

NEARBY HISTORY: Catawba hunting methods

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Anthropologist studied reservation, various weapons and concluded people followed history of elders, who were hunters, not agriculturalists

The Catawba Indians were still using bows and arrows, blowguns and traps as constructed and employed by their ancestors when Frank Speck, an anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania, visited them in 1913.

Over the years, Speck returned to the reservation during vacations. In the 1940s, Speck published his notes on the "procuring methods" of the Catawba hunters and fishermen.

Speck, writing of the paucity of animal food resources, stated that there were only 10 mammal varieties, three birds and 13 forms of water life available to the Catawbas. Still, the Catawbas were able to show Speck five weapons for killing warm-blooded animals, five kinds of traps and six ways to catch fish. From this, Speck concluded that the Catawbas were basically a hunting people, not agriculturalists.

Speck wrote, "Until thirty years ago Catawba men went

about the region as vagrant archers shooting for bets, at coins or similar targets, to earn money."

The bows were made from locust wood and were 4 to 5 feet long. The arrows were made of cane and wood, either hickory or sourwood. The points were of sharpened cane or tin, suitable for killing small game. There were no large animals left to require quartz or flint arrowheads, and the poverty-stricken Catawbas rarely had sufficient money to buy guns or ammunition.

Speck thought the arrow's feathering peculiar and interesting. A single feather of a hawk or swift was used for the rudder and the "entire quill is bound unsplit to the shaft, lying within one of the longitudinal grooves that run between the nodules of the young cane shoots chosen for arrow making." The point was hardened by pushing it into hot ashes. Speck made drawings to illustrate the final product.

Speck investigated arrow poi-



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soning and was told by Margaret Brown, a Catawba who died in 1922 at age 85, that the Catawbas took venom from the "maxillary glands of the venomous crocodyls inhabiting the bottom lands of the Catawba River, and allowed the liquid to permeate meat."

According to tradition, the poisoned meat and quartz points were stored together in small clay pots, 3 to 4 inches in diameter. Several 18th-century literary sources refer to the Catawba use of arrows dipped in rattlesnake venom.

The crossbow was used as a toy by boys and probably had been a hunting tool, but Speck could find no one competent with it.

From memories of his boyhood, Chief Sam Blue described the throwing club made of green hickory stock and its use by John Brown, and Thomas, Peter and Epps Harris. Four or five hunters accompanied by dogs would chase the rabbits over burned brush. Each carried three clubs to throw at the hemmed-in rabbits. Speck thought the Catawbas had picked up this hunting method from Virginia Indians.

The Cherokees did not use this method.

The blowgun was frequently used to kill small game and birds. A cane tube, 5 or 6 feet long, was used with 8- to 10-inch darts that were constructed from oak, pine or cedar trimmed to a sharp point. On the "piston end" of the dart, there was a wadding made of soft feathers or down.

"Bird brushing" was quite simple. A group went out at night, armed with a pine torch and several small tree branches. When the bird, blinded by the light, attempted to escape, it was beaten down by the brushes. At the end of the evening, the birds were thrown into a pile. On a "good night" there might be 100 birds. The birds were placed in a single pile for the chief or the hunt organizer to determine how they would be distributed.

Speck went on one of the bird brush hunts. When it was over, the handful of birds were given to elderly Sally Brown, whose "only source of food consisted extensively of birds gotten in this way, and by her grandchildren on their way to and from school, armed with the almost universal small boy's weapon, the sling-shot."

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