

## Gourds In American History

By Karen Neimeyer

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**I usually rely on Ginger Summit for a concise summary of gourd history. In her book published 2000, Gourd Crafts: From bowls to birdhouses; 20 projects to dye, cut, carve, bead, and woodburn in a weekend, she notes that "gourds have been used for thousands of years by people all over the world as utensils, dishes, containers, storage vessels, and even simple musical instruments. Originally gourds most often were left undecorated and were simply taken for granted in all facets of daily life, much as we use plastic and metal tools and containers in our lives today."**

Gourds began to be embellished with various materials and designs and that has caused

me to wonder: if gourds were our original containers (and they were) and if they were used as our plastic containers are today, do you suppose that in 200 years artists will be painting and etching and adding feathers to our plastic refrigerator containers? Perish the thought! Even the most humble gourd holds, for me, more interest than my plastic ware. Gourd artist Jolee Schlea once said, in a class I took at an IGS show, that one gourd had been on her workbench for more than a year. She was waiting for it to speak to her and help her decide what it would artistically become. I have some gourds in that category right now: their sizes and shapes intrigue me. There is a glimmer of what I might do with them, but it has not yet become clear. I cannot, however, imagine staring at my refrigerator container and asking it what it wants to be!

Charles E. Heiser, Jr., in The Gourd Book (1979) spends more than fifty pages wrestling with the origins of gourds in America and never proves to himself nor the reader whether gourd seeds floated across the ocean or were carried across, by man. His research, however, is extensive, the pictures excellent, the bibliography lengthy, his curiosity addictive, and the book 234 pages long.

Summit and Heiser agree that the gourd has been used by humans throughout the world for a very long time and for a great variety of purposes. The oldest physical evidence of gourds dates from 23,000 to 11,000 B.C., in Peru, from Mexico in 7000-5000 B.C. and in Florida's mastodon dung dated at 11,000 B.C.

Early visitors to North America found the Choctow and Chickasaw Indians used gourd birdhouses to attract colonies of purple martins to their villages for insect control. Native American children, according to legend, were encouraged to make noise and run through planted areas, shaking gourd rattles to frighten off marauding birds. The gourd was probably one of the very first musical instruments, as it was picked up and shaken, and soon accompanied songs and ceremonies, Summit notes in Gourds in Your Garden (1998).

An excellent explanation of the Gourd Dance and of the Gourd Dance Society of America's Plains Indians is found in vol. 5 of The Encyclopedia of North American Indians (1997). Although the gourd, or rattle, is used in the Native American Church services and "is to be held in the right hand, the peyote gourd will not be seen in the dance arena because it is not

considered the appropriate place for it. However, aluminum shakers or rattles are used in the arena." (p. 603) An eloquent chapter "I Am Alive" in The World of the American Indian (1974) describes a 1920 meeting of the Taimpe, or Gourd Dance Society, as the Kiowa dance. Gourds are still made into rattles in 2009, used in Church services, but replaced by metal cans in an Oklahoma dance arena in July 2009.

In her 1996 The Complete Book of Gourd Craft, Summit notes that gourds were used as bird feeders as well as houses and that American settlers felt that eggs lasted longer and were safer from pests if they were kept in a special bushel gourd. Her statement that most intrigues me, however, is that "Of all the known plants, the gourd is the only one experts believe spanned the entire globe in prehistoric times." (p. 6) Samples of oldest known pottery in Mexico imitate the shape of the bottle gourd, and primitive basketry webbing has been found "wrapped around ancient gourds in both Peru and Florida: the webbing served as handles and protective covering and to attach gourd floats to nets for fishing" (p. 7).

Edith Van Allen Murphey in Indian Uses of Native Plants (1958) states that the wild melon, or buffalo gourd *Cucurbita foetidissima*, was used to cure gonorrhea and syphilis. A tea from the same gourd was used to cure bloat and worms in horses. The buffalo gourd was used ceremonially because the plant has both male and female flowers and the part of the gourd used depended on the part of the body needing to be treated: root for the foot, top of the gourd for the head.

Dippers are a very common household use for gourds and have been for generations. Rosemary Dougherty, first IGS president, taught a 1996 class and stated that her goal was a "gourd in every kitchen by 2000". She explained that the gourd's inner lining must be carefully scraped away lest the user have flecks of gourd in his soup. She also explained that a dipper may be cured by repeatedly dipping it in water until water drunk from it no longer tastes bitter or by spraying with acrylic spray. Although various gourds, including a ridged I uffa, have been used as food and drink, in general gourds are considered bitter or tasteless.

Early American uses have indicated that foods and belongings were stored in gourds that were tied with ropes into trees, thus protecting them from animal predators. Native Americans boiled food by dropping hot rocks into gourds filled with liquids. Gourd ladles that are scorched on the bottom indicate that they were used to pour and spread batter on cooking stones. Beer was made by fermenting grains and plants in gourds. "Men and women on several continents chewed betel nut mixed with crushed lime and carried in special gourd containers. Rubbing oils, body dyes, medicine, seeds, bait and gunpowder were stored and carried in specially constructed gourd canteens." states Summit.

Today, our gourds contain craft supplies for gourd classes, potpourri, potato chips and houseplants. We are in the middle of the gourd growing season. How wonderful it is to watch our gourds grow and to ponder what uses they will have!