The evidence, then, seems fairly clear that sweet corn was an aboriginal food plant in America and that it was at least fairly widespread. It seems to have been used primarily to supply a sweet material for a people who lacked both sugar cane and the honey bee. Labelling it as not an important food plant in pre-Columbian America is about the equivalent of labelling sugar cane as not an important food plant in the present world.—GEORGE F. CARTER, Department of Geography, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.

SWEET CORN IN THE PRE-COLUMBIAN PERIOD IN THE UPPER MISSOURI REGION

MAXIMILIAN, an explorer of the upper Missouri, referred to by Carter above, mentions sweet corn and the important role it played during the “green corn season”.

The pertinent question is to what kind of corn does this term “green corn” refer. Was it Zea Mays L., commonly termed field corn, or Zea Mays L. var. rugosa, Bonf., currently called sweet corn?

Will and Hyde¹ who survey the corn of this region gives us the answer. “Green corn is invariably called sweet corn” by the early travelers. It really was the common species of field corn.

If sweet corn is to be regarded as a mutation of field corn, no doubt such mutations occurred at various times and places in both the pre- and post-Columbian period. It is mainly a question of whether it was the Indian or the white man who made any important use of them. Sweet corn was grown by 6 of the 18 tribes in the upper Missouri Valley. They may have used sweet corn as a substitute for sugar, as suggested by Carter.

Corn meal for torteas, tomales, etc., appears to have been the Indian’s most important use of corn. Sweet corn meal is definitely inferior to that made from field corn. The waxy character of the kernel and its lack of brittleness renders it difficult to grind. Perhaps this fact gave the Indians the idea of calling it “gummy corn.” The meal soon becomes rancid and lacks the storage quality of field corn meal.

Confusion in the sweet corn literature arises through the error of accepting flavor as a taxonomic character. Sweet is a loose term and merely denotes a substance agreeable to the sense of taste. Thus we have sweet peppers, sweet pickles. Flavor is not a taxonomic character and hence cannot be accepted as such in identifying plants.

Likewise, the term sweet has been loosely applied to both field and sweet corn in the literature. The Indians called our sweet corn “puckered corn” or “shriveled corn”. Both of these terms are good in that they apply to a taxonomic character found only in Zea Mays L. var. rugosa, Bonf., currently designated as sweet corn.

In closing, may we add, the workers in the field of archeology have contributed much valuable information regarding the early history of our economic plants. In some cases, however, the problem requires checking from every possible angle and even after weighing the evidence pro and con, the answer involves a considerable degree of

¹Will, Geo. F., and Hyde, Geo. E. Corn among the Indians of the upper Missouri. 1917. (Page 117.)