

WILD OR INDIAN RICE.

BY

ALBERT B. REAGAN.

Along the swampy borders of streams and in the shallow water of the numerous small lakes throughout the Great Lake region and on westward through Minnesota to the Red River valley in that state, grows the water oats or Indian rice, *Zizania aquatica* L. This plant belongs to the grass family. It is an annual; flowers monoecious; the staminate and pistillate both 1-flowered spikelets in the same panicle. Glumes 2, subtended by a small cartilaginous ring, herbaceous-membranaceous, convex, awnless in the sterile, the lower one tipped with a straight awn in the fertile spikelets. Palea none. Stamens 6. Stigmas pencil-form. A large reed-like water-grass. Spikelets jointed upon the club-shaped pedicels, very deciduous. Culms 3 to 9 feet high; leaves flat, 2 to 3 feet long (and lie flat on the water when they first emerge; later they stand erect and finally decline at the tips), linear lanceolate; lower branches are of the ample pyramidal; panicle staminate, spreading; the upper erect, pistillate; lower glumes long awned, rough; styles distinct; grain linear, slender, 6" long.

I became acquainted with this plant at Nett Lake, Minnesota, where I had charge of the Bois Fort Indian Reservation as Superintendent and Special Disbursing Agent from 1909 to 1914. Nett Lake, the lake that bears that name, covers three-fourths of a township in area and is the shape of a great lobster's paw with the claws pointing eastward, the major claw being the northern member. It is very shallow, the greater part being less than four feet in depth. In this the wild rice grows in such quantities that the lake looks like a great barley field.

The rice does not ripen all at once, so can not be cut like a barley field. But as the grains drop from the stalk very easily when ripe, it can be pounded off into a canoe with a stick and the green still left to ripen.

The rice begins to ripen in the latter part of August. As soon as it begins to ripen, the Indians have a secret ceremony and much powowing. Then the chief medicine man gives permission for the Indians to go out and gather rice.

With canoes, the Indians go among the rice and beat the heads over the canoe with short clubs. This they keep up till they have a canoe full of rice. They then go to the village with it.

At the village the rice, which has just passed the milk stage when gathered, is parched and scorched in a large iron kettle inclined over the fire so that a squaw can stir the rice the while to keep it from burning. By this scorching process the hulls are burned from the kernels, or are so dried and charred that they can be loosened and removed by the next process.

As soon as the scorched rice is removed from the kettle and is cold enough to handle, it is placed in a cylindrical hole in the ground that has been lined with cement or marl from the lake. Then the Indian man of the house gets into this hole and tramps the hulls off with his bare feet. (Some people say they wash their feet—after they get through the tramping.)

After the tramping is completed, the chaff, dust, and ashes are winnowed from the rice by the women. The product is then sacked and is ready for sale as breakfast food. It sold for not less than ten cents a pound before the war at the village; and as high as twenty-five cents per pound in the cities.

This rice is prepared and baked as gem cakes. It is also used to stuff ducks and other fowls when preparing them for dinners. A man in Salt Lake City sent all the way to Minnesota for wild rice for dressing for ducks for his Thanksgiving dinner.

In preparing it as breakfast food, it is prepared and cooked the same as white rice and can be cooked in as many different ways. The preferable way, however, is to take a cupful of the rice and pour a cupful of boiling water on it at bedtime and then cover it up so as to keep the steam in and let it set till morning. Then put it on the stove and evaporate the remaining water. It is then "puffed-rice" and is delicious with sugar and cream.

"The Ojibwa (Chippewa) sometimes boil the excrements of the rabbit with rice 'to season it' and are said to esteem it as a luxury. To make the dish still more palatable, and one of the highest epicurean dishes, they occasionally take a partridge, pick off the feathers, and without any further dressing except pounding it to the constituency of jelly, throw it into the rice, and boil it in that condition." (Winchell, *Aborigines of Minnesota*, p. 595.)