



KETTLES

When we hear the word "technology" today, we immediately think of iPhones, iPads, computers and microchips, yet technology is a part of every culture, regardless of time or place. We all know the stories of "major technological advances," but less glamorous technologies also have the ability to transform people's lives in dramatic fashion.

For nearly 1500 years before the arrival of Europeans in North America, non-nomadic indigenous peoples utilized clay pottery in cooking. But, clay pottery was fragile. Nomadic peoples hung buffalo or elk stomachs over their campfires and filled them with meat and vegetables. Their meals cooked unevenly and cleanup was difficult. When Europeans arrived, new technologies became readily available.

We normally think of horses and guns as the primary technological advancements that resulted from European contact in North America, but there were other advancements as well. Copper, brass and iron kettles changed life dramatically and quickly became valued trade items, important demonstrations of wealth, prized possessions, and articles of political action.

Imagine how much easier a Native American woman's work became when she possessed a cooking pot. The metal pot heated quickly over an open fire, and distributed the heat more efficiently. The kettle cooked its contents more evenly. It was easy to clean. It might dent, but it was difficult to destroy. The advantages were so great that by the late 1660s, among Native American societies in the North East, the metal cooking pot was preferred. Metal pots changed living patterns as well. "Utilizing portable kettles, [Acadian]Micmac households were less likely to camp near their immobile wooden cauldrons...the copper kettle thus afforded them the opportunity to move about at random as they hunted game for the fur trade."ⁱ Kettles also carried political and ceremonial significance. At the great peace council between the Cheyennes and Kiowas (1840), "...brass kettles filled with food were among the gifts given by the Cheyenne, and they made peace."ⁱⁱ Metal from brass and copper kettles was used to make weapons. Pieces cut from brass and copper kettles also served as decoration or as symbols of wealth. The seemingly common cooking kettle, changed Native American societies economically, demographically, nutritionally and politically.

ⁱ Calvin Martin. "The Four Lives of the Micmac Copper Pot." In *Ethnohistory*, Vol 22, No. 2 (Spring, 1975), pp. 1.

ⁱⁱ George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians. Volume 2: War, Ceremonies and Religion*. Yale university Press, 1915, p. 68.