

Native America on the Eve of Discovery

By Suzanne Strauss Art

SELECTED PASSAGES

Almost no public ceremony took place without the smoking of tobacco. Every tribal council, each call to arms or move toward peace, was opened by smoking a pipe. The pipe bowls were usually made from stone, carved with human or animal figures and polished to a smooth finish. They were attached to wooden stems, which were often as long as two feet. As with the wampum of the Iroquois, the Cherokee believed that when someone rose in a council meeting with a pipe in his hand he would speak only the truth. Whenever two foes sat down to parley, the smoke of the peace pipe was thought to cleanse their hearts and ensure that their accord would last forever. The smoke also carried their message to the realm of the spirits.

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If the patient recovered, he became a member of the False Face Society. His first task was to carve his own mask on a living basswood tree. The tree would pass on to him its power to heal itself. As he carved, he chanted prayers to the spirit of the tree. When at last he cut the mask free, he burned tobacco as an offering to that spirit. Then the tree was cut down by his fellow tribesmen. The carver took the mask to his longhouse, where he continued to shape it, then painted it and added hair. He considered the finished mask a living thing worthy of great respect. He kept it face down on a shelf in his living quarters until he was summoned to join the other masked members of the False Face Society for a ritual dance.

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Most of the leg and loin meat of the buffalo was cut in thin strips and hung on wooden racks to dry in the sun, away from the reach of dogs or roaming wolves. After a few days, the strips hardened into jerky, a dark-colored, leathery product that lasted for a long time. When there was no fresh meat available, the jerky could be softened up by boiling and then served for dinner. Strips of jerky were often pounded together with buffalo fat and bone marrow to make a high-energy snack called pemmican. Since the fat gave the

pemmican a rancid taste, crushed berries were added whenever possible to make it more edible. Portions of this mixture were stuffed into sections of buffalo intestine and wrapped in bags made of calfskin for hunting expeditions. Once the pemmican was gone, a hungry hunter could always eat the intestines and even the bag itself.