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Daily Living in a New Land

When we think of the food, clothing, and medicine of the early settlers, we think of the Wisconsin woman, for it was she who "manufactured" most of it. From her body came the children and from her heart, mind, and hands came the food, clothing, nursing, and medicine to sustain the entire family. If she remained healthy, optimistic, and was lucky, all prospered. If she became lonely, depressed, ill or had poor judgement to die, her family usually suffered in ways beyond imagining.

The food of the settlers bore much similarity to that of the Indians. Indians ate most wild life except dogfish, mink, otter, eel, weasel, and gophers. Wild rice and maze were important grains as were acorns and other nuts, often made into breads. Fruit was eaten as found - wild grapes, blackberries, blueberries, wild plums, etc. Indian vegetables were squash, potatoes, beans, peas, melons, cucumbers, watermelon, pumpkins, water lily roots, squash blossoms, and corn silk. Indians often drank cranberry juice and wintergreen tea. Interestingly, little or no salt flavored their food and apples were absent. Honey and maple sugar were used whenever available.

Indians cooked over open fires. Large meats were barbecued, roasted, or boiled. Smaller pieces were economically used in soups and stews. Cooking stones were heated and dropped into clay pots and animal stomachs to make the stews. Later, the Indians traded with the white settlers for iron cookware. The early settlers foraged for food like their Indian neighbors. The intense physical labor inherent in being a settler meant hardy appetites and bellies grateful for whatever could be found to put in them. Typically, the first year, the settlers located fresh water, built a shelter for the family and animals, cleared land, and planted crops. They hunted game and ate whatever food they had brought with them onto their new homeland. Year two, they planted a second crop and vegetable garden and bartered the first year's crop for animals such as poultry, cows, sheep, and pigs. From chickens, ducks, and geese came eggs and meat; from cows' milk, butter and cheese; from sheep, wool and candle tallow; and from pigs, ham, bacon, and lard.
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A poor harvest meant six months of hunger or starvation. A good harvest meant having enough to eat. A great harvest meant having enough to barter for food, tools, and cloth to ease the hardships of settler life. Little money was used in transactions. Instead, crops like corn, butter, eggs, pelts, hides, or feathers were traded for luxuries like white sugar, white flour, salt, coffee, tea, spirits, spices, and tobacco. Some foods could be bought on the frontier - whole carcasses of meat (largely uncleaned), crackers, vinegar, molasses, salt pork, dried legumes, rice, oatmeal, etc. - but settlers rarely could afford to trade for foods they could make themselves. Children were of paramount importance in food production in the kitchen, the field, and the forest. Their free labor was vital to the family’s table. They chopped and hauled wood, brought in water, milked cows, fed chickens, collected eggs, gathered apples, and helped make candles and soap. They also hunted for wild berries, mushrooms, onions, celery, dandelion greens, and leeks. Children walked behind the plows and planted beans and squash between the rows of corn. The settlers ate an Indian dish called succotash, made from corn and beans.

The early homes of the settlers were crude log huts. Cooking was done in huge pots in fireplaces. As cook stoves were introduced, pots got smaller but settlers never had many utensils or much cookware. Many pioneer "casseroles" reflect this. In summer, as much cooking as possible was done outside. This kept the house cooler and the cook’s temper down.

Apple saplings were planted by arriving settlers and became an important source of food. Apples were eaten raw, dried, cooked, as jam butter, sauce, and cider. Maple syrup was another important forest product for flavoring.

Meat was rarely eaten fresh. Butchering was done in early winter. Scraps were made into sausage. Larger pieces of meat were preserved by drying, smoking, pickling, or potting. Dried meat - domestic or wild - was called pemmican. It was dried in sun, wind, or fire and sometimes pounded into a powder. Fish was often prepared in this way. Both were used like modern bouillon cubes, to flavor other dishes, especially grain porridges.

Meat was pickled in sugar, salt peter and salt. Potted meat was pounded into paste, spices added and sealed with melted butter. Often pickled meat was taken out of its brine in the spring and smoked for one week using green hardwood, like oak or hickory. Before the smokehouse could be built, settlers hung meat in the chimney and smoked it over the winter. Foods like cucumbers, onions and melons were preserved in a brine of water, vinegar, salt, and spices.
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Fruits were made into jams and jellies and the jars were sealed with melted mutton fat and a lid of leather or animal bladder to keep out dirt.

When there was an abundance of milk, butter and cheese were made. Fresh milk was put into a stone crock in a cool place for a day or two. The cream rose to the top and was skimmed off and put into a clean churn. The cream was beaten with a stick until pieces of butter separated from the liquid. The liquid or buttermilk was strained from the butter. The butter was washed over and over until the water remained clear. It was then salted, and sometimes a drop of carrot juice was added for color.

To make cheese, the milk was heated to body temperature. Rennet from the inner lining of a calf’s stomach was added. In about thirty minutes the milk turned into curds like jelly. The remaining liquid was whey. This was drained from the curds and fed to the animals. The curds were cut into small pieces and heated again. Salt was added and the mixture was packed into a cheese press where the curd was formed into a hard round cheese. This was stored in a dark room and rubbed regularly with butter. The longer it was stored the stronger the taste.

Root vegetables like potatoes, turnips, carrots, etc. were kept in root cellars under the house or dug into the side of a hill below the frost line. Eggs were also stored here in summer, coated with fat or melted wax and packed in ashes, sawdust, or straw.

Some settlers had springhouses and ice houses for cool storage. The springhouse was a shed over a cold running spring. Crock of butter and cream were put directly into the water. Sometimes the well was used for this purpose. Ice houses were built half above and half below the ground with good drainage. Ice was cut in winter and packed in sawdust; this insulation kept it frozen throughout most of the summer.

Early food production was an immense chore beyond our modern imaginations. Most jobs during harvest had to be done quickly or the crop was lost. Families needed help beyond their own resources and to address this, they invented the work party or "bee". Early settlers joined together to harvest crops, prepare food, build shelters, make clothing and bedding, or for any necessity that could not be done by one family alone. Harvest work was hard but "bees" were generally viewed as fun. You came as invited guest and were expected to bring your entire family, your own eating utensils, tools, and animals. The host family organized the work to be done, cooked the feast for all in attendance and often
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supplied music for the party that followed. There were corn-husking "bees", threshing parties, maple-sugaring-off parties, apple bees, taffy pulls, barn raising, and quilting bees.

Food played at least two important roles in the settlers' lives, besides basic nutrition. First, it was a symbol of Christian behavior to offer a meal to a traveler at your door. In a time when settlers were few and far between and there were few public houses where food and shelter could be bought, the settler had to have enough for the unexpected guest. Second, for many European immigrants, food was an important link to homeland and loved ones they would never see again. Culinary traditions helped ease homesickness, especially during the holidays. The following menu is as much about memories as it is about eating:

- Irish soda bread
- Dandelion greens salad (from the Indians)
- French pea soup
- German cod and potatoes
- Ukrainian cabbage rolls
- Dutch apple pudding
- English plum pudding
- Johnny cake & baked beans

While settlers tried to eat well at Christmas, most meals were meager and unbalanced by today's standards. Their main meal was dinner, served at noon; supper was the evening meal and consisted of cold remains from noon.

While the Wisconsin wilderness was not on the cutting edge of fashion, women tried to follow trends back East and in Europe. Many settler women used basic pattern books from which they expertly altered patterns to fit each member of the family. Most settlers had but two sets of clothes. Aprons were important. Clothing was very durable, in part because it was not laundered as often as today. It was altered, patched, and worn until it fell apart. Scraps of new and used fabric went into the scrap bag for quilts and clothing repairs. Nothing was thrown away. The frontiersman wore anything he could make or find to keep himself modest and/or warm.

The clothing of some settlers was made from the hides of animals with the fur left on for warmth or from the tanned hides, i.e. leather. To tan leather the skins were stretched out to dry in the sun. They were soaked in a solution of hemlock
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and oak bark for a few weeks until the flesh and hair came off. The raw hide was then pounded with sticks and kneaded by hand for a soft texture.

Sheep were an important source of clothing, providing both wool and linsey-woolsey, a combination of linen and wool. First, the animals were washed in a creek with a tobacco solution to kill the bugs in their wool. Then they were sheared and the wool was greased, rolled up and carded to untangle the fibers. Carded fibers were spun into yarn, the yarn wound into skeins and the skeins dipped into hot dye. Red color came from mader, waxwood, onion skins, and horseradish leaves. Yellow came from goldenrod flowers, brown from walnut husks or butternut bark, but blue had to be purchased. It came from the West Indies, hence the name, indigo. Dyed skeins were ready to be knitted or woven on a loom. Woven cloth was soaked in a soap solution and then "fulled". In this process the wet cloth was pulled and pushed into shape to make it thick and soft. Finally, the finished cloth was ready to be cut and sewed by hand into clothing.

Linen was made from a plant called flax. Flax was ripe in July and pulled up by the roots. Seeds were combed out with a ripple. The plant was then soaked in water and dried. Bundles of stalks were pounded with a paddle-like "brake". The hard part of the flax broke off, the good silky thread was separated from the tougher fibers on a brush of nails called a hackle. The fine fibers were spun into linen threads, dyed and woven into fabric in a process like the wool.

Cotton was a luxury. The cloth had to be purchased because it could not be grown locally. It was very soft, not durable and caught fire easily.

Clothing of the early settlers was usually of rough, homemade cloth fashioned very differently from garments worn in the cities. On the occasion that silk, velvet, and soft cottons could be had, they were welcome reminders of the civilized world that the settlers had left behind.

The medicine of the settlers owes much to the Indians. For example, the Chippewa of the Great Lakes used 56 plants which are now part of modern pharmacopeia.

*The Indians taught the settlers how to treat fevers, intestinal worms, dysentery, and other disorders of the stomach and intestines. They discovered that chewing the inside bark of the willow tree made their pains less severe. Today, our aspirin is made from this substance.*

*The bark of the slippery elm tree, an Indian discovery, is still used in medicines made for relief of stomach upset.*
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Roots from yellow water lilies, after being dried and powdered, were used as poultries for cuts and bruises. The root of a white flower known as blood root, was chewed by savages as a relief for indigestion. Furry leaves of the great mullein were pounded and dried, preparatory for use in soothing respiratory disorders. Inner bark from a slippery elm tree was used to draw pus from a wound. A pike-fish tooth was used by Indians in pricking the skin and then working into the blood-stream some medicine of their own making. This proved that an uncivilized race was able in its own inherent way to develop many benefits in the art of healing.

A bitter calcium, made from a rare Wisconsin plant called jack-in-the-pulpit, was a relief for sore eyes; the best treatment for swollen eyelids was a medicine made from the roots of the large flowered trillium - a north woods beauty in spring. This same flower became useful as a tonic for women. Finally it was a modern antiseptic for use in obstetrical care. Leaves from skunk cabbage, too, were fitted into our Indian's medical scheme being used for poultries.

While the Indians had an impressive knowledge of cures, they did not look upon medicine as science. It was an art, performed in four acts: First there was the prayer, then a song, then an act of magic to make the illness go away, and finally, a fetish presentation. The fetish was an object such as a stone or feather where the evil spirit of illness could reside, outside the patient's body.

If Indian medicine sounds primitive, pioneer medicine was not much better. It was one part common sense, one part pure nonsense and one part dangerous superstition. For example:

For a chest cold, mix together goose grease and turpentine; rub a large amount of it onto the patient's chest. For whooping cough, the father of the family should place the head of the sick child into a hole in a meadow for a few minutes at dusk. No other family member should be present. To ward off diphtheria, wear red flannel and remove the dead through the windows in the middle of the night. To treat rheumatism, rub in goose grease, bear grease, or skunk oil; and avoid salt pork. Red thread around the neck will ward off mumps. Induce childbirth with a puff of snuff. Heal cuts with a mixture of coal oil, cobwebs, and urine. For snakebite, drink plenty of whiskey.

Pioneer medicine came in two forms: patent and herbal. Patent medicines were usually billed as cure-alls, made from secret formulas, contained 35% alcohol and were dangerous. Some herbal remedies worked and are used today, but many other followed the Doctrine of Signatures. In this doctrine, plants
were supposed to cure that part of the body which they resembled. For example, poppy seedheads look a little like the human skull and were supposed to cure diseases of the head; walnuts were used for the brain; rose petals for the blood; almonds for the eyes and so on.

Children most often suffered from mumps, measles, chicken pox, scarlet fever, whooping cough, poliomyelitis, and diphtheria. Many got cholera, typhus, typhoid fever, small pox, and tuberculosis.

And where was the doctor while the settler was suffering?

Physicians were few and far between at the start of western settlement. Hence the first settlers, particularly those in the isolated farming districts had to depend largely upon their own personal knowledge, abilities, and resources when sick or injured.

As a rule, pioneers at large were wise in the lore of herbs, brews, and ointments, meeting ordinary situations and emergencies with much skill and success.

Minor forms of surgery were resorted to by them, while extractions of teeth by farm forceps generally was common. Necessity was the mother of invention.

Many professions led naturally to "doctoring": minister, school teacher, butcher, apothecary, and innkeeper. A medical education was most often experience and apprenticeship.

If we examine the four medical treatments used by doctors for all illness, we can understand why the mid-1800's have been called the age of pills and powders, not the age of medical practice. The four treatments were bleeding, plasters and poultices, blistering, and amputation.

Bleeding or phlebotomy was done to rid the body of "bad blood" and restore the balance of body fluids. It was accomplished in one of three ways: Leeches could be put on a vein; a knife or lancet could pierce a vein; or a heated cup could be inverted over an incision creating a vacuum to draw blood. Patients were bled until they fainted. Nothing was ever sterilized. Plasters were a paste applied to the chest or back for colds or internal pain. For example, bronchial congestion might be treated with a plaster of warm manure, chopped onions, or mashed potatoes. Poultices were a concoction of bread and milk placed on cuts, bites, wounds, and boils.
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Blistering was burning the body with acid or a hot poker. The "medical" theory was that the body could contain only one illness at a time. Burns were supposed to replace fevers, arthritis, cholera, etc. The new pain did sometimes take the patient's mind off his present suffering.

Amputation was commonly used for broken limbs; it was the only remedy for compound fractures. The patient was intoxicated, the limb sawed off, the veins and arteries cauterized, and hot tar applied to seal the limb. Even as the territory grew and more doctors came, poor transportation and communication made medical practice difficult. "If a doctor in the French settlement at Green Bay wished to serve a sick member of the Grignon family at Kaukauna, he had to travel either by horseback or canoe." Medical supplies, such as they were, came from Chicago and overland that took several weeks if the weather was good.

By 1848, the State Medical Society had been formed, indicating that the medical profession was keeping pace with the settlement of the Territory. They urged statehood and petitioned the U.S. Congress to enact a pure drug law to help eliminate quackery. Legitimate drugs sold by doctors included quinine, cough mixture, calomel, ipecac, morphine, paregoric, etc.

Daily living in a new land was indeed difficult.

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Charlotte H. Newby