



Prehistoric Resources



Cattails

Woodland Indian Survival

Prehistoric American Indians found everything they needed to survive from the natural resources around them. From water to food to shelter to medicine, almost anything they needed could be found nearby. What wasn't provided was the knowledge of how to use the resources. American Indians used trial and error to learn how to effectively use plants, animals and other resources, and shared that information with the next generation.

Shelter

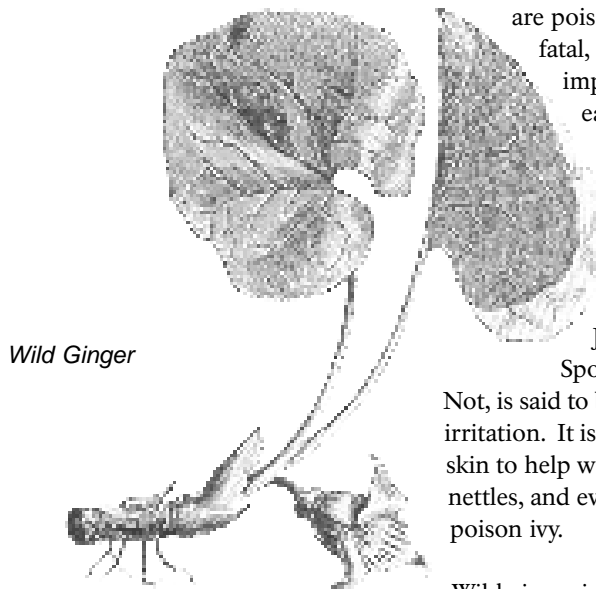
In the summer, the American Indians lived along the riverbanks in large campsites. The harsh winters created a need for more protection. This is easily found in the Driftless Region of northeast Iowa, which has not been heavily eroded by glaciers.

Limestone rock outcrops are abundant in northeast Iowa. This geography provides excellent conditions

for rock overhangs and some caves to form. These places provided important homes called rock shelters for early Americans. A good rock shelter faces south to protect from the winds and storms that come from the northwest, and to catch the winter sun from the south. With just a small fire, early American Indians could have lived comfortably throughout the harshest winters.

Medicine

Many plants were tried and tested for their healing properties. Some worked and some did not. No doubt many mistakes were made along the way, since many medicinal plants are poisonous, or even fatal, if you use them improperly. Many early American Indian discoveries, though, are still useful in today's world.



Wild Ginger

Jewelweed, or Spotted Touch-Me-Not, is said to be good for skin irritation. It is rubbed on the skin to help with insect bites, nettles, and even to soothe poison ivy.

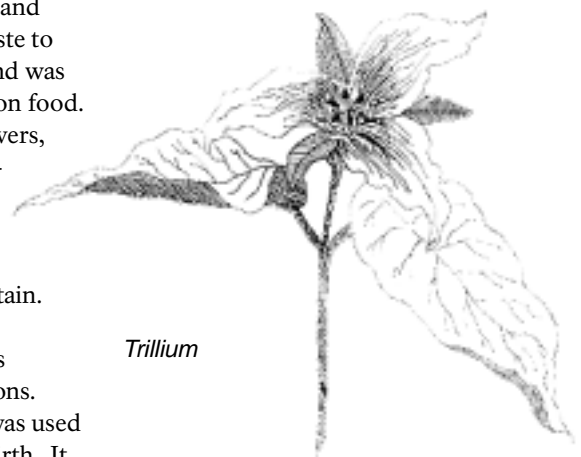
Wild ginger is a woodland plant that loves shade. Its root is similar in taste to the Asian ginger found in the supermarket, and was commonly used by American Indians to season food. Past medicinal uses include fighting colds, fevers, sore throats, cramps, and even for contraception. Wild ginger is also useful to calm stomach problems and increase appetite. Some of these uses may be attributed to the antibiotic substance it has been found to contain.

Trillium is an early spring wildflower that was extensively used in the past for many conditions. Trillium is also called bath flower because it was used to aid labor and help with problems in childbirth. It was also used for treating rheumatism. A stick full of

trillium-tipped needles was pounded against the skin to provide relief. The plant contains antiseptic, astringent, and steroid properties.

Bloodroot was an important medicinal root that is still used today. It is related to the poppy and contains similar alkaloids. American Indians often used drops of the juice on a maple sugar cube as a cough remedy. This was a dangerous practice, though, because higher doses can be fatal. They also used it for things like burns, cramps, warts, and other skin infections. The dark red juice of the plant was an important dye often used as skin paint.

Purple coneflower, or Echinacea, is being used today as an immune system booster. This may be attributed to its wide use in the past for conditions ranging from burns and injuries to sore throats and colds. The wide range of uses may be due to its infection fighting properties.



Trillium

Food

The early Americans of the area were hunter-gatherers and small gardeners. Corn was not introduced to the area until the end of the mound building period (about 700 years ago), and was then used for more extensive agriculture. The river provided much of the moundbuilder's food during the summer, whereas the forests

provided much of their winter foods.

In the winter they concentrated their efforts on hunting the abundant game in the area, which they supplemented with stored nuts, seeds, and dried fruits and vegetables. In the warm seasons the river was their lifesource.

Huge piles of mussels have been found along the Mississippi River. These "garbage piles" provide a very obvious clue as to what the early Americans were eating. Mussels were an important food source during the summer, possibly the number one food source. Mussels also provided tools, jewelry, and even pearls.

Wild rice is abundant in marshy regions of the upper Mississippi River. High in nutrition, undoubtedly it was an important grain that could be easily gathered and stored.

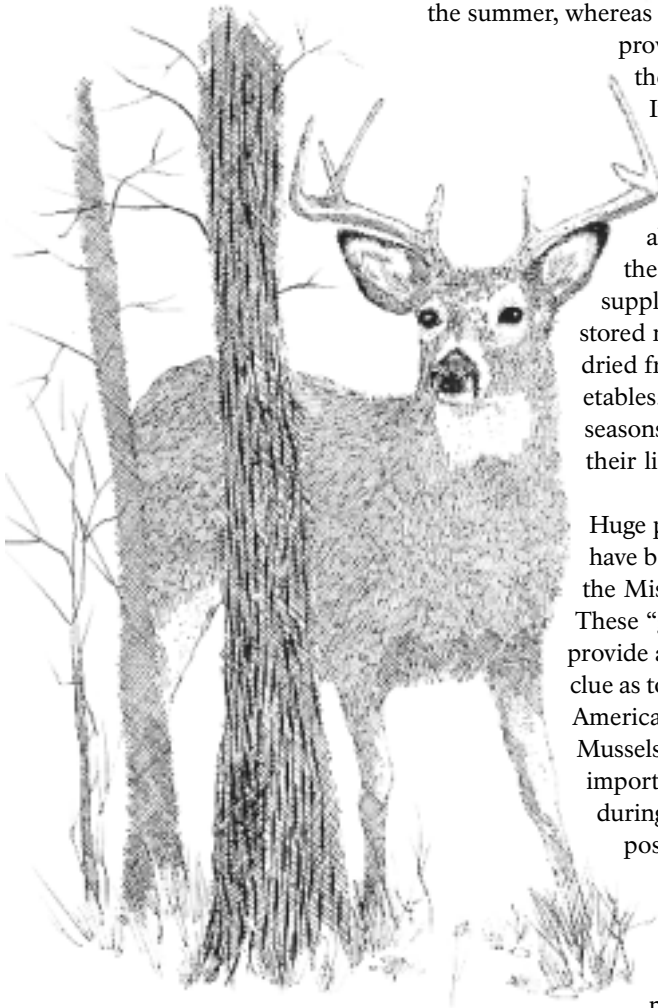
Seasonal nuts and berries would have offered flavorful additions to meals as well as occasional snacks. Nuts could have been stored through the winter, or ground into flour for bread. Acorns were commonly used for flour. Fruits such as grapes, plums, rose hips, and berries could have been dried and stored for winter, providing important vitamins such as vitamin C, which is needed to prevent scurvy (a common disease of the past).

The wooded valleys were rich in wild game, including deer, elk, bison, turkey, and waterfowl. American Indians were experts at tracking and hunting these animals.

The starchy tubers and young crisp shoots of many plants provided important vitamins and minerals as well as providing variety and filling alternatives to their diet. The arrowhead plant and cattail are good examples of these vegetables. Almost every part of the cattail has a use, from the shoots and tubers to the reeds and pollen to the early heads eaten like corn on the cob.

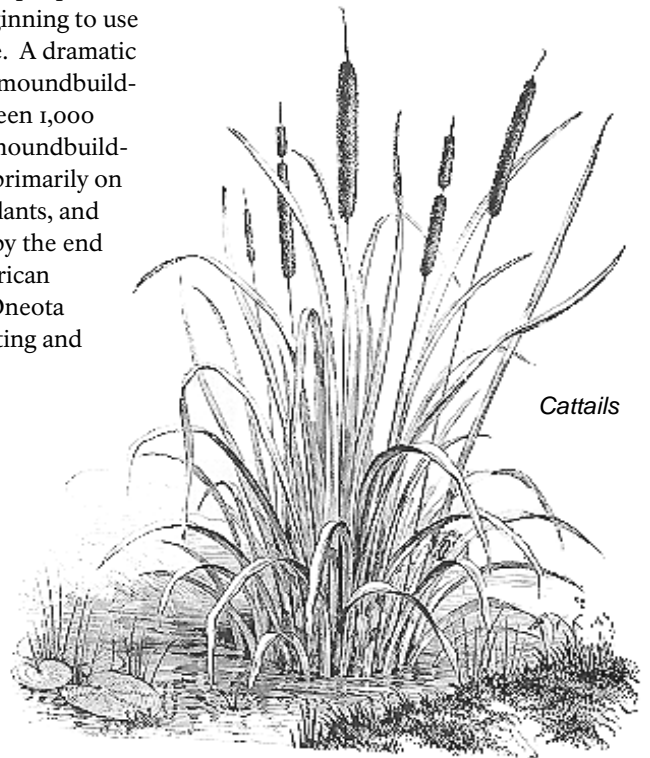
Many native plants and "weeds" are useful. Plants such as sumpweed, goosefoot, knotweed, and sunflower provided starchy seeds rich in nutrients for the early Americans. Evidence has been found that local people of the Woodland Culture (about 700 to 3,000 years ago) were learning how to cultivate these plants and squash in small gardens.

Whitetail Deer



Changes through Time

Each period of early American history is marked by significant changes in the lifestyles of the people. The earliest people in Iowa, living 14,000 to 8,000 years ago, were the Paleo-Indians, or Big Game Hunters. Their primary food sources were now-extinct megafauna such as mammoth and mastodon. The next group, from the Archaic period, was also known for its hunting skills. The Archaic people, living 8,500 to 3,000 years ago, were beginning to use more plant resources to a limited degree. A dramatic shift was emerging when the Woodland moundbuilding culture was getting underway. Between 1,000 and 3,000 years ago, the culture of the moundbuilders did a complete change from relying primarily on wild game for food to relying more on plants, and finally adjusting into a farming lifestyle by the end of the Woodland period. The later American Indians encountered by pioneers--the Oneota culture--had become adept at both hunting and using the plant resources around them.



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