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Author:	Kane, Ruth B
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EARLY KITCHENS

By Ruth B. Kane

1966

DeWitt Historical Society
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EARLY KITCHENS

I like old things that time has tried
And proved strong and good and fine;
I like old things--they have a depth
Unknown by anything that's new.

The daily life in the old houses centered in the fireplace, in the common room, more likely called the kitchen. It was the most cheerful, homelike and picturesque room in the house; indeed, it was often the only room. The walls were bare, the rafters dingy; the windows were small, the furniture meagre; but the kitchen had a warm, glowing heart that spread light and welcome, and made the poor room a home. In the homes of the first settlers the chimneys and fireplaces were vast in size, sometimes so big that the forelogs and backlogs for the fire had to be dragged in by a

horse and a long chain, or on a handsled kept for the purpose.

The fireplace itself sometimes went by the old English name, clavell-piece, as shown by the letters of John Wynter, written from Maine in 1634 to his English home. "The Chimney is large, with an oven at each end of him; he is so large that wee can place our Cyttle within the Clavell-piece. Wee can brew and bake and boyl our Cyttle all at once in him."

Fireplaces were built with projecting inner ledges on which rested a bar about six or seven or even eight feet from the floor, called a lug pole (lug meaning to carry) or a back bar. This was made of green wood and thus charred slowly. Many annoying and some fatal accidents came from the collapsing of these wooden back bars.

The destruction of a dinner sometimes was attended with the loss of life. On the bars were hung hooks or chains with hooks of various lengths called pothooks, trammels, hakes, pothangers, potclaws, potclips, potbrakes and potcrooks. A folding trammel, nine feet long, was

found in an old Narragansett, Rhode Island, chimney heart. Pots and kettles were hung on the hooks at varying heights over the fire.

A century after the first settlements, when iron was available, the Yankees invented the crane, and it proved a convenient and graceful substitute for the backbar. The housewife could swing the crane out into the room to hang the pots and kettles on it and swing it back over the fire, then out again to take the food off when it was cooked. Lids were always used on the pots to economize heat and, of course, to make the water boil harder.

The iron pot—desired and beloved by every colonist—sometimes weighed forty pounds, and lasted in daily use for many years. In all probability the first culinary effort of the pioneers was one-pot cooking. Everything was dumped into one pot and a sort of stew, hash, or New England boiled dinner was the mess. We should not shudder at usage of the word "mess." In early cooking the term meant service, or to serve. "Mess it forth" is the last direction in many early recipes.

The first refinement of one-pot cooking was one or more wire baskets in which different meats and vegetables were kept separate in the broth.

In the 17th century there were three kinds of cooking: boiling, roasting and baking. Boiling is cooking whatever food it be in hot water.

Roasting is cooking before the open fire. The very first frontier settler's wife cooked with a bare minimum of equipment. Her andirons were a couple of flat stones, no fancy iron ones with hooks to hold a roasting spit, and no spit. When meat was roasted, she hung it in front of the fire on a rawhide thong and gave it a spin now and then to keep it turning. She hung her stewpot over the fire on a wooden pothook (a duplicate of the one the Indians used).

In addition to the indispensible pot, a bake kettle, an iron skillet with three legs and a long handle, a gridiron for broiling, a long iron fork, a ladle and perhaps a strainer would complete the utensils list of the best-equipped kitchen in the woods. Later the housewife had a spit made of a sharp iron rod which she thrust through the meat

and supported in front of the fire on two forked uprights. By a handle on one end of the spit someone, usually a small boy, turned the meat continuously so that it cooked evenly on both sides. A pan underneath caught for the gravy the juice of the meat, the drippings, as it ran out.

No sympathy need be felt for the early settler of New England or of any of the colonies because of any unappetizing flavor of the meat. A steak or a split chicken broiled over a live bed of coals! An egg or a potato baked in hot wood ashes! A slice of steak, laid over the end of a forked stick and broiled over the fire—inside in winter, outside in summer, and then eaten on a slice of bread! This is what the early settler ate, and he grew strong in heart and mind and body, able to meet trouble and to like it.

Baking was cooking with dry heat in a closed receptacle. The earliest utensil for baking was a heavy, covered pan with legs, called a bakekettle, which sat right down in the red embers, and on which more red embers were piled. There were a number of different shapes and sizes of these.

As chimneys and fireplaces came to be built of brick and stone, and even before thatch had been done away with for the roof, the brick oven came into its own. It was a good-sized hole in the massive chimney itself, with a little flue of its own connecting with the main flue from the fireplace. The opening into the room was closed by an iron door. About once a week a hot fire of special dry wood, and therefore called oven wood, was built in the oven and kept going until all the bricks were hot. The wood and ashes were then swept out, the flue closed and the food to be baked put in: baked beans, brown bread, pies, as much as the oven would hold, pushed in by the long-handled shovel they called a peel. The door was then closed and the oven left to do its wondrous work, until experienced instinct said it was time to get the peel again and draw the baking forth within reach of the appreciative consumers. So good was the cooking of the brick oven that before long meat also was put into the oven instead of on the spit, and to this day, after the remarkable development of the up-to-date kitchen

range roast beef and all roast meats are baked.

Baking various kinds of breads called for numerous different utensils and aids. Not all breadstuffs were oven baked. Mush bread was baked for use at a specified meal rather than baked in batches and stored. Spoon bread, now considered a Southern delicacy, once enjoyed popularity in New England and Pennsylvania as oven-baked mush. Pone, now generally called corn pone, although originally baked from wheaten, laten maize (Indian corn) and even rye and spelt meals, was baked before many a fire on either a backstone or a sloping baking board. The backstone was once a slightly raised section of hearth. Two sides of the fireplace wall acted as natural reflectors of heat to this spot and here pies, bread, tarts and flams were put to bake. Later the backstone was a large, flat iron disk either suspended from the crane or supported on a spider.

Corn was grown, harvested and eaten in every conceivable way. The simplest way to cook cornmeal was to prepare it as mush. Throughout the English colonies, six or seven nights a week sup-

per was mush and milk or, when the cow was dry, mush with maple syrup or molasses. Molasses was not as we know it: it was maple syrup they called molasses. Also, they managed to extract a sweet liquid from pumpkins which they liked on mush. Johnnycake and corn pone were for breakfast and with the midday meat meal. The skillet made a good pan for cooking johnnycake slowly, next to the fire but not over it. If a pan was lacking, a flat stone would serve. The finished article was crisp and not more than an inch thick. (Incidentally, johnnycake was called journey cake because it kept well as the ration of a traveler). The pioneer woman baked her pone in a lidded kettle also, leaving it overnight in the hot ashes on the hearth. With the kettle she could make a better job of browning her pone on top by covering the lid with hot coals. Pone, so cooked, was soft and succulent in its center, but it had a thick crust.

In the early colonies Father made many utensils for the family table. He accomplished this by hollowing out bowls, etc., by burning and then

chipping and scraping with a knife, just as the Indians made dugout canoes. With a lot of time and effort he could convert a log section three or four feet thick into an excellent storage barrel for corn or dried meat. This kind of barrel was called a gum because many were made from gum logs. He made a pail the same way from a smaller log. Bowls, too, he burned out, large ones for stirring up cornbread batter and smaller ones for eating mush and milk.

Pottery dishes were so rare that they may be considered absent. The frontiersmen scorned them because he said they dulled his knife. Here and there a little pewter was cherished as a symbol of elegance, rather than as an article for daily use. Square, wooden trenchers served as plates and each trencher was shared by two diners. (Even as late as the first days at Harvard in the eating hall, two students ate out of the same trencher.) Most food was eaten with the fingers. Sometimes wooden spoons were brought on the overburdened packhorse or whittled out on the spot, and they were the only table utensils except the hunter's

ever-handy knife (for cutting meat) which, by the way, he usually called a scalping knife and not without reason.

Along with the wooden trenchers and spoons, there were wooden noggins and tankards for milk and beer. All members of the family drank beer and hard cider, even before breakfast. They preferred sour milk to sweet, which was just as well since there was no way to refrigerate it. Tea and coffee were not only scarce, they were despised as "slops that don't stick to your ribs." However, by 1780 tea was in general use.

Children in a Puritan household stood at the table and, in absolute silence, ate quickly what was given them, a moderate amount without seconds. When the meal ended, a basket called a voider was passed around the table and everything that had been used, including the napkins, was put into it to be taken away and washed.

Up to the time bog iron ore was discovered and mined in Massachusetts and Virginia in the 17th century, iron wares as a pioneer item were precious. The pots and kettles were, in some houses,

the costliest housefurnishings. In many inventories of the settlers, these items form an important legacy.

In Pennsylvania soon after 1700 Welsh pioneers opened mines of considerable richness and began converting the forest timber of the Pennsylvania woods into charcoal to smelt the ore. After that pioneers became good ironworkers and there were some few real artist craftsmen in iron. Also, we developed that all-around artisan, the blacksmith. Most of the early cooking utensils and gadgets of wrought and sheet iron appear to have been made by blacksmiths. Iron founders cast innumerable pots and pans, although some wrought-iron pans, made by blacksmiths, are among our antique pioneer items.

Next to the house carpenters, who were the most important craftsmen in wood, it would seem that second place must go to the coopers. The traveling cooper first came from England and found much to be learned from the Indians. With his wagon filled with staves, hoops and assorted wooden containers and dishes called treenware,

the cooper visited the early settlers along the back roads and would stay a day or two either to fashion new utensils, or to repair those in use. Coopers were highly skilled craftsmen. To go into the woods, cut down a big oak tree then, aided by a few simple tools, convert it into barrels which would hold liquids or into butter tubs that met the test of being brine-tight, called for a high order of skill.

The cooper made an amazing variety of necesities. He made flour barrels, cider barrels and pork barrels. He made the meat tubs, wash tubs and the butter tubs. He made the sap buckets and the old oaken bucket that hung by the well. He made the pails the farmer held between his knees when he milked the cows, the pails from which the calves were fed, and the kitchen pails. He made the oaken-dash churn, found on every well-ordered farm. In a word, he made everything formed of staves drawn together with wooden hoops.

From about 1725, when iron was beginning to become available and wood was being fashioned

into so many different utensils, the pioneers had as many gadgets, if not more, than you'd have if you purchased everything that struck your fancy at the best-stocked emporium of modern household wares. As late as 1845 the catalog of a housewares store in Philadelphia listed more than 250 items as necessary for a complete kitchen.

Stewing, braising, roasting, broiling, boiling, toasting, frying, baking, brewing, candling, drying—all called for different utensils and tools. Analysis of any early recipe will reveal what utensils the complete housewife had to have in order to prepare the dish. Here is a recipe for "Bursews" from a book printed in the 16th century. "Take pork, seethe it, and grind it small with sodden iron. Add good powders (ground spices, whole spices), salt and sugar. Make into small balls, dip in egg batter, and fry as fritters." This recipe required (1) seething pot, (2) sodden iron and mortar, (3) spice mortar, (4) spice box, (5) salt box, (6) sugar box, (7) dipping or dripping pan and (8) frying pan. A Bursew was a simple meat ball, which we'd call a sausage cake.

Shut in from all the world without
We sat the clean-winged hearth about
Content to let the north wind roar
In baffled rage at pane and door.
While the red logs before us—beat the
Frost-line back with tropic heat
And ever, when a louder blast
Shook beam and rafter as it passed.

The merrier up its roaring draught
The great throat of the chimney laughed
The house dog on his paws outtspread
Laid to the fire his dreamy head.
The mug of cider simmered slow
And apples sputtered in a row
And, close at hand, the basket stood
With nuts from brown October's woods
What matter how the night behaved
What matter how the north wind raved
Blow high, blow low, not all its snow
Could quench our hearth-fire's ruddy glow.