

Spring Harvesting and Preserving

Johnny Tailbone

My mom usually tells us stories when she's sewing or working on cutting meat or fish for the drying rack. She was telling us about harvesting meat during the spring time when she was young, living with her aunt and uncle at Fabre lake. Her mom died when she was really young so she said she barely remembers her. She had two older sisters, one was sent to residential school and she never saw her again and the other married an older guy and she too passed on. Her father died during the great flu epidemic. She grew up living with her aunt and uncle and later on after her aunt passed on, her and the uncle lived with the son Germaine Tatsia and his wife. She said she learned all the traditional skills from her aunt and Liza, Germaine's wife. When the aunt was still alive they were harvesting caribou during the caribou migration at Faber lake.

The men hunted and brought the caribou meat back with the dog teams and it was a real busy for everyone. There is no end to work: every day meat is cut, even the bone is taken out of the ribs and the short end cut out with a knife for the drying rack and hung to dry and smoked with willows that are still green and the dry one with red inside. The men help with turning and hanging the cut up meat on the rack for drying. The meat is preserved for a long time using willows for flavouring the meat. The weather is getting warmer and the flies are not out yet so it was good for drying meat. The men also hunt for beaver and muskrats and we help with cleaning the skins before the skins are stretched for drying. Nothing is wasted even the ankle bone is saved for tools for scrapping the hides. The sinew from the backstrap is also dried to used as thread for sewing hides. The caribou head is also deboned and the meat is also hung to dry. The brain and the enzyme is extracted out of the skull and the back bones. It is then spread on cut out clothes and dried for using as tanning agents on hides. Whatever is left over is given to the dog so everything it used.

The hair on the hide is first cut off with the knives and the hides are separated. The ones with warbles are set aside for making babiche for personal use or for trading for goods. The good hide with less warbles is used for clothing and moccasins and mittens. After the hair is cut off they used the ankle bone split in half as a tool for scraping the hides on both side. The ankle hide is cut out right to the hoof part and also used after it is stretched and tanned for moccasins . When it comes to the bigger caribou hides, with the hair on them, men stretched and dried them for using as a rug or sleeping on during the cold winter months.

When all the meat is dried and tied together, they are hung to air out as sometimes they get over smoked. Now the bone crushing begins to extract all the grease out of the bones. They used a good surface rock and smashed up all the bones that have been collected and stored in the bags that they keep for saving. The smashed up bone is boiled in a big pail most of the day for grease extracting. The liquid evaporates from boiling and snow from the shaded area is collected and added to the pail as snow water is preferred for good harvesting of bone grease. Once the extracting process is completed they use a ladle or a big spoon to scoop out the grease into a stomach part from the caribou. Once the grease becomes solidified the stomach bag is sewn together for it to stay fresh and not lose its tasty flavour.

While the bones were boiling we simi cooked some dried meat to make pound meat to go with the bone grease a delicacy that elders love. We used a short handle axe and used the butt end and pound the dried meat against the rock until it all soft and fluffy like. They make bags for the pound out of the caribou hide with the hair cut off and the upper part for the closing is white or tan hide with a cut out strip or lace for closing the bag. All this work is preparing for a trip to Rae for the summer and meat will be shared with elders and relatives.

My mom said there's so much dried meat and we left some behind for when we returned in the fall. My aunt said that we have to find an island with muskeg and with lots of moss and build a small wigwam and pull up the moss until the permafrost is visible and placed some dried moss as a flooring and put the packed dried meat in there and covered it with lots of moss for protection from the heat and animals. She said after the summer is over we came back in the fall and the packed dried meat was just the way we left it, still good.

She was telling us this story when we were living at the end of Gameti and lots of caribou were migrating to the west. My sister mentioned that the villagers across must be making lots of dried meat, while we were having some fresh caribou meat given to us by uncle Paul Rabesca. My mom said harvesting caribou is lots of work and they will be fattened up during the spring migration. That's what started the story. Just out of curiosity I asked my mom about the thundering noises that we heard when living below the mountains during the summer. She said it's a big spiritual being living in the mountain called Goojee or Wayadee in Tlicho. I asked how she knew that and she said her Aunt Madeline Rabesca mentioned it in a story one time. Years later I read in the paper about her aunt's interview about how she acquired her gift the lion's medicine power and finally knew what my mom meant when she said Goojee, meaning the lion. Just sharing some of my mom's stories about all the hard work women do.

Men even make dried meat too on the trips to the barren land during the fall hunts long ago. Alphonse Quitte was telling my dad a story about how his dad old David Quitte tanned a moose hide one winter after their mom passed on when living on Hardisty lake and make them all moccasins and mitts . He used the old moccasins and mittens as pattern and just traced them and it was made for warmth even though it had no decorative things like bead or silk on them. Just sharing stories about life back then and it was harsh but the people were happy with whatever the land provided.

Johnny Tailbone was born on the trapline at Hislop Lake 1953. He and his family lived in tents until they built log houses in Rae lakes in 1965. From 1958 until 1962 he was sent to residential school in Fort Smith. In 1963 he went to Fort Simpson for residential school. His dad, uncle and older brother taught him trapping and hunting living off the land.