Boas had apparently confused the fresh bark collected as a survival food during winter famine with the 'hemlock sap' gathered in large quantities during the spring, which was a great delicacy. It involved intensive labour in harvesting, and was served with other prestigious foods at great feasts.

The other 'poor' food Boas mentioned as evidence is salmon backs; the reference is to a Nass River story called "She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side" (Boas 1902). Boas' interpretation is not unambiguously supported by the details of the text, which recounts the story of a little slave girl who was seen by one of the friends of the son of a chief coming down the street. She entered the last house of the town.

There she sat down near the fire. Then the wife of the owner rose, took the back of a salmon, and gave it to the little slave girl, but she did not accept it. The little slave girl rose and left the house. She entered another house, and again sat down near the fire. The wife of the owner rose and gave her the backs of salmon to eat, but she did not accept them. She left the house. She did so in every house.

The friend of the chief's son who had gone out re-entered and said to the prince, 'A little slave girl is coming along the street.' Then his friends spoke: "Why don't you marry her when she comes in here?" When she came near the chief's house, they took a mat and spread it in the rear of the house. The prince sat down on it. (188ff)

The little slave girl turns out to be She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side, the daughter of Evening Sky, a supernatural being. The son of the chief does marry her, and the girl's mother gives her daughter's husband much wealth, and he becomes a very great chief.

Since in the text as recorded, the girl did not accept offers of any other food either, it is not entirely clear that salmon backs were 'poor' food. She seems to have been looking for a husband rather than a meal. This is the only reference cited by Boas to support the categorization, and it should probably treated as questionable, though it certainly raises the interesting question of just exactly why the food in the story was salmon backs rather than another item, or several items.

Boas is usually referred to as a descriptive, rather than an interpretive, ethnographer; every description is, however, also an interpretation. We simply don't usually notice the 'interpreter' unless the material comes into factual question. The necessity for re-interpretations of Boas' descriptions does not diminish the incredible contributions made by Boas and his two Tsimshian collaborators, Tate and Beynon; the most problematic aspect of the material is the potential for incorrect generalizations and confusion of categories apparent in such instances as the 'salmon back' and 'hemlock sap' examples mentioned here.

Boas fieldwork among the Tsimshian was relatively brief, and it is apparent that some of the interpretations he drew from the texts would have required further substantiation. He drew on the massive collections of texts received from Tate for evidence as well, of course, but his interpretations of the texts may occasionally have been 'closed' prematurely.
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