Beatrice Taylor The Rhythm of Ricing

Our People have many seasonal activities that tie us to our culture and our traditions.  After the winter ended, we would move from our homes and gather medicines in the spring.  In the summertime, there were the berry picking camps.  And in the fall, there were the rice camps.

There is nothing I like better than to go out ricing.  To gather rice in the traditional manner, two people usually go out in a canoe.  One person, called the poler, uses a long pole to push the canoe forward.  The other person uses heavy sticks to sweep the wild rice stalks over the canoe and knock the rice grains into the bottom of the boat.

It’s fun, and it’s nice to see that rice fall in the boat and build up and up and up.  It gives you a good feeling inside to know that you’ve got your winter’s food, and you’ve even got some to give away.

It doesn’t take long to get the hang of ricing, either.  When I was really young, my mother and stepfather didn’t take us out ricing.  But right after I got married, my husband and I started going out.  And I still always go out.  My grandchildren know – Gramma always goes ricing.

I’m not too good on the high rice anymore.  But once I get into a good patch of rice that’s grown to just above my head, I get a steady swing going.  You get that rhythm after a while and it just comes naturally.

I imagine it’s hard for the poler.  At the end of a day, you’re going to feel it.  I think the most I ever put in was four hours straight, and I felt it.

Then after you take a break, have some water, and wipe the sweat off, you can start cleaning the rice.  You take any tops or leaves off and push the rice to the front of the boat.  That’s nice as the pile gets bigger and bigger.

Then it’s time to parch the rice over a fire and fan it.  Only the men or boys can tramp on the rice.  They put it in a bucket and put on some clean moccasins and tramp on it awhile. That separates the rice grains from their husks.  When you do that, you learn how hard it is to process that rice!

Wild rice harvested in this way is nothing like commercially grown rice.  Genuine wild rice has got that smoked flavor.

Rice is a main staple of the Anishinaabe.  Some people use it in pancakes. Some people like it cooked with raisins.  I remember when we used to go to the powwows and had rice with raisins.  It was good.  But I always prepare my rice with some kind of meat – maybe venison, duck, pheasant, partridge or rabbit.

I am older now, and I only go out ricing a couple days a year.  But I still give some rice as gifts at Christmas and to my friends who like rice.  It makes me feel good when I can give.