

Where the Buffalo Roamed: The Arapaho Diet

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Before the 18th Century, the Arapaho lived northeast of the Missouri River, migrating seasonally as they followed their primary food source: buffalo. Pressured by other tribes, they relocated to the west and south, arriving in present-day Colorado in the early 19th Century. They remained dependent on the buffalo and continued their seasonal migration, with many bands preferring the relatively sheltered Front Range for their winter campsites. The area of northern Boulder County east of the Foothills presented one such campsite area.

Too nomadic to cultivate crops, the Arapaho depended on hunting for meat and foraged for fruits and (limited) vegetables. Hunting of at least small game would have been possible throughout the winter, but if they arrived in present-day Boulder County well after the first frosts, not much foraging would have been possible. They would have instead been required to collect, and then preserve, the non-meat components of their winter diet in the spring and summer as they followed the buffalo across the Eastern Plains.

Buffalo remained the mainstay of the diet, both fresh in the summer (boiled or roasted) and dried or smoked in the winter. The Arapaho both air-dried buffalo to make jerky, and cured it by smoking, sometimes over a slow fire topped with wild buckwheat. Buffalo meat could also be preserved by the making of pemmican, in which finely-pounded dried buffalo was mixed with buffalo fat and/or marrow, and crushed chokecherries (including the pits), either forming cakes for drying or stuffed into skin casings like sausages. And buffalo bones could also be used to prepare "Indian butter" (essentially marrow butter), with this recipe said to predate white contact:

Take joints and bones, particularly those of the lower backs of animals, chop fine, cover with cold water, bring to a boil, and boil slowly. When fat comes to the top, pour cup of cold water into mixture to solidify and remove at once with dipper or ladle. Add small amount of sugar to fat, mix and allow to solidify. Punch hole [in what?] and drain off all liquid. Serve with dry meat or use as dairy butter. The butter is also delicious served with Indian Fry Bread.

Buffalo meat was supplemented by meat (again, either fresh or dried or smoked) from deer, elk, antelope and mountain goat. No doubt, additional hunting could have continued throughout the winter in this area for rabbits, ducks and other game birds. There is a report of the consumption of the sustainable prairie dogs, and another report of the consumption, at least in connection with feasts and ceremonies, of regular old dogs. ("They taste like pork.")

Vegetables may have been limited to wild roots, such as wild carrot, cattail, and Indian breadroot, boiled separately or with buffalo meat. These could have possibly been dug fresh locally if early enough in the fall, or would have otherwise been stored from having been dug earlier on the Eastern Plains. Fruits eaten during the Boulder winter would have been limited to sun-dried berries (chokecherries, service berries, buffalo berries, wild currants).

Unlike their Clovis predecessors' extensive hunting of mastadons, the relatively small number of Arapaho in northeastern Colorado never threatened the enormous supply of buffalo. The Arapaho model is one of obtaining whatever food is available locally when it is available, and then discovering methods of preserving it for sustenance until it again becomes available.

Sources, and for further reading:

- Fowler, *The Arapaho* (1989)
- Hilger, *Arapaho Child Life and Its Cultural Background*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 148 (1952), pp. 175-79 (source of above quoted recipe).