

A WHIFF OF HISTORY

These gifts of spices are to remind you of our celebration of the COLUMBUS QUINCENTENNIAL. (Give out small plastic bags of spices.) Place them in a small pot on your stove or add them to hot cider and as the spicy smell permeates your house, think of how desirable these spices were in the 1400's. And, how one young weaver especially yearned to go to the Asian continent and the Orient to bring these aromatic treasures to his fellow Italians.

ALLSPICE is the tiny, round, dried seed from a tree, Pimenta Diocia, of the Myrtle family. It is pungent and suggestive of cloves and cinnamon; used in making wines and in Columbus' day, in meat dishes. The Myrtle tree is native to the West Indies and Mexico. Most is grown in Jamaica. The tree has small clusters of white flowers; the fruits are picked when they are green and sun-dried to a red/brown.

CINNAMON is the dried bark of the tropical tree, Cinnamomum, grown in Ceylon and much sought by Columbus. He never found it in the islands he explored. The trees grow as high as 30 feet. Under cultivation the trees are pruned so they can more easily be harvested. They are harvested in the rainy season, the bark is easily stripped from shoots then. The bark is slit along the length of the stem on one side, then pried loose and peeled off and heaped together and covered with sacks to promote fermentation which loosens the outer layer of the bark so it can be scraped off. It is the inner bark that contains the aromatic properties. The scraped inner bark dries into quills and they are baled for export. Smaller quills are placed inside larger ones. Broken quills are ground into cinnamon powder; oil of cinnamon is distilled from shoots and low grade bark and is used to flavor medicines.

CLOVES are the dried unopened flower bud of the clove tree and also comes from China. Clove oil is used as an antiseptic in dentistry. The clove tree

is an evergreen; 25-40 feet high which produces flowers for 50 years. The buds are picked by hand, dried in the sun until they shrivel and turn brown. Originally a native of Spice Islands, most is now grown in Zanzibar.

And now about the subject of our Quincentennial. Columbus was born on the dividing line between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the year 1451. Two great discoveries were taking place: exploring the intellectual world by scholars and exploring the earth's surface by sailors. No real birthdate of Columbus is known; he kept his identity even from his sons. Historians think the possible reasons for this are twofold: 1. political; if Columbus had served a country at war with Spain it would have done him no good to try to get royal backing, and 222. religious; perhaps he had a Jewish background. Some evidence points to this. If he was a convert he could not have revealed this in the Spain of the Inquisition.

Most historians agree on the basis of municipal documents that he was born in the Italian port city of Genoa in 1451, to an ordinary family headed by Domanico Columbus. He does himself mention in a letter "in the city of Genoa I have my roots and there I was born." His father was a woolen weaver - and his grandfather Giovanni. Also Dominico became a master weaver, while Columbus' mother, Susanna, also was a daughter of a weaver. They named Christopher for St. Christopher, a powerful legendary figure. The name means "Christ Bearer." St. Christopher became the patron saint of travelers.

Christopher Columbus had three brothers and one sister. His father was not a good business man, and as a child Christopher spent time at the harbor, working if he could, and helping to support the family. No records of him ever having had schooling has been found. He could not write classical Italian and was almost illiterate. He did learn to read and write Castilian, the language of the Iberian Peninsula. He also learned to speak Portugese when he lived

there, and used Latin.

He had red hair, freckles, blue eyes - a handsome man as he drew apart from his family as it is thought his father objected to his going to sea, which became his first love. He never sent money to his father or got in touch with him during his glory days. There is a record of him going to see his father at the age of 20.

He hitched rides on ships to get away from home and took any job he could get aboard ship. On his second adventure at sea, his ship was attacked by pirates and he got wounded and had to jump into the sea. He eventually made his way back to Lisbon and that became his place of business. He set up a business with his brother, Bartholomew. They became map makers and calligraphers. Columbus learned navigation during these years in Portugal. He read all he could find; made notes, acquired books and passed them on to his son, Ferdinand. These books are in Columbus' Archives in Seville with notes in his handwriting in the margins of the books.

In 1479 Columbus met Dona Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, his wife. Both were attending mass. She was aristocracy and historians wonder how they courted and how an old noble family let her marry a foreign born nobody chart maker. He was 28 when they married; she was 25. They had one child, Diego. Dona died young and Columbus raised his son.

His first long voyage down the African coast to Guinea gave him the chance to learn how people survive in the tropics; what supplies were needed for long voyages, how to store supplies and what kinds of goods native people different from himself liked to trade for.

Because he had married into a merchant family with good connections he could have settled down in Lisbon, but at 30 years of age, he had an enormous ego and felt he wanted more. He called his great dream, "The Enterprise of the

Indies."

He was sure he could get to Asia by sailing west. He discussed this with no one. No one knows how he got the idea. The idea of the world being round was by no means new. Aristotle had taught and believed it. What Columbus believed was the earths circumference was very small and he was WRONG, but he had to convince backers of his idea. He was original because he really meant to do it! Sail west to Asia! He believed in his dream so much he distorted facts and figures to make them fit his dream. He convinced himself the ocean was narrower than it is, and Asia is wider than it is. He studied all the maps and charts produced by scholars and seafarers from ancient to his time and when figures differed from his, he "Corrected" them. Then he took his great plan to the King of Portugal in 1484.

At this point he was very authoratative, grey hair, beard, eloquent of speech, a gentle family man. Affable and discreet with strangers; very impressive in his countenance, a sober moderate in eating and drinking, he wore moderate clothing and footware. He was a devout Catholic and was eager to convert the "Indians" in any region he might explore.

The educated authorities he had to appeal to for ten years before his journey were so much better informed than he - he was careful to speak in generalities, avoiding any particulars where he could be challenged. His first approach for a private investor was made to King John II of Portugal. King John thought him to be a boastful talker and asked Columbus to confer with three advisors. They were cosmographers and rejected his ideas mostly because they felt his estimates of distance were incredibly small; for instance, Columbus had placed Japan 2400 nautical miles west of the Canary Islands, just off the coast of Africa, when the true airline distance from the Canaries to Japan currently is 26,600 miles.

Discouraged in Portugal, Columbus went to Spain. His wife had died and he took 5 year old Diego with him. He settled in near a monastery so the friars could help educate his son. His brother stayed in Lisbon to run their map business.

He found friendly ears here and eventually his ideas got to Queen Isabella who gave his idea to her advisors. While here in Spain, he met Beatriz. They did not marry, but she bore him a son, Ferdinand.

Portugal, about this time, had sent explorers out and they discovered Africa could be rounded by sea. An eastern route to Asia was opened so Columbus' idea became secondary. When he returned to Spain, Queen Isabella kept him dangling until the Moorish war, which had been raging, settled down. The Queen's advisors never favored him. He was so sure of himself, he offended them. He never acted like a weaver's son when petitioning royalty. Finally a powerful figure in court talked the Queen into backing Columbus. If she would back him with one half the money, this rich noble would borrow some money from the police force he served, some would come from his own wealth, and Columbus would borrow some himself. The Queen was delighted he could make the journey, and Ferdinand, the King, once the money was available, joined in sponsoring Columbus.

We all know the famous story of the three ships he got as his fleet. He bargained hard and asked for, and got 10% of all the wealth that would come to Spain as a result of his discoveries. He got the title of Viceroy, this humble weaver's son, and Admiral of the high seas, which gave him great power over his voyages.

The Santa Maria, Nina, and Pinta were all small. Average length was 67 feet and 21 feet wide. They steered by outboard rudders and tillers. Forty men manned the Santa Maria, 24 or 25 on the others. All crewmen were Spanish

except for Columbus. There were interpreters in Hebrew and Arabic in the crew - he was so sure he would find their lands; a secretary kept a journal, and a comptroller was to log the riches they expected to find. There were no cooks on board; dried peas and beans, and biscuits plus salted fish and pork in brine, was food. Some cheese and onions started the voyage with them. Water stored in casks soon went foul and wine was doled out daily. Men built small fires in fire boxes on deck when they could find fish, and everyone cooked for themselves.

They left port in Spain on August 3, 1492; first stop the Canary Islands. After some repairs and delays, they finally sailed out to sea. After many anxious days, land was finally seen by a sailor on October 12, 1492. This was the eastern shore of one of the Bahamas. Columbus named it San Salvadore, or Holy Savior. National Geographic, in 1986, determined the island to be Samana. He and the few men who went ashore named the naked natives "Indians." He thought he had landed on islands off the coast of Asia. He spent until January 15 going up and down the Caribbean coast, looking for gold and any sign of spices. His Santa Maria got run aground on coral and he had to leave it behind when he sailed home in the Nina and Pinta. He left a few men on the island to stake his claim.

Due to a storm, he landed in Portugal rather than go on to Spain and he had to convince the King there that he really had traveled to "The Indies." He finally reached the port of Palos in Spain and messengers were sent the 800 miles to Barcelona to prepare the King and Queen for his arrival.

He wrote out a plan for colonization and proposed regulations for what he saw as a mad drive for gold hunting. He had found none but embellished tales of riches he saw, which were none. He was grandly greeted by the monarchs and invited to sit beside them on their thrones - unheard of in royal Spain!

Columbus remained in Barcelona as a royal guest. His son became a court page, the six "indians" he had brought back with him were baptized, and Isabella made herself their godmother. Columbus was made a noble man, received a coat of arms, and his agreements were honored so he became the ruler over all ships exploring the Indies. The Pope was appealed to, to decide who should get which islands, as Portugal was also claiming some. Since the Pope was Spanish, the scale was tipped in favor of Isabella, and King John of Portugal had to be satisfied with the demarcation line the Pope drew from the North to the South Pole 400 miles west of the Azores. The rest of Europe sulked and when any foreign sailors found they were on the wrong side of the line, they were murdered.

Columbus was restless and finally made a second voyage, this time with a huge fleet and hundreds of colonizers. He found, remarkably, his original islands, and the few men he had left had found no gold - only misery and sickness. For months he went from island to island searching for gold; he was obsessed to find some tangible evidence of the riches he had dreamed of. He himself became ill with fever and arthritis and lost control of governing any colony set up. He realized he would have to go back again with no great wealth and coerced the captains of his fleet into signing an oath that they believed and had seen enormous treasures in the islands. They had to sign or not return to Spain. Historians believe that at this point Columbus was so obsessed and stubborn, he refused any reason except his dreams of gold.

When he returned from this second voyage in 1494, he dressed in the coarse brown dress of a friar, instead of his gorgeous Admiral's costume. He was trying to convince the skeptics of how humility had replaced arrogance. It is said he wore this costume of humility all the remainder of his days. He had found Jamaica on this second voyage, but there was no legendary splendor there,

so it created no sensation at court.

In 1497, Vasca de Gama was more successful in bringing home to Portugal, a cargo of pepper and cinnamon - the very spices Columbus had hoped to find. But de Gama had traveled much farther, crossing the Indian ocean to Calicut.

In 1498 after recuperating, he again approached Isabella and Ferdinand for a third voyage. This time 300 men, at royal expense, were sent; also 30 women, one for each 10 men. This was done with the promise that these women could choose and marry a husband in the new colony. This third voyage in 1498 took him along the Venezuela coast; he never ventured inland. If he had, he might have found his coveted gold and silver mines.

He was sure he was near the African continent as he noted how fresh the water was as it ran into the ocean from one of the rivers. He was sure this was the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, when in reality, it was the Rio Grande. So he felt he was close to Eden, and insisted on this premise no matter how his chart makers tried to convince him otherwise. He stayed and tried to set up colonies. It was here he did find a new agricultural product: corn. This made living easier for the few who did try to colonize there. He ignored huge beds of oysters loaded with pearls which could have been considered riches. Later Spain did capitalize on this rare product. When envoys did return home to Spain with alarming tales of his erratic behavior, the King and Queen sent a representative to make an inspection. The King's envoy found utter confusion and ordered Columbus to be put into chains and sent back to Spain. Columbus kept the chains on all during this voyage home, although once out to sea, it was offered to him to be free. He arrived in Spain fettered, and kept the chains on for weeks in a monastery where he took refuge and was cared for. When Ferdinand and Isabella heard of his treatment, they ordered he be freed. He stubbornly kept the chains on as he appeared

before them, and in great drama, he prostrated himself before them, demanding his title and authority back and he got it!

He played this episode for all it was worth and then talked the royal couple into a fourth voyage. But he was forbidden to visit Hispaniola, the colony he had founded. But with bad weather threatening as he neared Santa Domingo, he was allowed to ride out the storm in the port although he never set foot on land. He sailed west to the coast of Honduras and he and his son observed the natives here to be more advanced in dress and using metal tools, even wearing gold ornaments and using metal weapons. He could not know this was an outpost of the great Mayan empire; again, he missed a chance to find his long sought after gold.

He got stranded in Jamaica for months on this voyage and finally, after 55 days at sea, he, his son, brother and 222 half-starved sailors, arrived back in Spain. Columbus was 53 years old, a worn old man, wracked by fever and arthritis and gout. He could barely walk. A month after he returned, his best friend at court, Queen Isabella, died. His restoration to power as a viceroy was refused, although he did continue to receive the revenue due him. He did not spend his last years in poverty as so often is reported. He moved to Valladolid where it was sunny and warm and friars of a nearby monastery of St. Francis cared for him. He died on May 20, 1505; his brothers and sons were with him. His death was not recorded; his biography was kept alive by his sons publishing one in 1571.

The reputation of Columbus has had its ups and downs. Many historians blame him for the spread of slavery, some claim his discoveries were the greatest thing since the creation. The first American biography of Columbus was Washington Irving's, "Life and Voyages of Columbus" in 1828.

The vast wealth of Central and South America did eventually belong to

Spain but through Peru and Mexico rather than the coastal islands Columbus had discovered. It was from these islands, however, that exploration went out and Spain eventually benefited. However, in the end, Spain did go down in defeat and impoverishment as she had overextended herself in explorations. The WINNERS of Columbus' dreams were the European nations as the world opened up to connect Europe with the coasts of nearly the whole world. The LOSERS were the Native Americans. The Indian cultures were crushed and they refused to be assimilated with the European winners. However, Indians exerted a strong cultural influence on the white conquerors.

I quote now from a leading historian of the Native Americans, Peter Farb: "About half the states have Indian names, and so do thousands of cities, towns, rivers, lakes and mountains. Americans drink hootch, meet in caucus, bury the hatchet, give clambakes, run the gauntlet, smoke the peace pipe, hold powwows, and enjoy Indian summer. The epithet 'skunk' that the frontiersmen hurled so freely at the Indian is itself derived from an Indian word, as are many others in the English language. The march of settlers westward often followed the same trails that the Indians had used, and eventually these developed into today's network of concrete highways.

"Indians supplied Europeans with foods that were new to them, taught them to plant and to hunt with Indian methods, guided them safely through a dangerous wilderness, and equipped them with tools and techniques that enabled them to survive. The plunder the Europeans were thus given the means to take, in gold and other treasures, built up the European nations and in part laid the ground work for the industrial revolution.

"More than fifty new foods first domesticated by Indians were carried back to the Old World, including turkey, maize, white potato, pumpkin, squash, peppers, the so-called Jerusalem artichoke, tomato, avocado, chocolate, and

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several kinds of beans. The European has turned for relief to drugs and pharmaceuticals the Indians discovered: tobacco, quinine, ephedrine, novocaine, curare, ipecac and witch hazel. Moccasin-style shoes are patterned after Indian footware, canoes after their birchbark craft, toboggans after their sleds, and apparel worn at ski resorts is copies from Eskimo clothing. We make use of other Indian inventions as well, including their snowshoe, hammock, poncho, parka, rubber ball, and even the syringe. The Constitution of the United States and those of several state governments were partly influenced by the democratic traditions of Indian societies."

The Equality; living without masters, real liberty, became a new idea for Europeans. This basic concept of liberty took hold of Europe over the next few hundred years. It helped shape our present idea of liberty and equality for all.

So we might conclude that a weaver's son's dream of spices and gold and an unswerving quest for a new world did, in a way, lead us to our land of liberty and our precious freedom. So once again, let the smell of spices remind you of our freedom, remind you of Columbus and his dream of a new worldlet it be a whiff of history and of liberty for all of us.

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