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HISTORY'S BLACK SPICE

by JACK DENTON SCOTT

It's only pepper—but the course of
empires was changed by it

THE AMERICAN BRIG slipped silently into the dark bay and dropped anchor with no more noise than that of a fish splashing in the night. To the north, the cliffs of Sumatra stood outlined against the sky like giant heads watching over the black mass of the shoreline.

Then, even before deck watches could be posted, brown heads began to appear over the sides, and with wild shrieks, Malayan pirates sprang on to the brig's deck, the sharp blades of their creeses flashing. . .

This happened many times along the coast of Sumatra a century and a half ago when American merchantmen went to trade for a pungent, bitter, biting black berry. For it, men risked death from the pirates of Malaya and from unscrupulous Sumatra natives who tempted them ashore and then treacherously slaughtered them so that

they might steal from their ships.

World politics centered about the dried black berry, yesterday's priceless uranium. The color of oil, it probably built more fortunes than all of our oil wells. It brought death, dollars, despair, and delight to the men who sought it.

This simple black berry is pepper, the oldest spice known to man—also the most valuable and the most popular. Without it, or the desire for it, there probably wouldn't be an America, our great sea trade routes would still be undiscovered, and man might even have given up the idea of eating meat.

Pepper, both black and white, comes from a perennial vine, *Piper nigrum*. Black pepper is the berry picked before it is fully ripe, then dried; white pepper, the berry left on the vine until ripened, then the outer hull removed. Both are shipped

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to market whole as peppercorns.

It is native to the Travancore and Malabar areas of tropical India and is cultivated, too, in the East Indies; and we import most of our average yearly 30,500,000 pounds (nearly 35 per cent of the world's output) from India and Indonesia, with lesser amounts from various ports within a 1000-mile radius of Singapore.

The eastern black pepper has no relation to cayenne or red pepper. Nor are the big green and red peppers that you pick up at the vegetable stand any more than sorry cousins.

Most Americans seem to prefer pungent black pepper over all other varieties, and use it in nearly every condiment and in almost all processed meat or food. Europeans take to the white grain for its distinctive, less hot flavor, and use large quantities in cooking.

Black pepper, which comes to us ground finely, coarse-cut or as peppercorns to be used in our own grinders, is usually identified either by the ports through which it is shipped or the areas where grown. Peppers differ to some extent in color, size, physical and chemical properties and flavor. Aleppey and Tellicherry are two of the finer types.

History records the use of pepper as far back as 3000 B.C. It was put in sausage meat during the Crusades, yet it wasn't until 1951 that scientists proved it had an "oustanding preservative effect" on the meats used in the making of sausage. Pepper is also placed on the list of spices recommended as seasoning in the food of patients on a salt-free diet.

The ancients held it of equal value to gold and silver. Early in the 5th Century when Rome was besieged by Alaric, king of the Goths, part of the ransom demanded from the city was 3,000 pounds of pepper.

For many years in Europe and the Far and Middle East, its use was restricted to royalty and the extremely wealthy nobles. Taxes and tributes were paid in pepper.

It was also held to have great medicinal value. A leechbook, or collection of medieval recipes of the 15th Century, advised: "To cure aching loins, the patient is to take nine peppercorns."

The search for this precious, pungent stuff led the Portuguese to seek an all-sea route to the Orient and resulted in Vasco da Gama rounding the Cape of Good Hope; pushed Christopher Columbus into setting sail for the spice lands of the East and the eventual discovery of America. Prior to these voyages the potent black spice, always in high demand in Europe, was obtained from secret sources in the Orient, then transported by camel caravan across Asia.

England stuck her hand in the pepper pot in 1577, after Sir Francis Drake's history-shaking voyage around the world drew attention to the lucrative opportunities of the South Seas and the Oriental trade. Eventually, in her quest for the black gold, England built the greatest navy the world had ever known and acquired India, Ceylon, Singapore and other eastern possessions.

America slipped quietly into the trade on the morning of April 15, 1788, when the 100-ton brig *Cadet*

left the harbor of Salem, Massachusetts, on a secret mission.

Nothing was heard of the brig until February 14, 1790, when word came that she was at the Cape of Good Hope from the East Indies, bound for the West Indies. When the *Cadet* made port months later at Boston, her hold was full of millions of little wrinkled black berries.

The *Cadet* went down in history as the ship that began the pepper trade with Sumatra, an island fabulously rich in pepper plants. It was a dangerous business and most of the ships that followed her left their home ports armed to the teeth.

The *Cadet's* voyage was directly responsible for some of America's great fortunes (Crowninshield, Peabody, Phillips, West, Peele), for the rise of our merchant marine, the prosperity of New England commerce, and our monopoly of the pepper traffic, called the "China Trade" by early New England seamen.

The romantic phase of the pepper trade is long past and today most of us take the black stuff for granted. Although we use more than one-third of the world's annual supply of nearly 90,000,000 pounds, it has been estimated that the average Ameri-

can family shakes only 7.1 ounces into their food a year. The balance is used by the makers of baked and canned goods, and meat-packing houses.

Chemists, attempting to discover what magical quality pepper has held for so many centuries, came up with this:

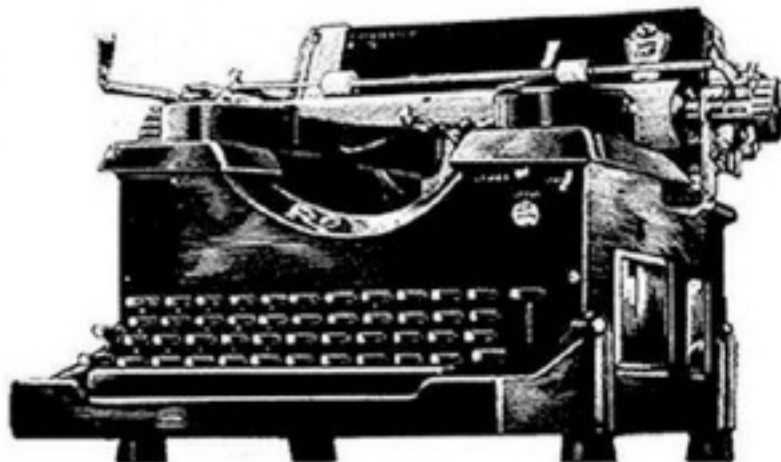
"It owes its pungency to a resin, its flavor to a volatile oil, of which it yields from 1.6 to 2.2 per cent. It also contains a yellow crystalline alkaloid called piperine, of 2 to 8 per cent, which has the same empirical formula as morphine ($C_{17}H_{19}NO_3$), but differs in constitution and properties."

Perhaps it is this last quality that makes it a world habit. No one seems to know.

The power of pepper can best be illustrated by a recent action in an American court: a man had filed for divorce, claiming that his wife deliberately withheld necessary food items.

"She knows I like pepper," he told the judge. "Yet she won't use it on a thing, and threw all of our black pepper away!"

It took the learned justice exactly three minutes to grant the divorce.



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