

PAWNEE CORN

NEW HOPE FOR OLD CROPS

Photos and text by Ken Bouc

Life, as the Pawnee tribe knew it in Nebraska, revolved around their corn. On a practical level, it was their staple food, but corn was so revered that it was assigned supernatural qualities as well. Leaders of Pawnee war parties wore an ear of sacred corn on their left shoulder as a guarantee of safety and success, and two ears of this holy “mother corn” resided in Pawnee ceremonial bundles to symbolize germination – the fundamental element of creation – and the origin of the Pawnee people.

When the Pawnee were forced to leave Nebraska in the mid-1870s, they took with them the seeds for their crops – beans, squash, watermelons and pumpkins, plus a dozen or more varieties of corn.

The northern varieties of traditional corn that the Pawnee took with them to Oklahoma, however, were difficult to

grow in the area’s heat and different soil, and other strains eventually had to be planted in their place. North American tribes raised four basic types of corn: flour, dent, flint and popcorn. Plains tribes such as the Pawnee ate mostly flour corn, both after it matured and in its milk stage as “sweet” corn. Modern corn was derived from native American flint corn, however, and is significantly different from the many varieties of flour corn that Plains tribes found so palatable and nutritious.

Today, the Pawnee again see value in their traditional varieties of corn, and from its Oklahoma reservation the Pawnee Nation is looking to Nebraska for help in recovering its original strains of corn and other ancestral crops.

“We were a healthy, thriving tribe once upon a time, but today a high percentage of our tribal members have diabetes and other health problems. We need to look at what made us healthy then and what isn’t working for us now,” said Deb Echo-Hawk, Pawnee Nation education and training director, director of admissions at Pawnee Nation College and a leader in Pawnee efforts to restore native crops. “Today, very few Pawnee do gardening and that’s what we’re looking at – encouraging gardening to bring in nutritious food for our tribal members.”

Echo-Hawk and a body of Pawnee elders known as the Culture Committee launched the Pawnee Seeds Preservation Project in 1997 to build a seed base of traditional crops that some day would provide their people with the same healthy diet that had nurtured their ancestors. After several years without much luck building their seed base, Ronnie O’Brien of Shelton



Dark spots in the center of its kernels sprout “wings,” giving eagle corn its name.

entered the picture. O’Brien, director of educational programs at The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument near Kearney, learned of the project by accident when she called the Pawnee Nation in the fall of 2003 looking for Pawnee seed for use in the archway’s education programs. Telling O’Brien they could not spare any seeds, Echo-Hawk described their recent difficulties in raising traditional crops in Oklahoma. That’s when O’Brien, herself a gardener, suggested that since Pawnee crops originated in Nebraska, they might do better in their native climate and soil.

The idea struck a chord with Echo-Hawk. Her family had preserved one of

the two native varieties of corn still in Pawnee hands, called “eagle corn” because of a distinctive dark spot on each pearly white kernel that, as the corn matures, expands into a purple shape often resembling a flying eagle.

Echo-Hawk and her family had tried in 1998 to raise enough eagle corn to renew the seed at the reservation without success. The handful of eagle corn remaining was older seed from the early 1980s, when the family lived in Colorado and Deb had raised it with her brother, Walter. Recovering Pawnee crops by jumpstarting the seed base in Nebraska, as O’Brien proposed, made sense to them, considering their experience with eagle corn.

Deb Echo-Hawk agreed to look for more seeds if O’Brien and her small circle of expert gardeners would plant and raise them. As a result, the Culture Committee issued a call to the Pawnee Nation through its newsletter, asking tribal members to come forward with any seeds they had for the Nebraska effort.

Much of the tribe’s seed had been lost over the years to insects, mice, mold or to fires and storms that had destroyed outbuildings where it was stored, but luckily some Pawnee families had seed of traditional crops still remaining. In 2004, Deb Echo-Hawk sent nearly half of her family’s remaining eagle corn to O’Brien and her friends to plant in

Platte Valley soil. She also sent Pawnee watermelon seeds and kernels of yellow flint corn from Pawnee elder Henry StoneRoad’s ceremonial bundle, one of the few remaining among the Pawnee. StoneRoad and those before him had planted the seeds periodically to renew them, following Pawnee tradition.

Another seed trove, preserved by the Spotted Horsechief family and provided by Adrian Spotted Horsechief, later supplied kernels of blue-speckled flour corn, another original Pawnee strain. It has been difficult to grow, and is O’Brien’s challenge for 2007.

As an interpreter of Nebraska history at the Archway Monument, O’Brien knew the story of the Pawnee in



Eagle corn was renewed in 2005 when Ronnie O’Brien planted the last 25 kernels in the Echo-Hawk family’s possession.



Five-year-old Skidi Star LeadingFox found the watermelons much more exciting than the corn she had looked at the day before, much to the amusement of her mother, Karla KnifeChief, and Ronnie O'Brien, right.

Nebraska and their agricultural techniques. Her first effort began in May 2004, with 20 precious kernels of the Echo-Hawks' eagle corn and 12 watermelon seeds from the StoneRoad bundle. After soaking the seeds for 24 hours, in Pawnee tradition she planted an even-numbered four hills, placing five kernels of eagle corn and three watermelon seeds in each hill. Meanwhile, her sister, Tina Smith of St. Libory, sprouted 11 of the 14 watermelon seeds she planted.

"Tina watered hers quite a bit, but I figured the old-time Pawnee would have been a couple hundred miles away on the summer buffalo hunt and couldn't have done that, so I didn't either and mine turned out better than the ones that were watered," she said.

The first melon to ripen in O'Brien's garden was harvested in early September and found to be "very, very tasty." In all she raised seven melons, the two largest weighing 24 and 32 pounds, and had no trouble finding volunteers to eat them so that their seeds, 400 to 600 per melon, could be harvested.

The yellow flint corn from the StoneRoad bundle had been entrusted to another Kearney area gardener that year who had almost 100 percent germination and raised 23 plants with an average of three ears per stalk, so O'Brien sent a hefty packet of

watermelon seeds and flint corn to the Pawnee Nation seed bank that fall. Her 2004 eagle corn crop, however, did not fare so well – an unusually cold, wet spring rotted all of the eagle corn kernels in the ground.

The following year, less confident in nature and tradition, O'Brien entrusted the last 25 kernels of the Echo-Hawk's eagle corn to Myron Fougeron, a retired University of Nebraska-Kearney biology teacher and one of the gardeners raising Pawnee crops. He wrapped the kernels in moistened paper towels, what gardeners call "rag dolls," and sprouted all but one of the seeds in his greenhouse. Fougeron used this technique to sprout most of the Pawnee corn sent to Kearney.

O'Brien transferred the sprouts to her garden in late-May. Two stalks succumbed to a blight, but the remaining 22 were raised to maturity with a little watering and fertilizing to bring the crop through a couple of rough spells, "something the Pawnee wouldn't have done in the old days," she said.

Other Kearney gardeners raised Pawnee blue corn, Pawnee red-and-white striped corn and more Pawnee yellow flint corn that year, and in 2006, O'Brien raised more Pawnee watermelons while others grew white flour corn.

In early September 2006, Echo-Hawk, accompanied by Karla KnifeChief and

Karla's five-year-old daughter, Skidi Star LeadingFox, traveled to Kearney to meet the gardeners and see their Pawnee crops. KnifeChief, administrative assistant with the Pawnee Nation Housing Authority, is also active in promoting gardening among the Pawnee. She co-authored the youth gardening program and was a summer gardening instructor.

"I like what you've done with our



Red-and-white striped flour corn is one of six Pawnee varieties raised in Kearney.

land," KnifeChief quipped at a garden club reception held at the archway upon the visitors' arrival. She and Echo-Hawk had admired the seemingly endless rows of corn as they traveled up the Platte Valley. They spent much of the next day with O'Brien, visiting various stands of Pawnee corn and other crops around Kearney, and a few Pawnee-related points of interest.

After completing their rounds in the Kearney area, O'Brien took them on a quick jaunt through east-central Nebraska before they left for Oklahoma. It included a stop in Genoa, site of the last Pawnee villages and Pawnee agency in Nebraska, with a visit to a private museum featuring area Pawnee artifacts and a tour of the Genoa Indian School, built after the Pawnee tribe departed and later restored as a historic site.

Echo-Hawk and KnifeChief were interested in the work of Jerry and Nancy Carlson of Genoa, who raise several varieties of Pawnee corn on their nearby Kitkehahki Hills Farm and contributed three varieties to the Pawnee seed bank. The Carlsons were traveling outside of Nebraska at the time, but Phil Swantek, president of the Genoa Indian School Foundation, showed them some of the corn the Carlsons were growing on his property and just off the main street in downtown Genoa. They also visited Pahuk, a promontory overlooking the Platte River near Cedar Bluffs that was one of the most sacred places in Pawnee country during the tribe's days in Nebraska.

Before they left, KnifeChief and Echo-Hawk talked about their efforts to encourage gardening and expand the Pawnee Seeds Preservation Project. They and several others at the reservation started a garden "for the little ones" in front of the Pawnee Language Immersion School. They had good topsoil hauled in, then helped the children plant Pawnee watermelons, yellow flour corn, spotted-like-a-horse bush beans and Arikara squash.

KnifeChief's gardening education project was originally meant for youths 14 and older, but soon the little kids, three- and four-year-olds from the Pawnee language school, came over and joined them in pulling weeds and helping however they could.

"Then the elders started coming by when we were out there mornings and

evenings working while it was cool ... to pray over our garden while it was growing or saying something like 'wish I could go out there with you guys, but, boy, my knees...'. So I think, in Karla's dream garden, she's going to build an arbor just for the elders," Echo-Hawk said.

At the beginning of the class, KnifeChief learned that not a single teen in the program had ever set foot in a garden. By summer's end, however, a number of them were asking about finding a place where their family could raise gardens. "That's encouraging," she said.

The gardening and seed projects, however, still face fundamental limitations – soil and water. Much of the soil around the reservation is hard and claylike, hostile to gardens and gardeners, alike. The Pawnee are involved in a lot of construction, so they can obtain topsoil removed from building sites and haul it to potential garden areas, but that can be troublesome and expensive. The other factor is the Oklahoma heat, which makes water absolutely essential. "We can raise these crops in Oklahoma, but bringing the topsoil and plenty of water together is all important," Echo-Hawk said.

Things are looking up for the seed bank, however. For 2007 and beyond, the Culture Committee received tribal approval to raise crops for seed on a suitable plot of tribal reserve land. The tribe has its own water supply available for the project, which will make seed production feasible. The site is planted with blue flour corn this year.

But the seed bank still has a ways to go – the Pawnee are not yet eating their crops. For the most part they are still raising them for seed, according to Echo-Hawk.

"When the seed bank gets seeds from Ronnie, we keep them at the library and check them out like you'd check



Myron Fougeron shows Deb Echo-Hawk the Pawnee white flour corn he raised in his garden on the outskirts of Kearney in 2006.

out books. At the end of the growing season, the gardeners check in with their seeds. That's how the seed bank grows," Echo Hawk said.

The brightest spot to date is the now abundant supply of Pawnee watermelon seeds that the tribe has.

"We had a wonderful time at Heritage Days. It was funny, because our emcee, the man that grew the blue corn, Dwayne Pratt, made sure everybody there kept all their seeds and after they had eaten their watermelon, we went around and collected them," Echo-Hawk said. Occasions like that, where tribal members can enjoy a sample of their crops, helps maintain interest in the gardening and seed bank projects, she said.

According to Echo-Hawk, the Pawnee seed bank wouldn't exist without the Nebraska gardeners. "If we'd had another year of blighted corn, it wouldn't have been possible," she said. "If Ronnie O'Brien came to the reservation, she would find that everyone here knows her name. As for us, Karla and I call her our 'Corn Sister.'" ■