

## The Stew Pan and the Spider

Emigrants, trekking over the Alleghanies and laboring along rough trails from Virginia, brought more than brawn, courage, and a passionate love of freedom to the back-of-beyond called Ioway. They brought household utensils as well as visions of a fertile prairie land soon to blossom with waving acres of corn and undulating heads of wheat. The New England Yankee carried his provincial cookery; the Red Horse from Kentucky clung to local recipes; and the Indiana Sucker set store by the foods he knew and enjoyed. A Hawkeye home was not long established before fragrant aromas rose from the stew pan and the frontier skillet or spider.

Many Iowa women learned to cook over the open blaze in a fireplace, tutored themselves in the use of the brick oven, and finally graduated to the wood or coal range. But it made little difference upon what they cooked or what pots and pans they used as long as they prepared tasty and nourishing food. "One of the first duties of women in domestic life", wrote the intrepid Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, author of *Mrs. Hale's New Cook Book* which was generously used throughout Iowa



during the fifties and sixties, "is to understand the quality of provisions and the preparation of wholesome food."

To victual a frontier family with palatable and nutritious food, of course, was no simple matter. Even though Iowa was abundant with game, it was a task to seek it out, kill and dress it, and prepare it for the table. The vegetable garden needed most watchful care. And the picking of berries in season and the collection of nuts, roots, and wild herbs meant exhausting labor. Even the grinding of corn meal left hands calloused and back muscles aching. Yet it was flour ground by hand or at one of Iowa's numerous mills which furnished, to a large extent, the strength of the pioneer menu. Pioneer families had to be practically self-sufficient in the production and preparation of food. The rationing of meat and vegetables by the government, even in wartime, would have been both unnecessary and futile.

"Corn-meal preparations will be found unusually good", said *Miss Leslie's New Receipts for Cooking*, and added that there was scarcely a home in America without a griddle. Indeed, the footed griddle and the Dutch oven (a large, deep, cast-iron pan standing on three or four feet, with a handle and a close fitting lid) were almost indispensable. With these the housewife conjured up



egg pone, common hoe-cake, and griddle cakes. It seemed as if every section of the nation had its local — and very favorite — recipe for griddle cakes. There were the Virginia cakes, as well as Missouri cakes, Carolina corn cakes, and Kentucky flapjacks. Who, indeed, could resist such a listing of geographic griddle cakes!

Girls early learned to mix cakes. When morning saw capricious smoke swirls ringing from cabin chimneys, it was safe to assume that the women of the household were greasing the griddle with salt pork. "Take a quart of warm water, or of skim milk", ordered the old rule, "and add a quart of Indian meal and half a pint of wheat flour, sifted. Put the water into a pan; add a level teaspoonful of salt; and having mixed together the wheat and Indian meal, stir them gradually into the water, a handful at a time. It should be about the consistency of buckwheat cake or muffin batter. Beat it long and hard. If you find it too thick, add a little more water. Bake the cakes on top of the griddle. They should not be larger than the top of a tumbler, or a small saucer. Send them to the table hot, in even piles, and eat them with butter, honey, or molassess." It is small wonder that menfolks said these were the "beatenest" cakes ever baked and smiled like a basket of chips.



The doughnut, cooked in deep fat and sometimes sprinkled with sugar, was another tantalizing delicacy. Not always, however, did this culinary product win applause. "This detestable esculent", scornfully commented an editor in 1826, "sometimes resembles one of your inflexible little soup dumplins; at others it appears to be a kind of mongrel pancake."

Probably no dish was better relished than the ever-present chicken fixins. The backwoodsman must have his chicken-fixins and shanty-cake, and it was said that the first inquiry made of the guest by the frontier landlord was: "Well, stranger, what'll ye take? Wheat-bread and chicken fixins, or corn-bread and common doins?" By the latter was meant bacon, or perhaps salt pork. When James Gardiner Edwards was journeying through the Illinois country before establishing his newspapers in Fort Madison and Burlington, he stopped for lodgings and supper at the miserable cabin of a settler. About the first thing Edwards's host did was to reach up to the cabin rafter, pull down a squawking hen, wring its neck then and there, and give it to his wife for fixins. Chicken prepared any way was called fixins.

A dish quite as popular as fixins was hominy. Hominy, of course, originally was white Indian corn. Shelled from the cob by strong hands, the



kernels first were scalded in hot lye, and then winnowed and dried. The Iowa woman when she was ready to prepare it for the table started the day before. She carefully washed the hominy with several waters, then covered it with boiling water, and let it soak through the night. Then into the stew pan it went. Two quarts of water were added to each quart of hominy. This was boiled until the grits were soft. Then it was drained, put into a deep dish, and sent piping hot to the table. Frontiersmen enjoyed corned beef or pork with this breakfast dish. Unused hominy was saved for another meal when it was made into thick cakes and fried in grease.

Johnny-cake, another corn delicacy, was a simple dish which appealed to common men as well as to aristocrats. And many a kitchen held the indispensable johnny-cake board which was only a piece of shaved clapboard from three to four inches wide and from fifteen to twenty inches long. The dough was spread upon this board and baked upon the hearth. In 1849, a somewhat sophisticated recipe for johnny-cake called for three teacupfuls of cornmeal, one of wheat flour, two of milk, one of cream, and one teaspoonful of saleratus (sodium bicarbonate) dissolved in hot water, to which was added a teaspoonful of salt. A verse commemorated the pleasing result.



Sure there'll be a new creation;  
Sure there won't be no starvation;  
Spirit-aiding; heart up-moving;  
Life-reviving; health-improving;  
New ideal  
Super-Real  
Indian *Johnny-cake*.

Few persons today know of the "Any Thing" cake, a popular substitute for the flapjack. *The Baker's and Cook's Oracle* of 1840 printed the following directions: "If you have cold rice left, you will find it very good to break it up and put in warm milk; add a little salt and mix with flour till thick to pour for fritters. You had better use an egg or so; but it does well without. Fry like pan-cakes. Butter when done, and put on sugar and nutmeg."

It must not be thought, however, that the pioneer menu of Iowa centered about pancakes, chicken fixins, salt pork, hominy, and johnny-cake, although there is little doubt that these were common items of diet. Meat was of prime importance.

The smart and thrifty frontierswoman was expected to know a good deal about butchering and meat cuts. She early learned that when selecting beef 'the best parts are cut from the thick portion, from the shoulders to the rump, and these are the most expensive parts, including sirloin, sirloin



steaks, and first, second, and third cuts of the fore quarter." She knew too that steaks from the round or the buttock were tougher and not as sweet as steaks cut from rib pieces. She was taught in the hard school of experience that a roasting piece cut close to the fore shoulder was always tough and poor. She mastered the art of pounding coarse cuts to render them tender.

A competent woman, of course, selected beef that had a coarse, loose grain and which easily yielded to the pressure of finger or knife. She knew that beef which had a purplish red cast and a whitish fat was best. She realized that stall-fed cattle possessed lighter fat than grass-fed beef. When her husband cast a line into one of Iowa's numerous streams and rivers, she urged him to dress his catch of fish at once, sprinkle them with salt, and lay them in a shady place covered with grass or leaves. Too many times he had proudly brought home fish whose meat was soft, the fins flabby, the scales dim, and the eyes sunken.

When butchering season came in late February or early March, the Iowa housewife not only had to set out the huge kettles, listen to the dying squeals of the porkers, and hear the monotonous scrape, scrape, scrape of the hide hoe, but also was obliged to know what to do with the recently killed hog. Shoulders and hams were carted



away to the smoke house which sent the honest odor of hickory into the crisp air. Spareribs, cut with plenty of fat adhering, were roasted. She labored long to boil and corn the shoulders. Sausage was made from odd pieces and what was left she salted down. The head and feet, of course, were reserved for jelly, head cheese, and souse.

Beef and veal necks, under skillful fingers aided by the judicious use of herbs — sweet basil, savory, sweet majoram — eventually came to the table as stew. Such a tasty dish must have had a general appeal. In 1840, a popular cook book printed directions in verse for stewing a knuckle of veal.

Meat pies teased hungry men almost as much as the odor of a well-flavored stew. Frequently the poorer cuts of beef came to the table surrounded by dough and seasoned with herbs grown in the home garden and then strung from rafters to dry. An 1830 recipe for a rump steak pie called for three pounds of meat cut into pieces "half as big as your hand". After the meat had been ground with a chopper, a half dozen minced eschalots were mixed with half an ounce of pepper and salt and added to the beef. A deep dish was filled with the mixture and covered with a gill of catsup and the same amount of gravy. It was then baked for two hours.



A more orthodox manner of preparing meat pies, however, was known to hundreds of women in Iowa from the Mississippi to the Missouri. Cooked in the following manner, such a pie could be made above an open fire, on the hearth of a pioneer cabin, and in the oven of a wood range. A deep dish was greased with butter or lard. In it was placed a layer of potatoes which had been seasoned with butter, salt, pepper, minced onions, or with any other herbs. The pioneer used what she could find. On top of the potatoes was placed a layer of meat. It did not matter much what kind of meat. Beef, pork, mutton, veal, rabbit, pigeon, chicken, turkey — almost anything could and did go in. If possible, however, a few pieces of salt pork were crisscrossed over the meat. After the dish had been filled with alternate layers of potatoes and meat, it was baked until done. Such a dish furnished an entire meal for a frontier family.

Desserts, following substantial stews, roasts, or meat pies, varied greatly during the early period in Iowa. Frequently no sweets concluded a meal. Often wild berries, recently picked, were served. Sometimes, of course, really elaborate cakes, puddings, and pies brought a meal to a distinguished close. Ice cream, although not common during the first years of the nineteenth century, was relished as a dessert and most cook books offered



both simple and elaborate directions for making it. In 1830, Mackenzie's *Five Thousand Receipts* gave minute directions for the freezing of lemon, raspberry, and strawberry ice cream; ten years later another collection listed a dozen different flavors including cocoanut, chocolate, quince, coffee, and peach; and in 1863, Catherine Esther Beecher devoted extended space in her popular book to the making of ice cream and ices.

Flummery, that delicious dessert coming straight from colonial days, has disappeared from the American table. Yet this dainty with the quaint name once was popular and frequently appeared on the menus of the Barrett House in Burlington. Stale sponge cake was cut into thin slices and a deep dish was lined with the pieces. Some superior cooks first moistened the cake with either white or red wine. Then a rich custard was made with the yolks, not the whites, of eggs. When cool, the custard was turned into the dish lined with the cake. The top was covered with the egg whites that had been beaten to a stiff froth. Sometimes the custard was flavored with orange and then the dessert became orange flummery.

Cakes and cookies, of course, were more likely to be found on the table of the common man than rich pastries and fancy puddings. The old-fashioned ginger snap which used to pile in



browned heaps in an earthen cookie jar still teases the appetite. To taste one of these is to bite into the middle of the nineteenth century. To make them as great grandmother did, follow this recipe. Take one cup of molasses, half a cup of sugar, half a cup of butter, half a cup of warm water with the butter melted in, and two tablespoonfuls of ginger. Make a stiff dough, knead it well, roll into sheets, cut into round cakes, and bake in a moderate oven.

Iowans could live well in a State abundant with the cereal grains, with pasturage for stock, and with facilities for milk, eggs, butter, and cream. As time went on Hawkeye tables reflected a growing prosperity and a higher standard of living. The stew pan and the spider, however, symbolized not only the period of settlement, but also the entire history of cookery in the nineteenth century.

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