Cooking in the 1800s

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A typical day on the farm began very early. Women rose and built the fire based on the meals planned for that day. Families who could afford to have detached kitchens—kitchens in buildings separate from the house—did so for...
several reasons. The kitchen often was hot, smoky, and smelly. Most North Carolina families did not have the resources for a separate kitchen, though, and the hearth provided the center of home life and family activity. With no ovens or electricity, women prepared meals on the hearths of brick fireplaces. They used different types of fires and flames to prepare different types of food. For example, a controllable fire was used to roast and toast, while boiling and stewing required a smaller flame.

To use all of the fire’s energy, families shoveled coals and ash underneath and onto the lids of Dutch ovens. Standing on three legs and available in a wide array of sizes, the cast-iron Dutch oven was one of the most important tools found on the hearth. It was used to prepare several types of food and allowed cooking from both the top and the bottom. Dutch ovens evolved into woodstoves, common in homes of the later 1800s and early 1900s before most people got electricity at home.

Preparing meals was not just a matter of starting a fire for cooking. Spices, such as nutmeg and cinnamon, and seasonings, like salt and pepper, had to be ground up with mortars and pestles. Milk had to be brought in from the family dairy cow and cream and butter made from it. After someone brought in the milk, it usually sat out for about an hour. The cream rose to the top, separating from the milk. Women placed this cream into a butter churn and beat it until it hardened, first into whipped cream and eventually into butter!

Every family member contributed to the production and preparation of meals. Men and boys spent most of their time outdoors. Chores included working crops in the fields, feeding larger livestock, and hunting. Diets included wild game, such as deer and turkeys. Women and girls worked mainly in the kitchen and fed smaller livestock.

When it came time to butcher animals, families joined with their neighbors to share the workload and the meat. Pork was the staple meat in the Southeast until the 1940s. Hogs proved more manageable than their much larger counterparts, cows. The taste of pork also improved with curing. Neighbors often gathered in the fall, using the time to get their work done but also to catch up, sharing news and gossip. What began as a chore turned into a social event. This was also the case at harvesttime. Neighbors pitched in to bring in crops such as corn and wheat. After the work was done, everyone might celebrate with feasts, bonfires, and dancing.

Clearly, meal preparation two hundred years ago involved several more steps than it does now. Much like today, families usually ate three daily meals. The main meal in the 1800s, however, was not the large evening meal that is familiar to us today. Rather, it was a meal called dinner, enjoyed in the early afternoon. Supper was a smaller meal eaten in the evening.

A big difference between the way people eat today compared with long ago is the work and time needed. For modern families, food and meals are merely an afterthought in the schedule. Two hundred years ago, food and food preparation stood at the center of the family’s daily lifestyle. Without the advances in technology that help us store, preserve, and prepare food, men and women would spend much of their time getting meals ready to eat. Instead of calling pizza delivery, imagine spending all day in front of a fire!

At the time of this article’s publication, Courtney Hybarger was a historic site interpreter at President James K. Polk State Historic Site in Pineville.

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