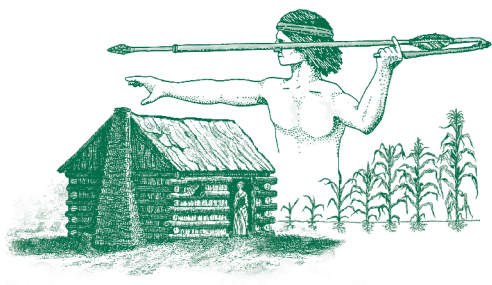


# UP FRONT



## MEADOWCROFT

By David Scofield, Director, Meadowcroft  
Rockshelter and Historic Village



**One of the millions of periodical cicadas that visited Meadowcroft in June.**

Photos by David Scofield.

### What is That Noise?

It's not unusual for a car with out-of-state license plates to unload at Meadowcroft on a summer day with occupants stretching and trying to regain their land legs after a long ride. But this time was different. As these visitors spilled out of their car on an early June afternoon, they looked about with obvious curiosity. "What is that noise?" they asked. "Is it some local industry?" "No, those are insects. Cicadas," replied the admission desk staff.

Millions of periodical cicadas, as they are known, also have shown up for a Meadowcroft

visit, *en masse*, after a 17-year subterranean respite. According to the Penn State Department of Entomology, these large, native North American insects are "widely distributed over the eastern half of the United States and occur nowhere else in the world."<sup>1</sup> Among the six species of periodical cicadas, three have a 17-year cycle and three have a 13-year cycle. All of the periodical cicadas found in Pennsylvania are of the 17-year broods. The Meadowcroft cicadas belong to "Brood V," one of 30 different broods identified by entomologist C.L. Marlatt in 1898.<sup>2</sup> However, not all of these broods actually exist and a few are thought to be extinct.

Depending on where you live in Western Pennsylvania, you may not see your brood until 2017, 2018, 2019, or 2021.

The eastern woodland Indians were familiar with the cicada phenomenon, but there are no recorded observations until the arrival of Europeans in the 17th century. In his writings, Governor William Bradford of the Plymouth Colony recounted the appearance of periodical cicadas in 1633: "[In] the month of May, there had been a quantity of a great sort of fly, as large as wasps or bumble bees, which came out of holes in the ground, filling all the woods, and eating the verdure. They made such a constant yelling noise that the woods rang with them, till they were ready to deafen the hearers." Bradford also recalls the Indians told them that "sickness would follow." According to his narrative, during the heat of summer that year an "infectious fever" claimed the lives of at least 20 men, women, and children in the colony as well as many Indians in the surrounding area.<sup>3</sup>





**Dianne Anestis prepares traditional food during Meadowcroft's American Indian Heritage Weekend.**

As broad-spectrum foragers, the eastern woodland Indians made use of the abundant supply of nutritious food that came to them in the form of cicadas. John Bartram, the great 18th-century naturalist, confirms this with one of the few recorded observations of cicadas being eaten not only by the birds and animals, but by the Indians as well. In a letter dated April 26, 1737, Bartram writes: “[Cicadas] are rather a Benefit than Distress to us for they are food for most kind of Fowl, and many Beasts, and our Indians will pluck off their Wings and boil and eat them.”<sup>4</sup>

The fascinating subject of everyday life for the eastern woodland Indians is always a

topic for discussion at Meadowcroft. During the annual American Indian Heritage Weekend, demonstrations of food processing and cooking methods bring details about the Indian diet to life. This year's event will once again provide common woodland period foodstuffs for visitors to see, such as the “three sisters” (corn, beans, and squash) and paw paw. Also, cooking on the grill will be a varied fare including venison, crayfish, squirrel, snapping turtle, and perhaps some bear meat. But this year, cicadas will be featured for the last time until 2033! So be sure to join us at Meadowcroft on September 24 and 25 for the 2016 American Indian Heritage Weekend. ☀

<sup>1</sup> A cicada fact sheet may be found at <http://ento.psu.edu/extension/factsheets/periodical-cicada>.

<sup>2</sup> C.L. Marlatt, “The Periodical Cicada,” *U.S. Department of Agriculture Entomology Bulletin* no. 71 (1907).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Paget, *Of Plymouth Plantation, Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement 1608-1650, Original Manuscript Rendered into Modern English* (New York: 1909; reprint San Antonio, Tx: The Vision Forum, Inc., 1998), 252.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Hoffmann and John C. Van Horne, eds., *America's Curious Botanist, A Tercentennial Reappraisal of John Bartram 1699-1777* (American Philosophical Society, 2004), 44. Thanks to Ed Robey, Doug Wood, and John Boback for assistance in locating this quote.