



GRANDMOTHER'S *churn*

## Pioneers' DINNER TABLE

IVA A. DINGWALL

WHEN MY GRANDPARENTS, Sylvanus and Lydia Tourtillotte, came from New England to Minnesota Territory, they brought with them little save a taste for the foods of Maine and New Hampshire and a manner of speech that utterly ignored the sound of the letter "R" at the end of a word. Grandfather first set foot on Minnesota soil at St. Anthony, and why he moved on thirty miles up the Mississippi and took a hundred and sixty acres of land near Elk River, I do not know. About a mile east of that village, however, he built a rambling farmhouse which nestled under the protective branches of huge elms. There all his children were born.

In that house I, too, was born a year after my father, Dewitt Andrus, and my mother, Jennie Tourtillotte, were married in 1876. Incidentally, this was less than sixteen years after my mother's birth. Although my par-

ents had a forty-acre farm adjoining grandfather's land, it seemed as though my sister and I spent more time at the old farm than we did at home. The shaded house of my grandparents was the enchanted spot, the fairyland of my youth. During the summer there was never an afternoon that we children did not visit the farm, and we explored every inch of it.

We could have fruit to eat in season just by climbing trees. Among those near the house were a row of mammoth chokecherry trees. We took turns boosting each other into the lowest branches, and once up we would eat chokecherries until our mouths felt as though they had been drawn together by puckering strings. We were told by our elders never to drink milk after eating cherries or we would surely die, but the more daring among us would sneak into the cellar and drink their fill of milk just to see if it really were true. Then they would return and fix themselves comfortably on the grass in the shade of a tree calmly to await the death that never came.

Grandmother used to say that it was a mystery to her why her children had not killed themselves, since they ate every green

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MRS. DINGWALL, who now resides in Superior, Wisconsin, spent her childhood on a Minnesota farm near Elk River. From her longer reminiscences of pioneer life there, the materials for this and for a second article to appear later have been drawn.

thing they found on the farm, including a green worm once in a while to show how brave they were. I suppose she wondered, too, how we children could be constantly munching on raw vegetables sprinkled with salt. We ate raw potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbage, rhubarb, tomatoes, and cucumbers fresh from the vines. We even tried the sorrel that we found in the meadow; it had a sour taste, but we liked it.

The coming of winter did not interrupt our visits to our grandparents. We missed very few winter evenings there, making molasses candy, popping corn, and eating hazelnuts and apples. When we had popcorn, we saved the "old maids" — the kernels that did not pop — and put them through the coffee grinder. Then we mixed them with butter and ate them with a spoon.

Father's favorite evening snack was a slice of uncooked salt pork between two pieces of bread. Evening after evening while the grownups played euchre, seven-up, or pedro in the living room, we children played authors or cassino by candlelight at the big kitchen table.

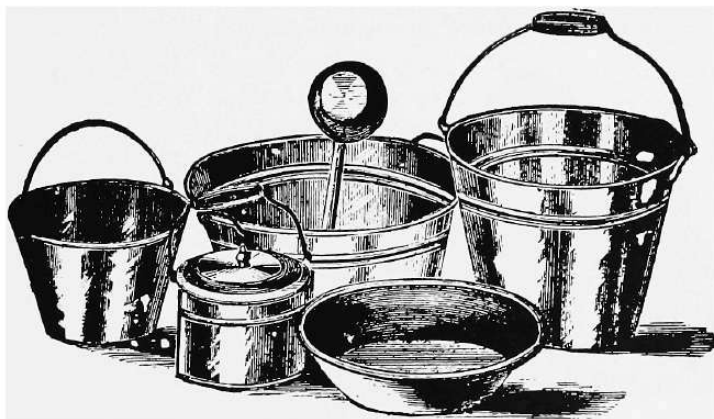
I WILL never forget the quality and quantity of food which Grandmother prepared and served on that old kitchen table. Fresh meat was available only when the family butchered its own beef and pork. Meat was preserved, however, by salting, corning, smoking, and freezing. The flavor imparted

to ham by the smoldering corncobs in the little smokehouse was something to be remembered. Headcheese and sausage which had been seasoned with home-grown sage were stuffed into muslin bags and hung up in the shed to freeze. When these foods were to be served, they were brought into the house and allowed to thaw partially. Pieces of sausage were sliced off right through the cloth, which was easily removed, leaving small, round "pats" for frying.

Grandmother did little canning, but if the crop was good she did put up blueberries. They were preserved in large-mouthed jars for which the boys whittled out wooden covers. To seal the jars, Grandmother melted rosin, which she poured over the homemade lids. As it cooled, the rosin hardened, sealing the jars. She also made wild plum jelly and watermelon rind preserves. A small cup of either of these in our school lunch was a real treat.

For the family's winter supply of pickles, cucumbers were put down in kegs of salt brine. They were taken out and freshened in water as they were needed and were served with vinegar. We were all fond of vinegar and ate it on almost everything — sliced tomatoes, chopped cabbage, beets, and all kinds of spring greens, including dandelions, cowslips, and pigweed. Mother even made vinegar pie. I do not have the recipe, but I remember that we ate it and liked it just as we did her sorrel and green

*SOME kitchen utensils  
used on a  
frontier farm*



tomato pies. The latter was made almost like apple pie, except that two tablespoons of vinegar were sprinkled over the filling. I make that pie each summer as soon as green tomatoes are available, and the first taste always brings back vivid childhood memories.

Eggs for winter use were always packed with the small end down in kegs of oats. The family's supply of flour was ground at a small gristmill about a mile from the farm. We were fond of anything made of corn meal and ate great quantities of johnnycake, mush, and corn bread.

Of course each family kept cows for milk and made its own butter. Since there were no cream separators, the milk was strained into round, shallow, six-quart tin pans and set away in a cool place to allow the cream to rise. With a skimmer, the cream was then lifted off and placed in a gallon crock until churning day. At best, churning was an arm-breaking job, which always involved more than one member of the family. Sometimes it was an all-day job; at other times the butter came more quickly. In the most stubborn cases, everyone who passed the churn gave it a few whacks.

Grandmother's churn was somewhat more modern than ours. It was a keg-like affair with a handle which turned it over and over to agitate the cream. Ours, on the other hand, was a wooden keg with a fitted cover that had a circular hole large enough to allow the handle of the dasher to be plunged

up and down to keep the cream in motion. If we had a surplus of eggs or home-churned butter, the store always took them in exchange for tea, coffee, sugar, or other staples.

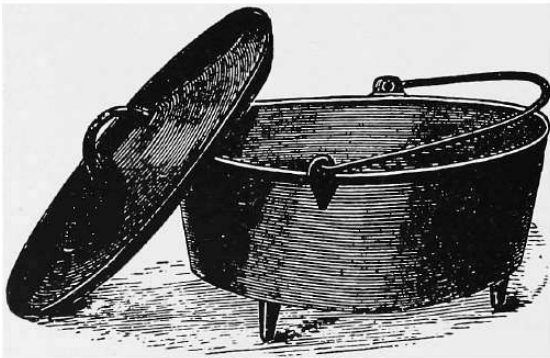
We bought coffee beans in bulk and ground them in a coffee grinder. Sometimes Mother and Grandmother bought green beans and roasted them. My father told us that when he was a boy his family stretched its supply of coffee by grinding with it dried bread and grain toasted to the burning point. Tea was popular with our family and was served with the evening meal. My elders always drank green tea, because Father said black tea tasted just like so much medicine. We children drank milk with all our meals except breakfast, when there was coffee for all.

In their early housekeeping days my grandparents had seen hard times. As a result Grandmother especially was very saving. She had her own special method of teaching her children the wickedness of waste. When they took more food on their plates than they were able to eat, she scraped the uneaten portion onto a saucer, and at the next meal each child was compelled to eat what he had left before he was served anything else.

Nothing in the way of food was ever wasted. Sour milk, for example, was used to make "Dutch cheese," similar to today's cottage cheese. The milk was drained off the whey, and a little salt, butter, and cream were added. The cheese was then pressed into a mold and could be cut in slices if handled carefully.

Sour milk was also used in baking. Both Mother and Grandmother were experts at making sour-milk or buttermilk biscuits, which we ate both hot and cold. We rarely had bread. Sometimes for variety Mother used the ingredients of biscuits to make a very thick batter, which she poured onto a baking sheet. This she called "spider bread," and it was always eaten hot. Dry bread or biscuits were used in three ways — in making bread pudding, fried bread, which was

*BEANS were baked in an iron pot*



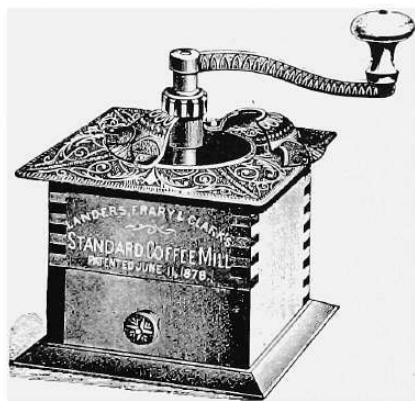
really French toast, and steamed bread. Bread toasted crisp in the oven, rather than crackers, was eaten with soup. In our home both pea and bean soups were served often, and they frequently made up an entire meal.

For Saturday evening supper the family always had steamed brown bread and baked beans. Cooked in a large iron pot with a close fitting cover, the beans were baked slowly for hours in the huge cookstove oven. A well-filled box of hardwood, usually oak, supplied the fuel to keep an even fire. If they were not all eaten, the beans were warmed up and served again for breakfast Sunday morning.

Sunday evening supper always consisted of corn meal mush and milk or bread and milk along with beans if any were left. Although there was always plenty to eat, nothing was ever thrown away. If all the beans were not eaten on Sunday, we finished them on Monday, when we spread them on a baking sheet in the oven and toasted them until they were crisp and crunchy. They were served in a little side dish as we would serve salted nuts these days.

At least once a week we had Grandmother's boiled dinner. A liberal piece of salt pork, always half lean and delicious either hot or cold, was boiled for two or three hours in a large iron pot. Cabbage, rutabagas, potatoes, and other vegetables were then added. This dish was always served with beets, which had been boiled and seasoned with salt, pepper, and vinegar. As a result, the best feature of the boiled dinner was the beet-hash supper which followed. The beets, drained of vinegar, were mixed with the left-over dinner vegetables in a big wooden bowl. They were chopped very fine, warmed in a frying pan, and served with hot buttermilk biscuits and slices of cold lean salt pork. This made a meal fit for a king.

Grandfather was a lover of codfish. Storekeepers in the village always knew that the first question "Vene," as they called him, would ask upon entering was: "What is the price of codfish today?" He always brought



*COFFEE was ground at home*

home a whole one, for that is the way they were sold. Early in the morning the fish was placed in a pan of water and allowed to simmer on the back of the stove until some of the salt had been drawn out. Then the water was changed, and the fish was allowed to boil very gently for a couple of hours. It was served for dinner just as it came from the pot with boiled potatoes and salt pork gravy.

Codfish was also Grandfather's cure for an upset stomach. When he felt squeamish, he settled his stomach by tearing off a bit of uncooked codfish and breaking it into small pieces. These he covered with vinegar and ate.

Dried corn was one of our delectable winter dishes. When fresh corn was in season, Mother cut the kernels from cobs left from each dinner. These were spread thinly on large baking sheets, which were placed on the back of the cookstove where the corn would dry for days. It was then put into muslin bags and stored out of reach of mice.

The evening before it was to be served, a portion of corn was put to soak. Early the next morning it was drained, and after fresh water was added, it was placed on the back of the stove to simmer for about three hours. When the corn was tender, it was drained again, and salt, milk, and butter were added. I could never seem to satisfy my appetite for this delicious dish. Would I like it now? I wonder.

As for desserts — they were simple, but many and varied. There were apple dumpings, rice and bread puddings, soft molasses cookies, sugar jumbles, and mincemeat, pumpkin, dried apple, or custard pies. On special occasions we might have lemon pie. It was not necessary to skimp on eggs or milk. Although cream was plentiful, I do not recall that it was used over any dessert except fresh berries. Rich sweetened milk flavored with grated nutmeg was poured over rice pudding.

Sometimes when company came, we had cream cake. It was made in layers put together with whipped cream which had been sweetened and flavored with lemon extract. The entire cake had to be eaten at once, because if it stood the filling soaked through the lower layers, making them soft and unpalatable. This was the best feature of that dessert, for it meant that we children could freely ask for second pieces without fear of menacing looks from our elders.

Grandmother's favorite dessert was blueberry bread. It was really made of muffin dough, and it was eaten with cooked blueberry sauce. Since white sugar was pretty much a luxury, everything was sweetened with brown sugar, molasses, or sorghum.

As a child I knew all about the making of sorghum. We raised sugar cane on the farm, and father bought a secondhand sorghum mill. The rollers between which the stocks of cane were crushed to squeeze out the sap were turned by a horse hitched at the end of a long pole attached to the mechanism. The horse walked in circles, providing the power to operate the mill.

The juice of the sugar cane was placed in a large pan made of very heavy tin and shaped much like a flat-bottomed rowboat. It was placed over an outdoor stove of masonry on which the pan could rest to boil the sap down to sorghum over a log fire. Much skimming was necessary during the boiling process, just as it is in jelly making. As a skimmer we used a piece of narrow board about eight inches long to which a wooden handle was nailed. It was skidded

along the boiling sap; the scum adhered to the board, and could easily be scraped off.

Although I have a vague memory of a hive of bees at the old farm, I do not recall that we had much honey to eat. A little beeswax was rendered. Only a cake or two was needed for waxing thread when harnesses or shoes needed repairing.

I vividly remember that when I was seven years old Father found a bee tree on one of our blueberry picking expeditions. He marked the spot, and the next day we drove out to get the honey. Father thought that a goodly amount of it would be stored in that old hollow tree, and he was not disappointed. We returned home with a whole washtub full of comb honey.

Among my possessions, I have a small paper-bound copy of the *Elk River Centennial Cook Book*, which was compiled and sold in 1896 by a church group of women who called themselves the Centennial Society. My grandmother was a member of this organization, which came into existence in 1876, the year of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In looking through the book, I found a recipe for cream sponge cake contributed by my grandmother. I tried it and found it as simple and fine as she herself had been.

On the pages of this cookbook I also came upon the following quotation from Shakespeare:

Now, good digestion wait on appetite,  
And health on both!

Perhaps both appetite and good health were needed to digest the cream cake, raw codfish, fat pork, vinegar pie, and many other rich and delicious dishes that made their appearance on the old kitchen table in that shaded Minnesota farmhouse. These dishes are a part of the rich fabric of my childhood memories, echoes of a self-reliant past when my family, like many others, raised and prepared the foods that nourished them so amply.

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