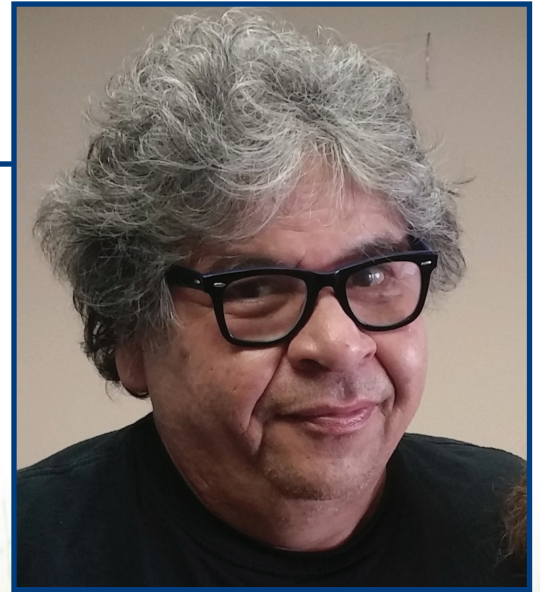


An Interview

with

Thomas Pecore Weso

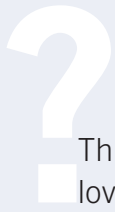


GOOD SEEDS

A Menominee Indian Food Memoir



WISCONSIN
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WHS Press Why did you decide to write *Good Seeds*?

This project developed naturally from my love of cooking. I love food and watch a lot of reality TV cooking shows. I want my food to be interesting, even if there are mistakes. So I experiment a lot and talk about food often, so much that my wife made me start writing down some recipes and stories. Then I began to realize, as I am in my early sixties, that I have outlived most

Menominee men my age. I have memories that need to be saved for my tribe and family—children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. I remember the Menominee reservation and towns around it, like Antigo and Shawano, as very different places. I have taught college history, so I understand how important it is to document. My Aunt Nita Perez has been working to scan Wisconsin newspapers from our area, and she is an inspiration, also. So the history is important to me.



WHS Press Was there one recipe or story in particular that speaks to you or captures Menominee culture best?

The forest is the center of the Menominee culture. The green of the pine trees is a color often seen in Menominee beadwork. I wear a lot of green camouflage, which is perfect for hunting in the woods of the reservation. One of my favorite stories is about fishing with my daughter when she was about three. We went into the forest to a branch of the Wolf River.

She already knew how to bait her hook and throw out her line. She caught a seven-inch trout, pretty big for a little girl, and she was so excited. We carried a small grill with us in the car. I started a fire, and within ten minutes we were eating her trout. She understood where that fish came from, its environment, her struggle to kill it, death, cleaning out the guts, and the technique of cooking. She learned the aromas of the riverside, the fire, and the grilling meat. This was a complete and spiritual experience.





WHS Press Menominee culture is central to Wisconsin. How will your readers come to understand the importance of the nation and its people through this book?

I want Menominees and others to understand how interrelated we are. Menominees have been changed by contact with European trade goods for at least four hundred years, yet we are still distinct. In Wisconsin I grew up influenced by the German, Polish, and Scandinavian people as well as Forest Band Potawatomis and Ojibwes. We all had

separate communities, but the milkman traveled the area and made deliveries to all of us. I thought cottage cheese was an Indian food. The same with sauerkraut and pickled pigs' feet. We all drank in the same bars, and Wisconsin beer is a hallmark of our shared culture, as is the orange army that enters the forest each fall and hunts deer. We all get gear for fishing at the same bait shops. The mystery is in the intangible, distinct essence of each community, with its traditions that make us all adapt the same materials in different ways.



WHS Press What do you find most fascinating about the food you profile?

Food is a signifier of culture. One of my favorite assignments as a college teacher of anthropology is to ask all of my students to bring in chili recipes. When I taught at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, this was especially interesting. Students come from so many tribes, over a hundred, from across the country. Northern

tribes put macaroni in chili and extra lard. Southwest tribes use more beans and hot spices. Oklahoma Indians make a sweeter chili with more vegetables, onions, and green peppers. The foods of the region find their way into the recipes. In Kansas, ground bison is readily available, so buffalo/beef mixes are common in chili. Recipes reflect the food environment, as well as how people are interacting with that environment, which is food culture.





WHS Press How can this book serve as a guide to Wisconsin history or Native American history?

The Eisenhower years in Wisconsin were not that well documented, and that's my era, from then on to the hippie/Civil Rights era. This book shows the aftermath of World War II in its stories about my uncle who helped liberate Auschwitz and our hired man, Wallace. I also hope this book shows a few glimpses of daily life in logging communities at that time. The Native American history here is unique, I think, because of how few Native sources are available. Boarding

schools prepared Native people for vocations, and not careers as historians. Believe me, no one expected me to grow up and write a book. People outside Native communities may not realize how the church and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools impacted our cultures. This is the era when my family lost fluent use of the language, and teachers tried to assimilate us. My viewpoint is unique as a Native writer in the topics I choose to cover and my cultural attitudes to gender, nature, and social interactions. So this gives a window into Menominee culture, especially through what foods were available and how they were used.



WHS Press What have you found to be the most surprising aspect of writing *Good Seeds*?

First, I was surprised that anyone cared. I had no idea that there would be readers who would want to learn about my family and people. The Wisconsin Historical Society Press has been wonderful with

encouragement from the start. Also, I was surprised by my wife's reaction to how I organized the book. For me, storage was a major chapter, because in the north, preservation of foods for the winter is so important to survival. Another chapter is about how the spiritual basis for our meals is as important as the physical food we eat.





WHS Press Are there any recipes you have since discovered that you could have included?

Yes. Since writing the book, I've been taking note of some of my daily experiments with local foods and saving the better recipes. One is pemmican bison burgers, made with ground bison (or elk, venison, or turkey)

mixed with dried cranberries and dried, minced onions. Game meats are less fatty, so more flavor is needed to keep them interesting. I like to cook with dried fruits. Another recent hit with my wife was pork sirloin in a crust of dried cranberries, maple syrup, red pepper flakes, and cumin. Dried blueberries with salmon is another good combination.



WHS Press Writing a book is a deeply personal experience. How has your writing of *Good Seeds* been so for you?

This book is about my love affair with my wife. She is a writer. When I courted her, I wanted her to be interested in me for the long term. I knew I had to prove myself to be someone she could wake up with in the morning and have a good conversation with. So I started telling her my best memories about home, and most of those were about family meals. After we were

married fifteen years or so, and I kept telling her stories, she started to write them down—she's a very fast typist. She brought me a pile of the stories and said most of them were about food. She suggested that we should meet weekly for me to dictate more stories, until we covered most of the categories of food. She thought I would start with breakfast and end with nightcaps, but I surprised her. She tells me most of the stories revolve around people I know and then food. Anyway, we've been married twenty-two years.



WHS Press What was your most revelatory experience in writing *Good Seeds*?

The stories revolve around my family members. Family and food are so closely linked. I found myself reflecting on my Uncle

Buddy's life a lot, and also my grandfather's teachings, not what they said, but how they lived their lives as Menominee men. I missed a lot when I was growing up, and this book gave me a chance to think again about their teachings.

