

Hopis' ancient ways thrive, but sometimes corn doesn't

ARIZONA REPUBLIC
SECOND MESA — Tony Dukepoo dropped nine kernels of blue corn into a hole he had poked in the sandy soil with a metal digging stick, the same way he first watched his father plant similar seeds about 70 years ago.

"That's the same kind of corn that my father grew, and before him, I don't know how many hundreds of years they used the same corn here," said Dukepoo, a 75-year-old Hopi whose smile shoots creases all around his face.

The 5-acre field lies on the plain below his home in the mesa-top village of Shungopavi on the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona. The village had more than four centuries of farming history before other Indians shared corn with the pilgrims of Plymouth Rock.

About nine-tenths of Hopis still grow crops, according to the tribal chairman's office. They include an assortment of traditional varieties of corn, beans, squash and melons, plus some more-recent additions.

To varying degrees, they use ancestral farming methods. More than 99 percent of farmland in Arizona is irrigated from wells or diverted rivers, but most Hopi farms get water only from rain.

"That's the beauty of it out here, to get corn to grow without irrigation," Dukepoo said. The area gets about 8 inches of rain per year, on average.

The yields are meager by comparison with commercial corn harvests, but they meet the growers' needs for a favorite part of their food supply.

"Each year when we harvest, we put a little away for seed," Dukepoo said.

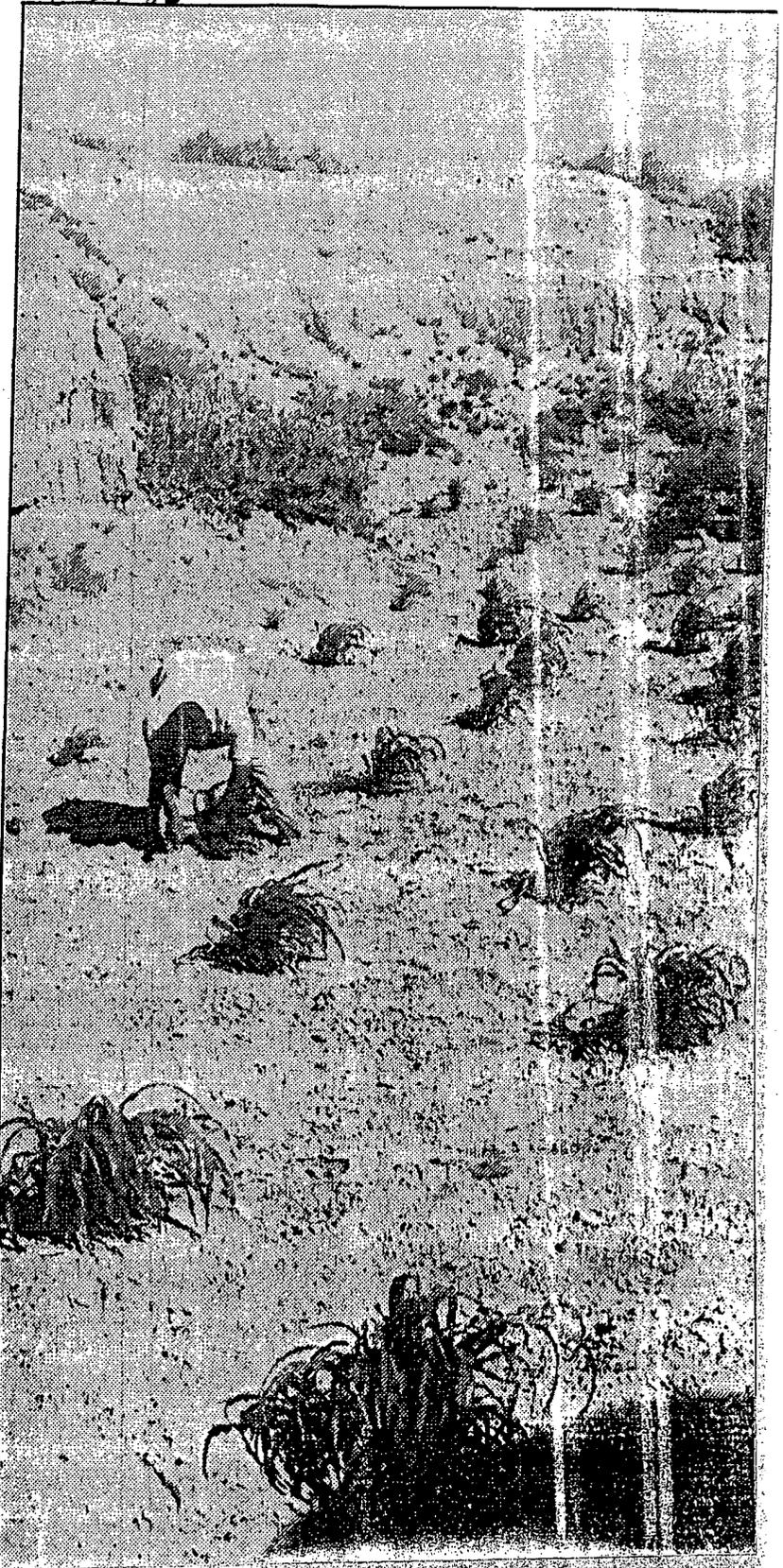
He has grown corn almost every year since he was a child, including 21 years when he tended the crop here on weekends after working weekdays as a carpenter and painter in Tempe.

When he used the metal digging stick this June, Dukepoo was filling gaps left in the rows by a tractor-pulled planter two weeks earlier.

"A lot of the people here use a tractor, but there are still some that use the old way," he said.

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Last year, he and a high-school-age relative, Bertram Walker, planted the whole cornfield by hand. This year, they hand-planted a smaller patch of sweet corn in April in a dry wash across the road from the bigger field.

Dukepoo is growing only sweet corn, blue corn, and white corn this year, plus some Hopi string beans, which are used both green and dried.

His options are wider, within the spectrum of traditional varieties: "We have blue corn, yellow corn, maroon corn, gray corn, red corn and the sweet corn, and there's a real dark blue corn and the white corn and the Supai corn," he said. "That gray corn, you don't see that much anymore, but some people are trying to keep the seed going."

Some of the corn varieties have different uses than others, and the diversity in the field also helps assure a harvest. Some years, one variety does best, other years another, the farmer said. It depends on the weather.

Hopi traditions about corn-planting dates tend to stagger the crop for extra assurance that some fields will be timed just right for whatever rain falls.

"The old people used to go by when the sun would be at certain marks on the horizon," Dukepoo said. Each clan would have its own planting time. On First Mesa (where Dukepoo grew up) the Flute Clan would plant early, then the

Water Clan, then the Coyote Clan.

"The whole village would help one clan at a time, then help another clan."

The clan-by-clan dates are not followed closely anymore, especially toward the latter portion of the planting season, but corn planting still gets spread out over about two months, he said.

By late June, Dukepoo had to scrape off 6 inches of dry soil before shoving the planting stick into soil still damp from spring rain. He spaced the planting holes four steps apart, with about eight seeds each, to be thinned to five or six stalks later.

He does not use fertilizer or pesticides, other than sprinkling some water scented with dog manure on young corn shoots to discourage rabbits. He says he is hard of hearing from chasing off birds with a shotgun.

The sweet corn, planted first, yielded some ears in time for Home Dance ceremonies in late July, but crows took much of the sweet corn after that.

Some of the sweet-corn ears are sun-dried after they are baked, for use throughout the year.

"You boil it, and the kernels swell up again, or you grind it real fine and make a drink out of it, like Kool-Aid," Dukepoo said.

The other corn varieties are harvested in September and October. In August, the Dukepoo's began spending nights in the fields to chase off crows at daybreak.

Hazel Dukepoo, Tony's wife, treats some of the white corn with ash and water to make hominy. She uses an electric grinder to make cornmeal and corn flour from white and blue corn. Thin batter from the blue flour is cooked into tissue-thin "piki" bread.

The Hopis' traditional farming gives spiritual sustenance as well as food. Much of the symbolism and timing of Hopi religious ceremonies are linked to crop production. Agriculture makes partners of man and nature.

"Farming is the livelihood of the Hopis," Hazel Dukepoo said. "Our traditions say we must not let it die. We must keep on planting."

Her husband said, "I see a lot of young boys out in the fields. I'm glad our young people are still interested in farming."

— GUY WEBSTER