



Written by [John Larabell](#) on August 7, 2017

Published in the August 7, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 15

You Are What You Eat: The Research and Legacy of Dr. Weston Andrew Price

Weston Andrew Valleau Price was born in 1870 in Ontario, Canada, and raised on a 200-acre farm in Southern Ontario. He came from a family of two doctors, a dentist, a minister, and a farmer.

As a young man, Weston decided to go into dentistry, attending the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. After receiving his DDS and MS degrees, he opened a dental practice in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Shortly thereafter, he contracted typhoid fever and nearly died. His eldest brother, Albert, then a businessman in Cleveland, Ohio, traveled to Grand Forks and took Weston back to the family land in Ontario, where he slowly recovered. After marrying Florence Anthony from Brampton, Ontario, Weston relocated to Cleveland and began a dental practice there in a converted three-story house.



While practicing in his Cleveland office, Dr. Price noticed an increase in dental problems among the younger generations. These issues included the obvious dental caries (cavities) as well as improper jaw development leading to crowded, crooked teeth. In fact, the relatively new orthodontics industry was at that time beginning to gain popularity. Perplexed by these modern problems that seemed to be affecting a greater and greater portion of the population, Dr. Price set about to research the issue by examining people who did not display such problems. He suspected (correctly, as he would later find) that many of the dental problems, as well as other degenerative health problems, that were plaguing modern society were the result of inadequate nutrition owing to the increasing use of refined, processed foods.

Man on a Mission

Beginning in 1931, Weston and Florence began traveling to various spots on the globe in search of people who had perfect teeth (as well as seemingly perfect all-around health), to use as a “control” group in his quest to find the cause of the modern dental dilemmas. He published his findings in 1939 in his groundbreaking book *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration (NPD)*. Price explains his rationale at the end of the book’s second chapter, “The Progressive Decline of Modern Civilization”:

In my search for the cause of degeneration of the human face and the dental organs I have been unable to find an approach to the problem through the study of affected individuals and diseased tissues. In my two volume work on “Dental Infection,” Volume I, entitled *Dental Infections, Oral and Systemic*, and Volume II, entitled *“Dental Infections and the Degenerative Diseases,”* I reviewed at length the



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researches that I had conducted to throw light on this problem. The evidence seemed to indicate clearly that the forces that were at work were not to be found in the diseased tissues, but that the undesirable conditions were the result of the absence of something, rather than of the presence of something. This strongly indicated the need for finding groups of individuals so physically perfect that they could be used as controls. In order to discover them, I determined to search out primitive racial stocks that were free from the degenerative processes with which we are concerned in order to note what they have that we do not have.

Keep in mind that terms such as “primitive racial stock” did not possess the same negative connotations that they do today, and Price was simply referring to various ethnicities and cultures who were living in non-modernized conditions, much the way they had for the past centuries or millennia, with no dentists, orthodontists, or modern doctors.

The era of the 1930s afforded Dr. Price a unique window of opportunity, as technology was advanced enough to permit worldwide travel by airplane or steamship and good-quality photographs to be taken, and one could still find cultures where some communities were isolated and had not adopted a “modern” lifestyle. Few of the groups Price visited have any members still living in an isolated state, so such research would be nearly impossible to conduct today, at least on the scale of Price’s work. Here we’ll take some time to outline Price’s travels. Roughly the first half of *NPD* is dedicated to the various observations he made while traversing the globe in search of healthy isolated people. Each chapter represents a different journey. As Dr. Price noted in the introduction to *NPD*,

These investigations have been made among the following primitive racial stocks including both isolated and modernized groups: the Swiss of Switzerland, the Gaels in the Outer and Inner Hebrides, the Eskimos of Alaska, the Indians in the far North, West, and Central Canada, Western United States and Florida, the Melanesians and Polynesians on eight archipelagos of the Southern Pacific, tribes in eastern and central Africa, the Aborigines of Australia, Malay tribes on islands north of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand and the ancient civilizations and their descendants in Peru both along the coast and in the Sierras, also in the Amazon Basin. Where available the modernized whites in these communities also were studied.

Space will permit us to offer only a sampling of the fascinating research Dr. Price conducted on his various excursions; any reader interested in reading more should certainly purchase a copy of *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, which is still in print.

Price’s first stop was Switzerland’s beautiful Lötschental Valley. At the time, the valley was still relatively isolated, and the villagers were living as they had been for the past 1,000-plus years. The Swiss here lived mainly on rye bread from the rye grass they grew on the slopes, and fresh, raw milk and cheese from their cows. They would eat meat once a week, and whatever greens they could grow during the short summer months. At the time of Dr. Price’s visit, there had not been a single case of tuberculosis, which was still a public health concern in Western countries at the time, in the 1,200-year recorded history of the valley’s residents. The isolated Swiss had fine dental arches and beautiful, straight teeth, and the number of teeth affected by cavities was between one and two percent. However, the modernized Swiss had rampant dental cavities, often at a rate close to 30 percent. Nearly 100 percent of all modernized Swiss had at least one cavity.

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Price visited isolated tribes in Sudan and Egypt, who mostly lived on camels' milk. These people were all very healthy and showed a great immunity to dental caries, disease, and birth defects. The Masai herdsman in Kenya were especially remarkable for the fact that they ate essentially no plant products. They thrived on a diet of meat and raw milk. Liver, which, incidentally, is extremely high in cholesterol, was considered a sacred food and often eaten raw. Pygmies in the Congo were also visited by Price and his retinue, and the same good health and resistance to disease was found. These short-statured people would occasionally hunt elephants for meat, tracking one for days through the forest completely unbeknownst to the elephant. They would disable the elephant by cutting its hamstrings stealthily from behind, then hacking off pieces of the trunk until the animal bled to death. Price studied other tribes living in the African Great Lakes region. These peoples were more agricultural than the Masai or Pygmies, but still relied heavily on fish caught in the surrounding lakes and rivers.

The native Africans living on their primitive diets also seemed much more resistant to the various insect-borne diseases that were the scourge of European explorers and colonizers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The natives would often get these illnesses, such as typhoid fever, but would recover and then be immune. When they were on modernized diets, however, they would be vulnerable just as the Europeans were.

The primitive Eskimos thrived on a diet of mainly seafood, such as salmon and seal meat. Caribou and elk were also eaten. Small amounts of berries and sorrel grass were eaten in season, but for most of the year, fish and seal meat were the main sources of sustenance. The organs of large sea animals such as whales were highly prized for their nutritive properties, and fish eggs were consumed to ensure fertility. Much of the food was dipped in seal oil before eating. Price later analyzed the seal oil in his laboratory and found it to be one of the richest sources of vitamin A anywhere. Even though they lived on a diet extremely high in meat and fat, the Eskimos who had not come into contact with modern civilization were some of the healthiest, strongest people Price encountered anywhere in his journeys:

One does not get a conception of the magnificent dental development of the more primitive Eskimos simply by learning that they have freedom from dental caries. The size and strength of the mandible, the breadth of the face and the strength of the muscles of mastication all reach a degree of excellence that is seldom seen in other races.... I was told that an average adult Eskimo man can carry one hundred pounds in each hand and one hundred pounds in his teeth with ease for a considerable distance. This illustrates the physical development of other parts of the body as well as the jaws, and suggests that the exercising of the jaws is not the sole reason for their very fine teeth, since the superb development of the musculature includes all parts of the body.

Like the Eskimos, the isolated North American Indians in the far north of Canada and Alaska lived on mostly meat and fat. Rather than foods from the sea, of course, these Indians consumed large animals of the chase such as moose and caribou as their primary source of nourishment, along with fish from rivers and lakes. Very little plant food was eaten, as little could be grown. Despite living in a rather inhospitable region, these Indians were superbly healthy. Their skill in selecting the proper foods to ensure good health generation after generation was astounding, as illustrated by this anecdote:

Another illustration of the wisdom of the native Indians of that far north country came to me through two prospectors [who attempted to walk to civilization after becoming stranded when their



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plane could not make it over the mountains] whom we rescued and brought out with us just before the fall freeze-up....

One of the men told me the following tragic story. While they were crossing the high plateau he nearly went blind with so violent a pain in his eyes that he feared he would go insane. It was not snow blindness, for they were equipped with glasses. It was xerophthalmia, due to lack of vitamin A. One day he almost ran into a mother grizzly bear and her two cubs. Fortunately, they did not attack him but moved on. He sat down on a stone and wept in despair of never seeing his family again. As he sat there holding his throbbing head, he heard a voice and looked up. It was an old Indian who had been tracking that grizzly bear. He recognized this prospector's plight and while neither could understand the language of the other, the Indian after making an examination of his eyes, took him by the hand and led him to a stream that was coursing its way down the mountain. Here as the prospector sat waiting the Indian built a trap of stones across the stream. He then went upstream and waded down splashing as he came and thus drove the trout into the trap. He threw the fish out on the bank and told the prospector to eat the flesh of the head and the tissues back of the eyes, including the eyes, with the result that in a few hours his pain had largely subsided. In one day his sight was rapidly returning, and in two days his eyes were nearly normal. He told me with profound emotion and gratitude that that Indian had certainly saved his life.

Now modern science knows that one of the richest sources of vitamin A in the entire animal body is that of the tissues back of the eyes including the retina of the eye.

Price also noted that in order to prevent scurvy (caused by lack of vitamin C), these Indians would eat the adrenal glands of the large game animals such as moose; the adrenal glands are one of the richest sources of vitamin C anywhere in nature.

Making Sense of It All

Time after time, in place after place, Dr. Price noticed the same thing: When the people he studied lived in their isolated state on their traditional foods, the rate of tooth decay was consistently between zero and one percent, and they were robust, happy, and healthy; when the people became modernized and ate what Price termed the "foods of commerce," tooth decay was rampant, often at a rate of 30 percent or higher, and the people were decimated by health problems such as tuberculosis. Furthermore, the children born after the parents adopted modern foods exhibited poor bone development and crowded, crooked teeth. This, Price noticed, was very similar to the situation among the modernized whites living in America and Europe:

There have been many important unexpected developments in these investigations. While a primary quest was to find the cause of tooth decay which was established quite readily as being controlled directly by nutrition, it rapidly became apparent that a chain of disturbances developed in these various primitive racial stocks starting even in the first generation after the adoption of the modernized diet and rapidly increased in severity with expressions quite constantly like the characteristic degenerative processes of our modern civilization of America and Europe.

Price went further than simply noticing physical differences between isolated and modernized people; he saw marked changes in behavior as well. He noticed that all groups of isolated people living on their traditional foods were not only physically strong and healthy, but were happy, bright, and cheerful. They typically had easy-going personalities, and there were little if any social problems such as theft or



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violence among the primitive groups. Price noted how honorable many of these people were; there was essentially no need to keep doors locked in the isolated communities. Bearing this in mind, Dr. Price felt that there was something in the brain that was damaged owing to poor nutrition that would result in lower mental function and the development of antisocial traits.

To prevent many of these problems, the isolated people Dr. Price visited would often eat “special foods” when trying to conceive, and during pregnancy, nursing, and childhood. In addition to large amounts of fat, these special foods often included items such as fish eggs and the sex glands of animals in order to ensure good fertility and virility. This, the people believed, would help prevent the physical and structural problems that would so often appear once modern foods were adopted. Price concluded that, if poor diets were consumed, even the sperm and egg of the parents could be damaged, leading to improper development in the child. As he noted in *NPD*:

A very important phase of my investigations has been the obtaining of information from these various primitive racial groups indicating that they were conscious that such injuries would occur if the parents were not in excellent physical condition and nourishment. Indeed, in many groups I found that the girls were not allowed to be married until after they had had a period of special feeding. In some tribes a six months period of special nutrition was required before marriage. An examination of their foods has disclosed special nutritional factors which are utilized for this purpose....

While it has been known that certain injuries were directly related to an inadequate nutrition of the mother during the formative period of the child, my investigations are revealing evidence that the problem goes back still further to defects in the germ plasms [the sperm and the egg] as contributed by the two parents. These injuries, therefore, are related directly to the physical condition of one or of both of these individuals prior to the time that conception took place.

So what was so different about the diets of the isolated groups that Dr. Price studied? That’s what he wanted to know, so he had samples of different dietary items from around the world shipped back to his laboratory in Cleveland for analysis. He found that the traditional diets contained between four and 10 times the amount of certain nutrients, including important minerals such as calcium, phosphorous, and iodine; fat-soluble vitamins such as A, D, E, and K; and water-soluble vitamins such as B-complex and C. The diets were also very rich in fats and proteins. Particularly nutrient-dense were the dairy products from animals living on rapidly growing green pasture, and certain sea foods. This can be contrasted with the “foods of commerce,” which include white flour, sugar, jam, canned fruits and vegetables, and processed, pasteurized dairy products. Much of the nutrient content has been stripped away from these pseudo-foods. Today’s “enriched” white flour is an improvement from what the modernized groups were eating during Price’s time, but a far cry from the quality of the traditional diets of the isolated people.

Dr. Price applied some of these dietary principles in his own practice, using high-nutrient foods to supplement the diets of malnourished children among the poor and institutionalized. He was able to observe great improvement in their overall health, particularly in increased bone density and the reversal of dental caries by the growth of secondary dentin, coupled with greatly increased resistance to sickness.

The isolated people Dr. Price visited often ate large quantities of meat and other animal products. What about vegetarianism? We’re often told that saying goodbye to meat and adopting a plant-based diet is



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really the healthiest way to go, as well as being great for the environment. Price was very interested to see if any primitives were living on a purely plant-based diet, so he could see how this would work out in nature's laboratory. He was disappointed that he did not find any primitives living totally free of animal products. As he noted in *NPD*:

As yet I have not found a single group of primitive racial stock which was building and maintaining excellent bodies by living entirely on plant foods. I have found in many parts of the world most devout representatives of modern ethical systems advocating the restriction of foods to the vegetable products. In every instance where the groups involved had been long under this teaching, I found evidence of degeneration in the form of dental caries, and in the new generation in the form of abnormal dental arches to an extent very much higher than in the primitive groups who were not under this influence.

The fascinating nature of the work that Price recorded in *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration* cannot be overstated. The brief descriptions here of his findings, as well as the small sample of the literally hundreds of photographs he took, do not do the book justice. Readers are encouraged to read the book for themselves.

A Quack Doctor?

As Price's work was unorthodox, it was not without criticism. His findings went against the status quo of his day, and while there certainly was interest in his work, it was rejected by the mainstream dental/medical community. In Price's time, a common explanation for the rise in underdeveloped facial structure resulting in crowded, crooked teeth was that racial mixing caused this problem. Price, however, refuted this easily with his research, pointing out that full-blooded children were born with these characteristics when the parents adopted modern foods:

While tooth decay has proved to be almost entirely a matter of the nutrition of the individual at the time and prior to the activity of that disease, a group of affections have expressed themselves in physical form. These have included facial and dental arch changes which, heretofore, have been accounted for as results of admixtures of different racial stocks. My investigations have revealed that these same divergencies from normal are reproduced in all these various racial stocks while the blood is still pure. Indeed, these even develop in those children of the family that are born after the parents adopted the modern nutrition.... The blending of races has been blamed for much of the distortion and defects in body form in our modern generation. It will be seen that these face changes occur in all the pure blood races studied in even the first generation, after the nutrition of the parents has been changed.

Representative of the modern criticisms of the information in *NPD* is Stephen Barrett's "Quackwatch" website (quackwatch.org), a site dedicated to criticizing any health-related practice (or practitioner) disagreeing with the modern allopathic medical model of surgery, pharmaceutical drugs, chemotherapy, etc. Chiropractic care and encouraging the consumption of organic food are considered "quackery" to the likes of Barrett. According to Barrett, "Price made a whirlwind tour of primitive areas, examined the natives superficially, and jumped to simplistic conclusions," and that Price "ignored" the natives' "short life expectancy and high rates of infant mortality, endemic diseases, and malnutrition." Barrett claims that Price "failed to realize" that the reason the primitive people developed cavities and diseases was not because they ate modern foods, but because they



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“overindulged” in them, and that diseases were caused by unfamiliar germs, adopting a sedentary lifestyle, and alcohol abuse.

Anyone who has actually read Price’s book, which Barrett obviously has not unless he is being dishonest, will immediately see the flaws in his claims. As mentioned earlier in this article, the primitive cultures Price studied rarely, if ever, experienced any health problems *until eating modern foods*. Price’s photos of primitives living on their traditional foods do not show malnourished, disease-ridden people. Furthermore, they did not have short life expectancy or high infant mortality; Price found many older individuals among the isolated groups (some well into their 80s) in robust health, and local contacts such as missionaries and doctors confirmed the consistent health of the infants while the people were living on traditional diets. The degree to which the isolated people developed tooth decay and disease was directly proportional to the amount that they replaced their diet with modern foods. Even small amounts of refined foods, regularly eaten, could lower their resistance. Those who had totally adopted modern food were the worst off. Among the groups Price studied, the diseases the primitives contracted were the same that afflicted the modernized whites, and only became a problem after modernization. While some of the people did become sedentary, many were involved in physical labor, yet they still developed health problems. Alcoholism was a problem for some, mainly the North American Indians and Eskimos, but not all. But again, alcoholism itself would not cause cavities and underdeveloped bone structure in the children.

Others have criticized Price’s conclusion that having better nutrition, and hence better physical health, leads to better morality and character development, saying that Price went too far in drawing a strong connection between the two. Perhaps, but the main focus of Price’s work, and of *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, was physical rather than psychological health.

Price’s Legacy

Despite being unorthodox, Dr. Price’s research has left a strong legacy in the “alternative” health community. Many naturopathic doctors, including some well-known individuals such as Dr. Joseph Mercola, were influenced by Price’s work and consider it foundational for proper nutrition and health. To preserve Dr. Price’s research and continue his legacy, several foundations have been established, such as the Price-Pottenger Nutrition Foundation (price-pottenger.org), which owns, curates, and disseminates Price’s research and his many hundreds of photographs, and publishes *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*; and the Weston A. Price Foundation (westonaprice.org), which advocates traditional diets and access to whole, raw milk from grass-fed cows.

Dr. Weston A. Price set out to find the cause of what he felt was the degeneration of modern people and society. He believed the primary cause was inadequate nutrition, and the proper means for what he termed “race regeneration” was an abandonment of modern, processed foods and a return to traditional, nutrient-dense diets. Decades after Dr. Price’s death in 1948, his research is still relevant. Healthcare in Western society is a hot-button issue, with a seemingly ever-larger percentage of the population suffering from what Price termed “diseases of civilization.” While improved technology and better sanitation have led to the near elimination of many of the airborne communicable diseases of centuries past, chronic degenerative disease is still rampant, and now even affects children and young adults. Expensive new pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures are constantly being offered, but seem to be ineffective at preventing the problems and very effective at raising healthcare costs.



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Naturally, government is offered as a solution to skyrocketing healthcare costs. But is this really necessary? Clearly, people once knew how to prevent degenerative disease and poor health without any modern medicine or government. While the desire to eat “health food” is growing in popularity in America, much of it is governed by fad diets and vegetarianism/veganism. While more traditional ways of eating such as the “paleo diet” are gaining in popularity, we still have a long way to go to reverse the decline in health of Western people. While unorthodox, Price’s research can offer great wisdom in this regard, and should not be ignored.

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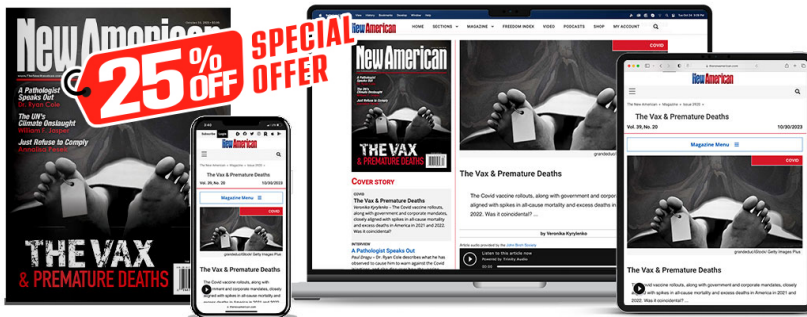
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