won every time. Everyone laughed and was happy for her. The TV was on in the background and the younger ones were watching it.

But my friend and I sat side-by-side and filled our tablecloths with kernels of the beautiful red, purple, and white corn.

Some Indian families like to use metal spoons or knives to shell the corn, because they think it is easier than using or finding clam shells. But other families believe that using shells is not just a way of practicing tradition, but is a way to respect the corn. Corn is considered sacred and every single kernel is considered to be alive, just like a human being. Scraping with shells, instead of knives is “gentler” on the kernels and does not cut them open as it pulls them off the cob. So using shells to shell corn isn’t a corney idea at all!