Sweet Corn Not an Important Indian Food Plant in the Pre-Columbian Period

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SWEET corn, Zea Mays, L. var. rugosa, Bonaf., was not extensively used as an Indian food plant in the United States in pre-Columbian times, concluded the writer in a paper (2) dealing with this subject. George F. Carter, assistant professor of Geography, Johns Hopkins University, in an interesting volume entitled "Plant Geography and Culture History in the American Southwest," takes issue with this opinion and suggests that the writer has not given sufficient consideration to the literature of the upper Missouri and also to the literature of northeastern United States, rejected by the writer as inadequate.

Will and Hyde (7), referred to by Carter, list 104 varieties of corn collected from 18 tribes. Ninety-nine of the varieties are designated as field corn and five as sweet corn. In other words, 95% of the list is field corn and 5% sweet corn. Sweet corn is listed from 6 of the 18 tribes. Two-thirds of the tribes grew no sweet corn.

The fact should also be noted that their sweet corn was not used for roasting ears, according to Will and Hyde, but was crushed and made into balls which suggests its use as a confection rather than a food product. It should not be inferred that the Indians did not relish roasting ears, for the green corn season was "one of great rejoicing and feasting." Granted that the list of varieties grown by the Indians in 1915 is representative of that time, the question still remains as to conditions in the pre-Columbian period. A century had elapsed since the white man first visited the upper Missouri and the habits of the Indian have been influenced in many ways by the white man.

The writer does not question the accuracy of Will and Hyde's survey, but the statement of the Indians as to the antiquity of these varieties requires verification from other sources. In the absence of a calendar and a written record, too much should not be taken for granted. During the interval referred to, the Indians' habits were modified in many ways. The so-called Indian pony, an animal some of the tribes claim they had "always," despite facts of history to the contrary, is a good example.

However, accepting the evidence of Will and Hyde at full value as representing the pre-Columbian period, the evidence is still unimpressive. The fact should be borne in mind that in the pre-Columbian period, the four-footed beast of burden did not exist on this continent, hence corn was grown exclusively for human consumption.

"The certainty as to the origin of maize will come rather from archeological discoveries," noted DeCandolle.

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2Professor.
3Figures in parenthesis refer to "Literature Cited", p. 121.